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How the National Park System Is Faring Under the Trump Administration

U.S.

DONALD TRUMP



Jim West—Getty Images

by Rebecca Schneid

REPORTER

Peak travel season to the United States' national parks is upon us, with locations such as Yellowstone and Grand Canyon set to welcome masses of visitors. But it's also a testing time for the National Park Service (NPS) amid President Donald Trump's second term, with rising concerns over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) changes, entry fees, and staff shortages.

While there are 63 national parks, the NPS, in total, manages 433 sites across more than 85 million acres. The locations amassed a record 331 million visitors last year. In 2023, visitors spending in communities near these sites resulted in a \$55.6 billion benefit to the nation's economy and supported over 400,000 jobs, according to the NPS.

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Trump showed some support for national parks during his first term, signing the Great American Outdoors Act, which dedicated up to \$1.9 billion per year for five years to fund deferred maintenance projects identified by the NPS and other parks departments.

"From an environmental standpoint and from just the beauty of our country standpoint, there hasn't been anything like this since Teddy Roosevelt, I suspect," he said during the bill-signing ceremony at the White House.

The Trump Administration's Secretarial Order 3388, signed later on in 2020 raised concerns, with critics saying it lessened the effectiveness of the Great American Outdoors Act. When former President Joe Biden entered office in 2021, his Administration revoked the order.

Advocates are now noting a sharper turn in Trump's second term, voicing concerns over budget cuts, environmental protections rollbacks, and more. Trump's eagerness to change Alcatraz Island, a designated national park, and reopen it as a functional prison is also causing alarm.

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Retired national parks superintendent Bob Krumenaker says it's hard to know where to begin, when asked to voice the key issues.

"The staff is being decimated right now. The morale is as bad as it has ever been," he says. "The big issue is it would appear that this Administration... [is] systematically destroying the workforce and the values of the National Park System that are really important to American people."

The potential impact of Trump's Big, Beautiful Bill

Trump's signature spending bill, which he has dubbed the "Big, Beautiful Bill," has been noted for tax cuts which target Medicaid funding, food benefits, and clean energy incentives. It also includes a significant expansion to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) budget. Overall, it's predicted to add around \$3 trillion to the national debt.

But a lesser known aspect of the spending bill claws back \$267 million of previously committed funding for national park staff. The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) says these cuts are occurring "in their moment of greatest need."

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Kristen Brengel, NPCA's senior vice president of government affairs, says it is "inconsistent" how in 2020 Trump signed the "Great American Outdoors Act," but now showcases such different priorities.

"It's sad to me that Congress one year understands and recognizes that the parks actually need even more staff, and now we're at such a deficit with staff. The Administration submitted a President's budget that seeks a [big] cut to the park services operation," she says.

More concerning than the spending bill to Krumenaker is the budget the Administration has proposed for FY26, which suggests "devastating cuts" to the NPS and stands to cut the workforce by over 5,000.

"Operational funding would see a 31% reduction. Facility operations would be reduced. Resource stewardship would be reduced tremendously," he says. "What people don't understand is that the National Park System returns a lot of money to the American economy... so in the guise of saving money and being efficient, it couldn't be more wrong."

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Workforce decline

In an early action on Valentine's Day this year, the Trump Administration fired around 1,000 NPS workers, but Brengel and the NPCA says this is only the beginning of workforce shortages at national parks.

The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) driven layoffs prompted legal action, including a lawsuit filed on April 28 by a large coalition of unions, local governments, and nonprofits.

The NPCA released a report on July 3 that found there has been a sharp decline in staffing levels across the National Park System since January. "Since the Trump Administration took office, the National Park Service has lost 24% of its permanent staff, a staggering reduction that has left parks across the country scrambling to operate with bare-bones crews," the report stated.

“When you try to imagine the people going to our national parks, mostly in the summertime, and you think about the staff shortage, it just raises a lot of concern in terms of resource protection, public safety, and ongoing maintenance,” Brengel says. “This just means there are fewer people protecting these places. The expertise and institutional knowledge that has been lost is hugely problematic.”

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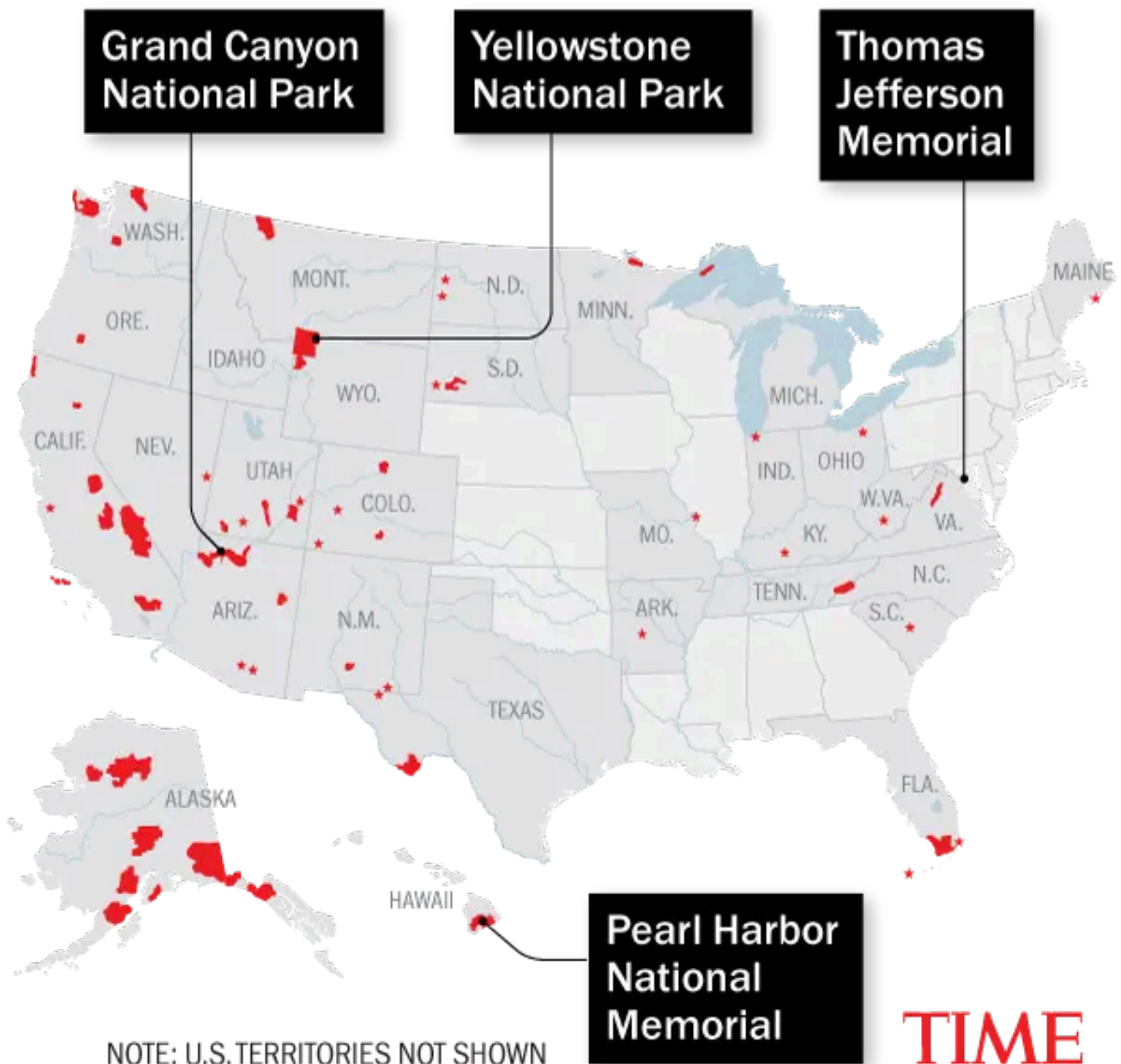
Experts also argue that seasonal hiring is lagging far behind the numbers needed to fill the gaps. From her discussions with park superintendents, Brengel says she has learned that most are trying to make it work for this summer, but they are concerned about the future.

Former regional director at the NPS, Kym Hall, says that this has resulted in people taking on extra jobs they’re not trained to do.

“I think it's absolutely inappropriate,” she says, arguing it gives the impression that “people are interchangeable pieces on a chessboard.”

National Park System

There are 63 national parks in the U.S. (in red below) but the National Park Service also manages hundreds of additional sites. Months into President Trump's second term, there are rising concerns over the pressures facing the NPS amid changes related to DEI practices, entry fees, and more



TIME map; Getty Images

Potential increase in fees for foreign visitors

On July 3, Trump signed a new Executive Order titled "Making America Beautiful Again by Improving Our National Parks." It calls on the Department of the Interior to increase fees for foreign visitors and give U.S. residents priority access in any permitting or reservation systems. This includes an increase in the year-long America the Beautiful pass, which grants access to public lands across federal agencies.

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A budget brief for NPS released in May states: "In 2026, NPS will establish a surcharge for foreign visitors that is estimated to generate more than \$90 million to keep national parks beautiful."

The Executive Order also directs the interior department to use these funds to "improve services and affordability for United States residents visiting national parks."

"There could be a billion-dollar revenue opportunity without discouraging visitors," Department of Interior Secretary Doug Burgum said during a House Committee on Natural Resources oversight hearing in June. Currently, 106 parks managed by the NPS require entry fees.

Brengel says that this directive is not actually uncommon and it could perhaps have positive effects, so long as it does not provide a significant barrier to entry or discourage visitors.

DEI challenges

Trump has made various strides to dismantle DEI initiatives since returning to the White House.

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This directive has significantly impacted the history included on the NPS website and throughout the parks themselves.

In March, it was reported that in light of the Trump Administration's efforts to dismantle DEI, the NPS had taken down web pages dedicated to transgender activists and LGBTQ+ history. The NPS reportedly removed online pages once dedicated to activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.

In a March 27 Executive Order titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," the Trump Administration alleged that the Biden Administration had "pressured National Historical Park rangers that their racial identity should dictate how they convey history to visiting Americans because America is purportedly racist."

Following this, references to Harriet Tubman were temporarily removed from a National Park Service webpage about the Underground Railroad before being restored.

On May 20, Secretary Burgum also ordered that all national parks and other public lands must post notices encouraging people to report "any signs or other information that are negative about either past or living Americans or that fail to emphasize the beauty, grandeur, and abundance of landscapes and other natural features."

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The Center of American Progress argued in a report that this was a "blatant attempt to erase history" and could "degrade the integrity and educational value of our parks and may discourage visitation."

"These are America's classrooms. We are the stewards of American heritage," says Krumenaker, pointing to the Pearl Harbor National Memorial and the Japanese American internment sites that are part of the National Park System. "These are the places that tell the story of who we are as Americans—the majestic things that the Trump Administration supports, but also the stories of when we have not fulfilled our own ideals, so we can learn from them."

Experts point to the "exhibit redesign" of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, which is managed by the NPS, as an example. Hall says it used to provide a "more balanced" story about Jefferson that included his history as a slave owner and the story of Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman in the Jefferson household.

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Overall, the Administration’s understanding of the parks’ “importance” to the American people is “lacking,” Krumenaker argues. “If their assaults continue, I think it will change the National Park System irreparably for the future generations.”

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