Recession drives down national park visitation, study finds

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A national recession doesn't just affect Americans' wallets. It also impacts their travel to national parks, a new University of Georgia study has found.

Recent visitation statistics released by the U.S. Department of Interior already noted the significant decrease in national park visitation—dropping nearly 10 million since 1998 to 278 million visitors—but this is the first study to link the drop to a bad economy. The findings could help park managers plan ahead for revenue shortfall and a decrease in visitation, particularly as the economic forecast remains bleak.

Researchers in the UGA Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources and the Catholic University of Korea's department of economics conducted the new study recently published in *Tourism Management*.

"Economic downturns come and go, but the impact on resource conservation and visitor management could last longer," said Neelam Poudyal, an assistant professor in the Warnell School. "Therefore, understanding whether and how recession impacts visitation could inform mangers of what to expect during these tough economic times."

The study was led by Poudyal and Michael Tarrant, a Warnell School professor and director of the study abroad program Global Programs in Sustainability.

Although overall national park visitation has dropped the decrease has not been uniform, according to the U.S. Department of Interior. Yellowstone and Yosemite, for instance, have experienced notable increases in visitation between 2000 and 2011. However, the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, the most visited national park in the U.S., saw a 7 percent decrease in visitation over the same time period. Other state parks have seen similar or worse declines in visitation.

The increases for Yosemite and Yellowstone could be because the parks have high international recognition, Tarrant said.

"Visitation to some national parks may be incidental to tourism," Tarrant said. "For example, U.S. Highway 441 is the only main road in the Smokies and receives substantial non-tourism and thoroughfare traffic. Consequently, reduced visitation to such parks may be a function of lower vehicle miles traveled in the past decade. National transportation statistics show that traffic on U.S. 441 has had a reduction from 3.03 trillion in 2007 to 2.96 trillion miles in 2011."

The study suggests consumers cut out non-essential goods and services and visit local city or neighborhood parks rather than drive to national parks when faced with tighter budgets. In addition to gasoline prices, several indicators of recession—including a high unemployment rate, a decline in personal saving and a decrease in consumer confidence in the state of the economy—were all negatively related with national park visitation.

"While the recession affected all types of park visitation," Poudyal said, "trips involving longer timeframes and higher costs such as overnight visits, concessioner lodging and backcountry camping are likely to be hit harder than shorter and relatively cheaper trips such as day visits, front country camping, etc. This suggests a potentially disproportionate burden of the effect" of the recession on certain sectors of the national park

system.

Researchers have linked many factors to a decline in park visitation, including natural disasters and the growing reliance on indoors technology for recreation, but this study was the first to examine economic factors.

Another factor to consider is that while national parks are a bargain in comparison to theme parks, they don't offer the same kind of recreation experience.

"It has been claimed that national parks are America's best idea, and there is simply no substitute for the visitor experience they provide," Tarrant said. "Moreover because they are publicly funded, national park entrance fees are discounted relative to other entrance fees to private parks across the nation."

Some researchers speculated that when money is tight, people would turn to national parks for cheaper recreation options. But that does not seem to be happening, or the substitution is perhaps limited to national parks of national and international reputation only, such as Yosemite or Yellowstone, he said.

Provided by University of Georgia

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