

US national parks are crowded—and so are many national forests, wildlife refuges, battlefields and seashores

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Visitors at Sliding Rock, a popular cascade in North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest. Credit: [Cecilio Ricardo, USFS/Flickr](#)

Outdoor recreation is on track for another record-setting year. In 2022, U.S. national parks logged more than [300 million visits](#)—and that means a lot more people on roads and trails.

While research shows that spending time outside is [good for physical](#)

[and mental health](#), long lines and gridlocked roads can make the experience a lot less fun. Crowding also makes it harder for park staff to [protect wildlife](#) and [fragile lands](#) and respond to emergencies. To [manage the crowds](#), some parks are experimenting with timed-entry vehicle reservation systems and permits for popular trails.

For all of their popularity, national parks are just one subset of U.S. public lands. Across the nation, the [federal government](#) owns more than [640 million acres](#) (2.6 million square kilometers) of land. Depending on each site's mission, its uses may include logging, livestock grazing, mining, oil and gas production, wildlife habitat or recreation—often, several of these at once. In contrast, national parks exist solely to protect some of the most important places for public enjoyment.

In [my work](#) as a historian and researcher, I've explored the history of public land management and the role of national parks in shaping landscapes across the Americas. Many public lands are prime recreational territory and are also becoming increasingly crowded. Finding solutions requires visitors, gateway communities, state agencies and the outdoor industry to collaborate.

Alternatives to national parks

The U.S. government is our nation's largest land manager by far. Federal property makes up [28% of surface land area](#) across the 50 states. In Western states like Nevada, the federal footprint can be as large as 80% of the land. That's largely because much of this land is arid, and lack of water makes farming difficult. Other areas that are mountainous or forested were not initially viewed as valuable when they came under U.S. ownership—but values have changed.

Public lands are [more diverse than national parks](#). Some are scenic; others are just open space. They include all kinds of ecosystems, from

forests to grasslands, coastlines, red rock canyons, deserts and ranges covered with sagebrush. They also include battlefields, rivers, trails and monuments. Many are remote, but others are near or within major metropolitan areas.

Many people who love hiking, fishing, backpacking or other [outdoor activities](#) know that [national parks](#) are crowded, and they often seek other places to enjoy nature, including public lands. That trend intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and social distancing protocols motivated people to get outside wherever they could.

The rise of remote work has also fueled a [population shift](#) toward smaller Western towns with access to [open space](#) and good internet access for videoconferencing. Popular remote work bases like Durango, Colorado, and Bend, Oregon, have become known as "[Zoom towns](#)"—a fresh take on the old boomtowns that brought people west in the 19th century.

With these new populations, gateway communities close to popular public lands face critical decisions. Outdoor recreation is a powerful economic engine: In 2021, it [contributed an estimated US\\$454 billion](#) to the nation's economy—more than auto manufacturing and air transport combined.

But embracing recreational tourism can lead local communities into the [amenity trap](#)—the paradox of loving a place to death. Recreation economies that fail to manage growth, or that neglect investments in areas like housing and infrastructure, risk compromising the sense of place that draws visitors. But planning can proactively shape growth to maintain community character and quality of life.

Broadening recreation

People use public lands for many activities beyond a quiet hike in the woods. For instance, the Phoenix District of the federal Bureau of Land Management operates more than 3 million acres across central Arizona for at least [14 different recreational uses](#), including hiking, fishing, boating, target shooting, rock collecting and riding off-road vehicles.

Not all of these activities are compatible, and many have not traditionally been rigorously managed. For example, target shooters sometimes bring objects like old appliances or furniture to use as improvised targets, then leave behind an unsightly mess. In response, the Phoenix District has [designated recreational shooting sites](#) where it provides targets and warns against shooting at objects containing glass or hazardous materials, as well as [cactuses](#).

Skiing also can pose crowding challenges. Many downhill skiing facilities in the West operate on public land with permits from the managing agency—typically, the U.S. Forest Service.

One example, [Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area](#) is a nonprofit ski slope 16 miles from Boise, Idaho. Demand surges on winter weekends with fresh powder, creating long lift lines and crowded slopes.

The mountain is open for 12 hours a day, and Bogus Basin uses [creative pricing structures](#) for lift tickets to spread crowds out. For example, it draws younger skiers with discounted night skiing and retired skiers during the week. As a result, the parking lot only filled up once in the 2022-2023 season.

Local governments can help find ways to balance access with creative crowd management. In Seattle, King County launched [Trailhead Direct](#) to provide transit-to-trails services from Seattle to the Cascade Mountains. This approach expands access to the outdoors for city residents and reduces traffic on busy Interstate 90 and crowding in

trailhead parking lots.

Other towns have partnered with federal land agencies to maintain trail systems, like the [Ridge to Rivers](#) network outside Boise and the [River Reach trails](#) near Farmington, New Mexico. This helps the towns provide better nearby outdoor opportunities for residents and attract new businesses whose employees value quality of life. Creating corridors from the "[backyard to the backcountry](#)," as the Bureau of Land Management puts it, can help create vibrant communities.

A less-extractive view of public lands

For many years, Western communities have viewed public lands as places to mine, log and graze sheep and cattle. Tensions between states and the federal government over federal land policy often reflect state resentment over decisions made in Washington, D.C. about local resources.

Now, land managers are seeing a pivot. While federal control will never be welcome in some areas, Western communities increasingly view federal lands as amenities and anchors for immense opportunities, including [recreation and economic growth](#). For example, Idaho is [investing \\$100 million](#) for maintenance and expanded access on state lands, mirroring federal efforts.

As environmental law scholar Robert Keiter has pointed out, the U.S. has a lot of laws governing activities like logging, mining and energy development on public lands, but there's [little legal guidance for recreation](#). Instead, agencies, courts and presidents are developing what Keiter calls "a common law of [outdoor recreation](#)," bit by bit. By addressing crowding and the environmental impacts of recreation, I believe [local communities](#) can help the U.S. move toward better stewardship of our nation's awe-inspiring [public lands](#).

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