

State park attendance trends suggest parks will be overburdened by mid-century

4 June 2019, by Bob Yirka



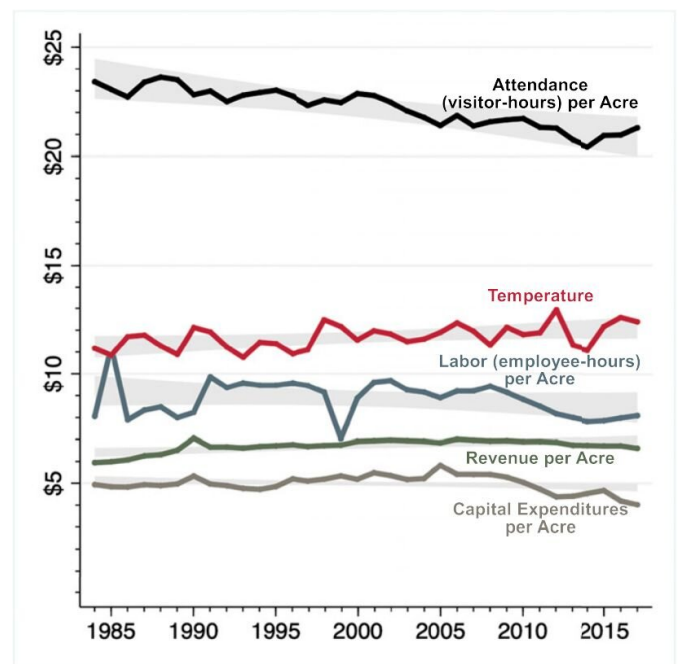
Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A combined team of researchers from Utah State University and North Carolina State University has found evidence that suggests state parks in the U.S. will become so crowded by mid-century that states will have difficulty paying for their upkeep. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the group describes their study of historical attendance records of all the state parks in the country and what they mean for the future.

State parks in the U.S. are a big deal. People from all walks of life visit parks to get away from the bustle of daily life. Combined, they greet far more visitors than the National Park system, and in general, enjoy a good reputation as a welcome respite. But that reputation might be in jeopardy if the state bureaucracies operating the parks do not take into account the rising numbers of visitors.

To learn more about likely future attendance at America's [state parks](#), the researchers looked to the past. In so doing, they found that attendance at most state parks has been rising, along with operating costs. They report that since 1984, state [park](#) attendance across the country rose by 6.6 percent. The researchers did not look into the reasons for the increase in attendance; they may be too varied to count accurately. But with a rising [population](#) and state parks serving as a reasonably inexpensive getaway, it seems likely that they will

continue to be a draw. The researchers do note that there is also another factor involved—[climate change](#). As the planet heats up, people will have longer warm seasons, allowing more opportunities to visit state parks. Also, climate change could add to the costs of maintaining parks in general.



Estimated average marginal effects by year across all 50 state park systems. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1902314116

The researchers used the data they collected to make projections about the future. In one scenario based on attendance records of the past and increasing temperatures, they found that operating costs for parks nationwide could see an increase of 756 percent in just 30 years. Such an increase, the researchers note, would push budgets far past their current levels, putting state parks across the country at great risk. They note that lawmakers

need to start considering their options before the parks start to degrade.

More information: Jordan W. Smith et al.
Attendance trends threaten future operations of America's state park systems, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). DOI: [10.1073/pnas.1902314116](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1902314116)

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