

Chapter 9

All Play and No Pay: The Adverse Effects of Welfare Recreation

J. Bishop Grewell

“Our national parks are being overused, over-loved.
They’re being loved to death.” (Hebert 1999)
—Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.)

Commodity development has been rolled back on federal lands.¹ Now environmentalists have turned their attention to public recreation. Two reports in 1999—one from the Wilderness Society and one from the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA)—listed ecosystems considered endangered by the organizations. The Wilderness Society report cited fifteen environmental areas in the United States and the NPCA designated ten U.S. national park areas of concern (Wilderness Society 1999; NPCA 1999b). The striking thing about the reports is an increased focus on the damage caused to environmental lands by recreational use. The NPCA noted problems from recreation in half of their listed areas; the Wilderness Society cited similar problems in four of the fifteen sites studied.

The irony with recreation is that environmental activists have tended to ignore the economics. Not so, however, with commodity development. Environmentalists have fondly pointed out that grazing and timber harvesting on federal lands lose money, and indeed they do. Grazing lost an average of \$66 million per year from 1994 to 1996, and timber harvesting lost about \$290 million per year over the same period. Yet the largest loser for federal lands is recreation, which lost more than \$355 million annually during the same three-year stint (Fretwell 1998, 1).

And there appears to be no end in sight. The proposed budget for fiscal year 2001 includes an \$11.3 million increase for the Bureau of Land Management’s recreation program to \$62.5 million, a 22 percent increase over fiscal year 2000. In addition, the budget would add nearly \$46 million in funding to the Forest Service’s recreational spending, increasing it by 13 percent over the previous year to \$397.4 million (Coffin 2000, 5).

Recreational activities used to be overlooked by environmentalists as a cause of environmental damage, because they had bigger fish to fry and because the “user” is the public.

Reprinted from *Government vs. Environment*, edited by Donald R. Leal and Roger E. Meiners (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002). Copyright © 2002 by PERC (Political Economy Research Center).

With grazing, logging, mining, and commercial providers of recreation, such as ski resorts, the user is private enterprise. It was easier to vilify these users when making their case before the public. But with the recent success of shutting down commodity development, it appears the environmental movement is willing to venture into the politically tenuous waters of public recreation. As NPCA's Rocky Mountain regional director Mark Peterson states, "We need to recognize that tourism can be as environmentally destructive as mining and logging" (Tennesen 1998, 29). For that, environmentalists need to strengthen their economic case.

This chapter discusses how recreation, as offered by federal land agencies, encourages overuse of resources and poor recreational services. To illustrate the harm it causes I focus on our national parks. In addition, I demonstrate how market-driven recreation coupled with the business requirement of linking revenues with costs can improve the management of recreation and the natural resources that support it. Finally, I examine the arguments against the "commercialization" of recreation.

What Is Welfare Recreation? How Does It Cause Harm?

In a competitive market free of government interference, the amount of recreation provided is determined by the interaction of buyers and sellers freely determining how much they will consume and produce. In the long run, there is neither a shortage nor an oversupply of recreation. If there is a shortage, the price will rise, encouraging a greater supply of recreational services. If too many recreational services are provided, the price will fall, encouraging a smaller supply. When the federal government enters the game, however, the corrective forces of the market are impeded. Price signals no longer convey the amount of recreation that consumers are willing to pay producers.

This situation is possible because the federal government does not need to consider the full costs of providing too much or too little of a good or service. Because activities are largely financed out of taxes, it can charge less than the cost of providing a service, and keep operating. In the case of recreation on federal lands, we have what might be called "welfare recreation," because the government often charges substantially less than would be charged in the marketplace.² Under this scenario, site managers have no way of telling how much recreation should be produced, because government-distorted prices do not reflect consumer demands. In addition, with prices set far below market prices, the quantity of recreation demanded escalates. In short, the incentives created by welfare recreation intensify recreational pressures on federal lands.

These pressures manifest themselves in different ways, such as multiple visits beyond what a recreationist would have made at the market price and visits from people who would not visit otherwise. Such pressures increase the likelihood of damage to the environment. In the case of national parks, assets worth hundreds of billions of dollars—including infrastructure like roads, visitor centers, and sewage systems as well as natural resource assets such as wildlife, habitat, and water and air quality—suffer from abuse and overuse. Anderson and Leal (1991, 76) sum up the harms from welfare recreation on federal lands this way: "Zero or token fees result in crowding, abuse of resources, and reduced incentives for the private sector to provide similar

activities. The move to higher recreational user fees eliminates fiscal problems caused by subsidized recreation. . . .”

Another major problem that stems from welfare recreation is the failure to link costs with revenues. Just raising the price of recreation will not solve all the problems. For much of the twentieth century, most of the proceeds from user fees have gone to the federal treasury instead of the facility or agency collecting the fees. This leaves managers with little discretionary funds for site upkeep and recreational provision. Instead they must turn to politicians to supply the funds. Since politicians control the purse strings, they decide which projects are funded and which are not. As discussed later, the pet projects of politicians often take priority over resource protection and facility upkeep.

The Harms of Welfare Recreation to National Parks

From 1960 to 1998, the U.S. population increased by nearly 50 percent, and visitation to national parks shot up by more than 260 percent. The rise in park demand is a function of more than just population growth. Anderson and Leal (2001, 59) identify another critical factor: “Since World War II, incomes for United States citizens have been rising dramatically, increasing the willingness of Americans to pay more for outdoor opportunities.”

Unfortunately park visitors are not paying most of the higher costs from higher park utilization, because park fees have been kept too low. When adjusted for inflation, fees taken in at park entrances declined during the twentieth century. Consider that in 1997 the fee for Yellowstone’s annual vehicle pass was \$40. Visitors paid more in real terms, \$133, for entry into Yellowstone in 1916 (Leal and Fretwell 1997, 3). On one hand, by not linking the revenues from fees to the costs of managing recreational and environmental assets, park managers have neither the wherewithal nor the incentive to provide the things that give visitors a quality experience, such as maintained roads, sewage systems, and a well-preserved environment. On the other hand, users have been given an incentive to recreate more, because of artificially low fees.

As a result, taxpayers and federal lands are bearing the costs of the increased recreation through higher taxes and declining infrastructure. With recreation provided below market and below cost, it is not surprising that there is increased use and abuse of our national parks. The problem is manifest by recent evidence that the National Park Service (NPS) has not kept up with the growing need for maintenance caused by the additional wear and tear from overcrowding. A severe maintenance backlog of basic infrastructure has built up in our national parks and other federal sites. According to the NPS, it will cost an estimated \$3.54 billion to fix backlogged problems at national parks, monuments, and wilderness areas (Janofsky 1999).

Congress took one step in the right direction to solve the problem of welfare recreation. The fee demonstration program, which was authorized in 1996, allowed four federal agencies including the NPS to charge higher or new fees at selected sites. At least 80 percent of the increased revenue from this program must be spent at the facility where it is collected; the remainder is spent at the agency’s discretion (Fretwell 1999b, 10). Allowing most of the fees to remain at their collection sites links revenues with costs and sensitizes site managers to recreational demands and the costs of provision.

The initial results of the fee demonstration program have been encouraging. Such improvements, as noted by Fretwell (1999b, 13), include:

- Natural Bridges National Monument in Utah, which is managed by the NPS, used fees to rebuild 5,000 feet of deteriorating trails. The monument had not had a trails maintenance and repair program in more than thirteen years; it now has a trails maintenance crew of five.
- Fees helped Grand Teton National Park survey wildlife in the park and monitor water quality.
- At the Forest Service's Mount St. Helens National Monument, fees kept open three visitor centers that otherwise might have been closed. Other funds at Mount St. Helens were used for plowing snow to provide early access to the monument's popular Windy Ridge and Lava Canyon areas.

Unfortunately fees from the program remain a small part of the Park Service's overall budget, which means congressional appropriations still provide the lion's share of the agency's financing. In 1999 the outlays of the Park Service budget were \$1.86 billion, whereas the fee demonstration program brought in \$141.4 million in receipts.³ The program provided only about 8 percent of the total Park Service budget. This means Congress, the administration, and, therefore, politics are still controlling the purse strings, and that means there is a long way to go to end welfare recreation on federal lands.

Maintenance backlogs are not the only result of welfare recreation. Increased congestion, direct damage to the environment from overuse, and increased pollution also occur.

Trash and Sewage

The oldest, and perhaps, most recognizable of the national parks is Yellowstone. Yellowstone's attractiveness as a tourist destination causes it to suffer some of the greatest threats from welfare recreation, sewage disposal among them.

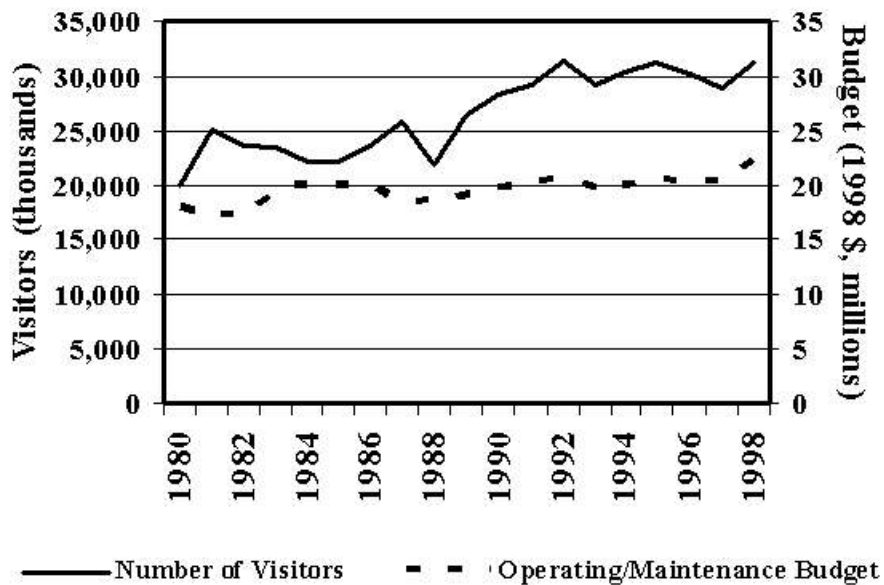
Alan Summerski, the assistant chief of maintenance at Yellowstone, remarks that the park's broken water lines have been "strained beyond reason by the growing use of bathing facilities and toilets" (McMillion 1999a, 9). Malfunctions in the sewage system at Old Faithful caused by old age and increased use have led to spills into pristine streams near the park's most popular tourist attraction. Another decaying sewer system has led to sewage spilling into Yellowstone Lake.

In 1999 the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality issued a citation to the NPS for violating water quality laws; it was the second such instance in two years. The violation arose because the Park Service needed to siphon sewage from one of the sewage ponds at the Fishing Bridge treatment plant into a nearby meadow in order to keep the pond from failing (Milstein 1999b). The Park Service has identified 142 water and sewer problems needing \$30 million

worth of repairs (Moen 1999).

The sewage problem stems, in part, from the failure to link revenues with rising costs. Park attendance more than doubled between 1960 and 1998, rising from just under 1.5 million visitors annually to more than 3.1 million (NPS 1999, 9). Those 3.1 million visitors produce 270 million gallons of waste, using up to eighteen rolls of toilet paper per toilet daily (Moen 1999). Yet when visitors enter Yellowstone’s gates, they do not pay a high enough fee to cover the costs of keeping the park in good condition for public use. In recent years, fees covered less than one-quarter of the park’s operating costs. According to an NPCA report on Yellowstone’s sewage problem, the park’s budget has climbed less than 3 percent since 1980, whereas the number of visitors to the park has climbed by nearly 40 percent (NPCA 1999c). Using NPS figures and adjusting for inflation, I found Yellowstone’s budget to have increased by 25 percent between 1980 and 1998, whereas visitation increased by 56 percent (fig. 9.1). In either case, there is a substantial disparity between visitor growth and budget growth. As a result, it comes as little surprise that there is a \$30 million backlog in sewer repairs at Yellowstone. As Tom Brokaw stated on *NBC Nightly News* (August 3, 1999), Yellowstone is “strained to the breaking point by its popularity.”

Figure 9.1
Yellowstone National Park, 1980 to 1998



Sources: Budget data: Jack O’Brian, Freedom of Information Act officer, National Park Service, Intermountain Region, Denver, CO, by written correspondence, September 16 and 27. Visitation data: National Park Service (1999).

The park's sewage repair backlog is not the only sewage problem needing attention at a national park. Everglades National Park needs an updated water treatment center that will cost \$20 million, and Grand Canyon National Park suffers from the same need at a price tag of \$15 million (Janofsky 1999). Until welfare recreation ends, these sewage problems in our national parks will persist.

It is important to understand that the sewage problem in Yellowstone and the other national parks only partially results from visitors not paying the full cost of their recreational activity. On the other side of the coin, because park managers are not required to balance their revenues against their costs and politicians control the purse strings, funding is not properly allocated to real maintenance needs. Even if the NPS took in greater revenues from visitors by charging higher user fees, politics can and often does override park needs.

Consider the employee housing situation at parks like Yosemite. New employee housing was built at the average cost of \$580,000 per unit in 1997. This housing came in at two to four times the average construction rate for nearby local housing. Despite spending a small fortune, the new housing accommodated fewer than 60 of the park's 5,000 employees, leaving some to dwell in tent-cabins without running water (Fretwell 1999b, 4). The unnecessarily high building costs no doubt led to fewer accommodations and more employees stuck out in the cold.

Unneeded ventures like the \$1 million outhouse built in Glacier National Park in 1998 provide another example (Pound 1997). The park had other pressing needs, such as road repair, but politicians diverted funds to the outhouse. With park managers still receiving most funds from the federal treasury, additional funds from user fees may not be enough to offset political interference by Congress.

If national park managers were required to pay all costs out of revenues from fees and had no spending orders from Congress, then the above problems would be mitigated. Services that paid their way would be the rule instead of the exception. And what projects tend to pay their way? Those that bring visitors back year after year, such as upkeep of infrastructure and protection of natural resources. For Congress, oversight should focus on efficiency of park operation, environmental quality, and other like-minded goals instead of mandates for gold-plated outhouses.

Environmental Assets

In the national parks of Utah and all along the Colorado Plateau, the soil is covered with a thin black crust of cyanobacteria. Cyanobacteria, known as blue-green algae, provide many functions in arid desert regions. According to the National Park Service, it provides three basic services to vascular plants. First, it fixates nitrogen, converting the atmospheric gas into a form plants can use. As nitrogen levels are often low in deserts, thus limiting plant productivity, this is an important function. Second, cyanobacteria store water, which is essential to plants in desert regions. Third, the black crust contributes to organic matter in the region, often representing up to 80 percent of living groundcover. The cyanobacteria provide an important function to the entire desert ecosystem by stabilizing the ground against wind and water erosion (Belnap 1999).

Despite all of the strength that they provide to the soil, cyanobacteria cannot stand up to

human traffic. The brittle crust is destroyed when the full weight of a human body is applied. Tourists who leave the trails and walk onto the crust can cause significant damage. Harmed areas often take fifty years or longer to recover (Fretwell 1999a, 20). And so, the NPS marks areas of heavy traffic with signs to stay on the trail.

Yet wear and tear from heavy traffic combined with deficient funding for trail repair and maintenance have worn away trails, making it difficult for hikers to know where they can travel with a minimal impact on the crust. The lack of trail maintenance harms the sensitive soil. The same can be said for backcountry hikers in the region. If hikers paid adequate fees and those fees went directly to maintenance upkeep, harm could be avoided.

Cyanobacteria are not the only creatures damaged from foot traffic. Where hikers or bikers create trails, plant life is destroyed. This happens throughout natural landscapes and national parks. The importance of maintaining trails becomes paramount for minimizing the environmental impact of hikers on parklands. Again, to maintain trails, recreationists should pay the cost of their activities.

With trails, linking costs with revenues is as important as making sure that visitors pay for their activity. Knowing that the natural environment keeps visitors returning year after year, park managers who rely upon visitor revenue for their funding must keep the environment in tiptop shape.

Leal and Fretwell (1997, 20–25) underscore this point with their comparison of Big Bend National Park in Texas and its nearby neighbor the Big Bend Ranch State Park. The national park is not forced to balance its revenues and costs, and therefore faces serious deterioration of facilities and trails. It makes no deliberate efforts to control where visitors tread in order to limit the impact on sensitive areas of the park. The state park, in contrast, has divided Big Bend Ranch into zones where visitor activity is strictly controlled at any given time. Environmentally sensitive areas are monitored for the impacts of public use in order to reroute visitors and minimize wear and tear. This is done because the park managers must rely on returning visitors and those who prize environmental protection to pay their salaries. A poor environment means fewer tourists. When the incentives of environmental asset managers are consistent with their personal preference to protect the environment, the results are better than when managers must respond to shifting political interests in Washington.

Congestion: People, Cars, and Congestion Pricing

Many of the problems from welfare recreation boil down to one thing: congestion (too many people in one area at one time). In 1999 game wardens from Tanzania visited Yellowstone National Park. “Too many people. Too many vehicles,” commented one warden. Another said, “It’s like a city. How can a tourist enjoy with so many vehicles around?” (McMillion 1999b). Anderson and Leal (1991, 62) write, “As with any good, low or zero fees for federally controlled resources increase the demand and result in overcrowding and diminished quality.” Problems from overcrowding result in reduced quality of a visit to a desirable locale and reduced environmental quality.

On the convenience side, roads are run down in the parks. Some of the most traveled

roads in Yellowstone have not had major improvements in nearly sixty-five years. Potholes along these routes have gotten bad enough to break car axles (Janofsky 1999). In 1998 Yellowstone's Dunraven Pass was in such poor shape that it was closed to traffic until it could be repaved.

High concentrations of visitors lead to traffic jams, and idling cars increase pollution emissions. On summer evenings at the Yavapai Point overlook in the Grand Canyon National Park, the parking lot is regularly full, leaving many visitors to drive away in frustration (T. Watson 1999). Too many visitors using the facilities at one time is also a large reason for overflowing sewage systems. Built for a lower capacity, they cannot process sewage fast enough to keep up with the crowds.

Congestion was addressed in a 1999 General Accounting Office (GAO) report analyzing the success of the fee demonstration program. The report suggested that the Park Service needed to experiment more with different pricing structures based on use. According to the report,

The Park Service has done little to experiment with different pricing structures. Visitors generally pay the same fee whether they are visiting during a peak period (such as a weekend in the summer) or an off-peak period (such as midweek during the winter) or whether they are staying for several hours or several days. A more innovative fee system would make fees more equitable for visitors and might change visitation patterns somewhat to enhance economic efficiency and reduce overcrowding and its effects on parks' resources. Furthermore, according to the four agencies, reducing visitation during peak periods can lower the costs of operating recreation sites by reducing (1) the staff needed to operate a site, (2) the size of facilities, (3) the need for maintenance and future capital investments and (4) the extent of damage to a site's resources. (GAO 1999, 4)

Some argue that recreational use does not commit the egregious harms that traditional commodity extraction does because it does not extract a resource. Congestion illustrates the flaw in this thinking. One reason that recreationists visit areas of natural beauty is to get away from civilization. Recreational users extract a resource by taking up a given space at a specific time. The difference between four people in a meadow and forty affects a visitor's enjoyment of nature.

The problem of too few parking spaces in the Grand Canyon viewing area is a prime example of a valuable space resource being allocated by first-come, first-served with no restriction on length of stay. Long lines and scenic views filled with not-so-scenic crowds of people lessen the outdoors experience for everyone. Despite the GAO's acknowledgment of the benefits of congestion pricing—which would bring the price charged more in line with the actual cost of recreating—the NPS is instead looking at expensive tram systems for Yosemite and the Grand Canyon as well as direct rationing, in which reservations are required to use parts of the park system.

Plans to reduce the crowding at Yosemite have been under consideration since the General Management Plan began in 1980. According to the National Park Service's original report, "Increasing automobile traffic is the single greatest threat to enjoyment of the natural and

scenic qualities of Yosemite” (NPS 1980). Four million people now visit the park annually, double the number in 1980. Under the preferred alternative for the Final Yosemite Valley Plan (the primary planning document for carrying out the goals of the General Management Plan), the following solutions were proposed to handle congestion: Overnight accommodations will be reduced by approximately 16 percent (that includes a 5 percent *increase* in camping units); day-use parking spaces in the Yosemite Valley will be reduced by about 65 percent, leaving only 550 spaces at Yosemite Village; and shuttles, biking, and hiking will provide transportation in the park (NPS 2000, 2-259 through 2-273). Eventually the planners hope to create a transit system to allow for complete removal of all private vehicles from the valley. In addition, restricting the numbers of visitors per day through a reservation system was considered (NPS 1980).

A simpler and less expensive plan to the problem of intensive use would be congestion pricing—not currently one of the options under the Yosemite Valley Plan. Congestion pricing is the reason movie matinees are cheaper than evening shows, telephone calls are less expensive on weekends, hotels have different rates during winter and summer, and airline tickets are priced differently for different days and times of the year. By raising the price at peak hours when their service is in its highest demand, companies reduce the traffic and give greater priority to those with greater demand. Congestion pricing affords everyone the option to visit Yosemite. Those who place a lower value on their trip to Yosemite can postpone their visit to the off-peak season and pay less. By applying a congestion pricing scheme, Yosemite would raise more funding, cut down on congestion, and allow visiting travelers the freedom to drive through the park. At the same time, the extra funds could be put back into enhancing the park by improving wildlife management and hiking trails instead of spending federal tax dollars on building an expensive transportation system that will benefit a fraction of the taxpayers forced to contribute to it.

Overcrowding of national parks, forests, rivers, and other recreational areas harms the environment. It leads to degradation of the wilderness, its environmental amenities, and the recreational experience by stretching the resources beyond their capacity. Yosemite even suffers from overcrowding and environmental damage due to underpricing the right to climb the world-class rock, El Capitan. Rock climber Peter Anderson observes that raw human waste and a high density of climbers have degraded the famous landmark.⁴ Congestion pricing could go a long way to ending these problems.

According to the NPS, “During peak visitation periods the noise, smell, glare, and congestion associated with motor vehicles can overwhelm the resource-related visitor experience” (NPS 2000, 1–11). Increased traffic is harmful to wildlife crossing the roadways. Gridlock caused by too many visitors in one place leads to stop-and-go traffic and idling engines, both of which produce air pollution. But like the problems of inconvenience, these environmental harms could be handled by using price structures that reflect the varying demands of park use.

Vandalism and Litter

One park on the NPCA list of Parks in Jeopardy is the Chaco Culture National Historic Park. Among the threats to Chaco according to the NPCA are “inadequate funds for preservation

and maintenance, tourism impacts, vandalism and looting” (NPCA 1999a). Vandalism and looting are problems that have yet to be tackled. Not surprisingly, these are also linked to welfare recreation privileges.

With increased recreational users visiting an area, there is a need for an equal increase in law enforcement. In 1989 Yellowstone National Park reached its peak staffing year. Since then, with more visitors and fewer staff, the park has experienced a significant rise in wildlife poaching, thefts, weapons charges, and violations by snowmobile drivers (Janofsky 1999). The cost of extra enforcement is not being considered in the recreational price users pay, and thus there are no funds to hire the appropriate staff.

The *New York Times* reports that criminal deterrence is an unexpected benefit of a user fee program, which attempts to align a park’s revenue with the costs imposed on it. The article points out that “since Glen Canyon National Recreation Area started charging fees at the Lone Rock Campground in Utah, documented cases of assault, rape, and drunken driving dropped abruptly, according to a Park Service report, as gang activity decreased and more families began visiting” (Cushman 1999). Gene Zimmerman, forest supervisor for the San Bernardino National Forest, found the same thing from the Forest Service’s user fee program, the Adventure Pass. “The anecdotal information is that the Adventure Pass is slowing vandalism in the park” (Sleeth 1999).

These stories are not surprising to private enterprises that offer recreation, such as the North Maine Woods and International Paper (IP). These two operations used to offer recreation opportunities for nothing or next to it. Littering, arson, vandalism, and damage from off-road vehicle use ended the free lunch. The two organizations began charging for recreational use on their lands. Both found that user fees reduced littering, vandalism, and criminal activity. Funds from fees helped provide the support staff to enforce rules on their land, and no doubt the higher fees discouraged vandals from entering the recreational areas in the first place. When damage did occur, fees helped to pay for the cleanup (Anderson and Leal 1991, 69; 1997, 5).

Commercial Activity vs. Recreation: Ignoring the Economics of Nature

An argument often made against forcing recreationists to pay their way is that it commercializes nature. The Website for Free Our Forests attacks the fee demonstration program. “Fee demo has nothing to do with stewardship of public lands. It is, in fact, the beginning of an attempt by corporate America to privatize and commercialize our public lands” (Free Our Forests 2001). The group also contends, “Our public lands are our heritage and our birthright. We own these lands. They are not a recreational commodity.” The Sierra Club writes, “Fee Demo is designed to commercialize these lands—to extract whatever the market can bear and to encourage development of recreational facilities” (Sierra Club 1999). Scott Silver, executive director of Wild Wilderness, compares the difference between free and fee to prostitution: Fees are like the “difference between romantic love and paid sex. It changes the experience totally. It can’t be wild if it’s not free” (K. Watson 1999).

All of these arguments ignore the economics of recreation. Although the environmental groups and the recreational groups are asserting that pricing is bad, the latter wants unlimited free

access and most of the former wants limits on “free” access. The former apparently has little regard for the havoc wreaked on natural resources from wide-open recreation, whereas the latter ignores the problem of inadequate upkeep in tax-supported federal sites.

Does charging recreationists for the costs of their activity commercialize nature? More important, is this a bad thing or even a new thing? Recent debate over allowing companies into Yellowstone National Park to bioprospect provides an interesting anecdote for contrasting recreation and other commercial activity in park areas. Microorganisms that live in the thermal areas of Yellowstone—thermophiles as they are often called—carry unique genetic material that may unleash the secrets to better beer brewing, safer bleach, or new perfumes. One product derived from a Yellowstone thermophile created a \$200 million per year industry that replicates genetic material for DNA fingerprinting (Warrick 1998).

The Park Service recognized that Yellowstone could be receiving significant revenue if it took royalties from bioprospecting. It worked out a deal with the Diversa Corporation from San Diego to do just that. But a few environmentalists were upset and claimed that this could lead to massive resource extraction from the park. The activists sued and successfully got the deal postponed (Milstein 1999a). One of them, Mike Bader, executive director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, equated the Diversa deal to “a modern day gold rush.” Yet according to David Barna, chief of public affairs for the Park Service, “Tourists on the boardwalks probably carry more [of] these thermophiles home on our sneakers than the researchers take out” (McMillion 1999c).

The activists’ primary worry was that the park was heading down a dangerous path to commercialization. In his decision halting the Diversa deal until an environmental impact statement had been completed, Justice Royce C. Lamberth wrote, “Although parkgoers may be willing to forgive the trespass of their national parkland when the goals of that trespass are scientific and educational, commercial exploitation of that same parkland may reasonably be perceived as injurious” (Milstein 1999a). These worries over commercialization of our national parks are at the heart of the problem. People are unwilling to recognize that the parks already are commercialized. Recreation *is* commercial activity. Dan Janzen (1998, p#), a professor of biology at the University of Pennsylvania and a scientific adviser to the Guanacaste Conservation Area in Costa Rica, puts it this way: “The very nature-oriented tourism industry that thrives in our national parks has been conducting commercial development of biodiversity and ecosystem in, and downstream from, national parks since the first train tracks were laid to Yellowstone’s front door more than 100 years ago.” In fact, the formation of Yellowstone National Park stems from the commercial drive of the Northern Pacific Railroad (Anderson and Hill 1996).

Recreationists like any other customer of a commercial venture need to pay their share of the cost. If they do not, it is the health of the resource, nature, that will suffer. What is not mentioned by activists like Silver who compare user fees to prostitution is that unlike in free love where both parties receive benefits, a plan of free recreation affords the recreationist a benefit, but the environment just gets screwed.

Conclusion

Recreation is not the problem, *welfare* recreation is. Recreation coupled with user fees can be quite helpful to the environment by providing funds to maintain habitat and animals and by sensitizing users and suppliers to the values of nature and the costs of protecting those values. Programs to improve habitat for wildlife on IP lands didn't really take off until IP biologist Tom Bourland began to show that wildlife could pay its way through recreation. As Bourland puts it:

Because the status of wildlife affected the bottom line, the landowners bent over backwards to provide habitat for whitetail deer, wild turkey, fox, squirrel, and bobwhite quail, as well as endangered bald eagles and red-cockaded woodpeckers. They left corridors of trees 100 yards wide between harvested areas through which wildlife could travel safely. They left clumps of trees uncut while younger stands next to them grew, thus creating greater age diversity. They reduced the size of cut areas and made their perimeters more irregular and therefore more attractive to a greater variety of wildlife. They did not harvest large strips of trees and shrubs along either side of streams, and they planted food plots. (quoted in Anderson and Leal 1997, 7)

Throughout the western United States, state game agencies have begun building on the recreational activity of fee hunting in order to preserve habitat. By allowing landowners to make a profit from wildlife, the game agencies are providing another source of income to stave off development (Leal and Grewell 1999). Ecotourism is used by groups like The Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society to pay for ecological preservation on their lands. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition (1998, 22) offers up farm and ranch tourism as a way to protect open space. These are all examples of recreation in a commercial form helping to protect the environment. And in each of these cases, the groups involved must consider the costs of their activities versus the benefits, something that our public lands do not as yet have to do.

Recreation is not an entirely benign activity. It imposes harms and costs on the environment. It extracts resources, not only physical ones like worn-down trails and damaged wildlife, but also more abstract ones like the nature experience of an uncrowded area. Raising the price is not enough: Revenue from fees must be put in park managers' hands so they can manage the resource without the political hand of Congress interfering with resource management. When costs are paid for by recreationists, they call the tune for better services and facility upkeep. Beyond that, market-driven recreation can help preserve an environmental area by raising its value beyond that of alternate uses such as mining or grazing, and can even turn a profit. The idea of free recreational use on federal lands is a nice but utopian one. It is not practical, and it will not help protect the environmental resources on our federal lands. Commercializing recreation by way of fees may change the experience—some even claim may harm it. But ignoring that recreation is a commercial activity in itself ignores a golden opportunity to manage our lands in a way that protects the environment.

Notes

1. See chapter 7 (Fretwell 2002) of this volume.
2. Two issues of welfare recreation, which I will not address here, are justice and the driving out of competitive private efforts. On the justice side, should taxpayers who never or seldom use the recreational amenities be forced to pay for their provision? The question becomes even more intriguing when one considers that those who benefit most from the provision of welfare recreation are the upper- and middle-class members of society who can afford trips to recreational areas. On the competition side, charging a price below that of a market price does not allow the private sector to provide recreation and environmental amenities on an equal footing. See Fretwell (1999b, 6–10). This is not beneficial to the environment, because the brunt of meeting recreational demand falls on the public sector, thereby resulting in more stress on public lands.
3. The fee demonstration numbers were taken from the Department of the Interior's 1999 report to Congress on the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture 2000). The budget outlays were taken from the Public Budget Database. Total receipts taken in by the National Park Service were \$150.8 million (Office of Management and Budget 2000).
4. Personal interview with El Capitan rock climber Peter Anderson, August 8, 1999.

References

- Anderson, Terry L., and Donald R. Leal. 1991. *Free Market Environmentalism*. San Francisco, CA: Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy.
- . 1997. *Enviro-Capitalists: Doing Good While Doing Well*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- . 2001. *Free Market Environmentalism*, rev. ed. New York: Palgrave.
- Anderson, Terry L., and P. J. Hill. 1996. Appropriable Rents from Yellowstone: A Case of Incomplete Contracting. *Economic Inquiry* 34(July): 506–18.
- Belnap, Jayne. 1999. *Cryptobiotic Soil Crust*. April 15. Online: www.nps.gov/seug/resource/ecology/cryptos.htm (cited: March 7, 2001).
- Coffin, James B., ed. 2000. *Federal Parks & Recreation*. February 11.
- Cushman, John H., Jr. 1999. Priorities in the National Parks. *New York Times*, July 26.
- Free Our Forests. 2001. *Why Is the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program Wrong? Let Us Count the Ways*. Online: www.freeourforests.org/whywrong.htm (cited: March 21, 2001).
- Fretwell, Holly Lippke. 1998. The Price We Pay. *Public Lands*. Bozeman, MT: PERC, August.
- . 1999a. Forests: Do We Get What We Pay For? *Public Lands II*. Bozeman, MT: PERC, July.
- . 1999b. Paying to Play: The Fee Demonstration Program. *PERC Policy Series*, PS-17. Bozeman, MT: PERC.
- . 2002. The Untouchables: America's National Forests. This volume.
- General Accounting Office. 1999. *Recreation Fees: Demonstration Has Increased Revenues, But Impact on Park Service Backlog is Uncertain*. GAO-RCED-99-101. Washington, DC.

- Greater Yellowstone Coalition. 1998. *Incentives for Conserving Open Lands in Greater Yellowstone*. Bozeman, MT.
- Hebert, H. Josef. 1999. Neglecting National Parks. *Associated Press*, April 20. Online: <http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/science/DailyNews/parks990420.html> (cited: March 18, 2001).
- Janofsky, Michael. 1999. National Parks, Strained by Record Crowds, Face a Crisis. *New York Times*, July 25.
- Janzen, Dan. 1998. Bioprospecting and Public-Private Benefit Sharing in the U.S. National Parks. *Environmental Forum*, July/August, 38–45.
- Leal, Donald R., and Holly Lippke Fretwell. 1997. Back to the Future to Save our Parks. *PERC Policy Series*, PS-10. Bozeman, MT: PERC.
- Leal, Donald R., and J. Bishop Grewell. 1999. *Hunting for Habitat: A Practical Guide to State-Landowner Partnerships*. Bozeman, MT: PERC.
- McMillion, Scott. 1999a. Panel Earmarks Funds for Yellowstone Park Sewer Improvements. *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, June 25.
- . 1999b. An African Perspective: Game Wardens from Tanzania Tour the First National Park. *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, August 8.
- . 1999c. Judge Nixes Yellowstone's Microbe Deal. *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, March 26.
- Milstein, Michael. 1999a. Judge Disallows Yellowstone's Microbe Agreement. *Billings Gazette*, March 26.
- . 1999b. Park Sewage Overflows. *Billings Gazette*, July 12.
- Moen, Bob. 1999. Geysers of Effluent Strains Yellowstone's Budget, Environment. *Los Angeles Times*, July 11.
- National Park Service. 1980. *General Management Plan for Yosemite National Park*. Preface and introduction. September. Online: www.nps.gov/yose/planning/gmp/intro80.html (cited: March 7, 2001).
- . 1999. *Recreation Visits: Decade Files in PDF Format*. June 24. Online: www2.nature.nps.gov/stats/decadepdfs.htm (cited: August 2, 2000).
- . 2000. *Yosemite Valley Plan*. November. Online: www.nps.gov/yose/planning/yvp/seis/pdf/Volume_IA.pdf (cited: March 7, 2001).
- National Parks and Conservation Association. 1999a. *Parks in Jeopardy: NPCA's 1999 List of 10 Most Endangered National Parks*. Crumbling Treasures: Chaco Culture National Historical Park Online: www.npca.org/readaboutit/tt_chaco.html (cited: July 30, 1999).
- . 1999b. *Parks in Jeopardy: NPCA's 1999 List of 10 Most Endangered National Parks*. Introduction. Online: www.npca.org/readaboutit/tt_introduction.html (cited: July 30, 1999).
- . 1999c. *Parks in Jeopardy: NPCA's 1999 List of 10 Most Endangered National Parks*. Muddying the Waters: Yellowstone National Park. Online: www.npca.org/readaboutit/tt_yellowstone.html (cited: July 30, 1999).
- Office of Management and Budget. 2000. *Budget of the United States Government: Fiscal Year 2000*. Online: www.access.gpo.gov/usbudget/fy2000/other.html (cited: March 18, 2001).

- Pound, Edward T. 1997. Panel Chair Raps Park Service on \$1M Outhouse: Congressman Wants Explanation. *USA Today*, December 18.
- Sierra Club Yodeler*. 1999. The Corporate Takeover of Nature. Online: tamalpais.sierraclub.org/chapters/sanfranciscobay/yodeler/199905/corporate.html (cited: August 20, 2000).
- Sleeth, Peter. 1999. Saving Mount Hood from Our Loving Soles. *Oregonian*, February 21.
- Tennesen, Michael. 1998. The Road Less Traveled. *National Parks*, May–June.
- U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2000. *Recreational Fee Demonstration Program Progress Report to Congress Fiscal Year 1999*. Washington, DC: National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Forest Service, January 31.
- Warrick, Joby. 1998. Yellowstone: A Gold Mine of Microbes. *Washington Post*, July 12.
- Watson, Keri. 1999. The Wayward West. *High Country News*, August 30.
- Watson, Tracy. 1999. Visitors' Cars Not Welcome. *USA Today*, August 20.
- Wilderness Society. 1999. *Putting Conservation First*. Online: www.wilderness.org/newsroom/15most_1999/15most_report.pdf (cited: March 7, 2001).