

Funding, staff shortages threaten national parks

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WASHINGTON — Five years out from its 100th anniversary, the National Park Service lacks funding for critical maintenance and staffing, imperiling the natural and cultural heritage found in America's "special places," watchdog groups and other observers contend.

Nationwide, there is a nearly \$11 billion maintenance backlog, about half of which agency officials consider "critical" — and the total shows no signs of lessening. Problems include craggy and washed out roads and visitor centers and other aging buildings with stressed electrical systems and worn out roofs.

Shortfalls for staffing approach \$600 million, according to an estimate by the National Parks Conservation Association, an advocacy and watchdog group.

Cultural resources, such as archeological and archival collections and historic structures, suffer from a lack of trained personnel to care for them, it says.

"With too few park staff to watch over them, park prehistoric sites and battlefields are looted and destroyed, historic buildings are vandalized and museum collections are left to deteriorate," said the report, one of many by outside groups in recent years that have described park system problems. Looting at the Vicksburg National Military Park has sparked six recent investigations.

Meanwhile, ecological challenges, such as invasive animal and plant species and climate change, threaten iconic plants such as the Joshua and redwood trees that anchor parks in California, the conservation group warned.

Reports of climate change harming parks from Montana to Southern California have also come from the U.S. Geological Service, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Park Service itself.

Agency officials also acknowledge a variety of problems in interviews and documents.

"This ... didn't happen overnight. It's been building for about 10 years," This 0x226(euro) ã didn't happen overnight. It's been building for about 10 years," said Maureen Finnerty of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees. "They try to put a good face on it for the public."

The 394 national parks draw 270 million visitors annually and remain a top attraction for foreign tourists, various surveys show.

Included are 27,000 historic buildings; 3,500 statues and monuments; 2 million archeological sites; and 123 million museum objects and historical documents. The quality of latter collection ranks second only to the Smithsonian Institution's, the NPCA said.

But in Congress, where worries about federal spending overshadow everything, about the best the Park Service can hope for is less severe budget cuts than other agencies.

That's disappointing to those who want to see a rejuvenated Park Service before its 2016 centennial. They worry about serious degradation marking the occasion instead.

"We have a good system that is at a tipping point," Tom Kiernan, president of the NPCA, said in an interview.

Dayton Duncan, a writer and filmmaker who collaborated with Ken Burns on the public television series "National Parks: America's Best Idea," said the system has struggled with inadequate funding for too long. Its last nationwide facelift occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

"It's a crisis," Duncan said of Park Service's needs colliding with the anti-government fervor of many politicians.

"The national parks are one of the earliest examples of government doing something and doing something well."

Beginning with the 2008 budget, former Republican President George W. Bush and Congress agreed to start adding a series of \$100 million increases to the

Park Service's \$2.5 billion annual budget to prepare for the agency's anniversary in 2016. But the plan stalled in 2010.

The agreement congressional Republicans negotiated with the Obama Administration for 2011 cut the agency's budget by \$132 million.

And shortly before Congress left for its August recess, the House was considering a 2012 spending bill that would trim an additional \$10 million.

To keep its deferred maintenance backlog from growing would require \$700 million annually. Instead, the Park Service gets about \$250 million for maintenance, said agency spokesman Jeffrey Olson.

Despite widespread reports of staffing shortages, Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, chair of the House subcommittee that controls Park Service funding, said his panel's 2012 spending bill ensures "every park unit in the country will be operational and fully staffed without the threat of furloughs or layoffs."

In response, Kristen Brengel, who tracks legislation for the NPCA, said assurances about further layoffs do not address staffing shortages that already exist.

A fraction of the money that goes into some Pentagon weapons programs, she added, could make up for a lot of the Park Service's maintenance and staffing needs.

However, Chris Edwards, an expert on federal spending at the Cato Institute, a conservative-libertarian think tank, says the Park Service, like most federal agencies, has no right to expect funding increases when the national debt is close to \$15 trillion and yearly budget deficits remain over \$1 trillion.

"One problem is that the federal government has accumulated too many national parks," he said. "Many of these are mainly visited by residents of particular states and thus should be transferred to state government ownership. That way, the Park Service could concentrate on real national gems like Yellowstone."

Philanthropic sources add about \$25 million a year to what the agency has to spend, and Brengel said one possibility for increasing that is setting up an endowment similar to the Smithsonian's, which has grown to nearly \$800 million.

Edwards said another option is to put parks under the control of private, nonprofit corporations that depend on fees and contributions.

Duncan, however, says private funding "can't fill the hole."

He also rejects proposals to privatize the parks. Yellowstone National Park would become "Geyser World," he said.

Meanwhile, environmentalists are worried about other aspects of the House bill that funds the parks.

Generating the most alarm is a provision added by Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., that would allow uranium mining near the Grand Canyon National Park, perhaps the premier U.S. national park. Among other worries, such activity would pose a risk to the Colorado River, which supplies drinking water to 25 million Americans, including numerous Southern California residents, environmentalists say.

Another element of the bill worrying them would drastically reduce the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is used to buy properties adjacent to National Parks, to \$66 million, its lowest level in its 45-year history. The Park Service frequently acquires adjacent land so it can eliminate pollution problems.

"I personally would like to see more funding for the (the fund); the problem is we just don't have the money," Simpson said.

Despite the storm clouds, Kiernan, president of NPCA, refuses to believe that Congress won't eventually care for the parks in the manner advocates want.

Every \$1 invested in them, he said, generates \$4 of economic activity in return.

Said Kiernan, "They are a powerful rural economic development engine."