



## What a Romney presidency might mean for national park visits

By: Blane Bachelor - October 24, 2012

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There's growing concern among some environmental groups and travel operators that a proposed energy plan by presidential hopeful Mitt Romney could threaten the future of national parks, possibly damaging the nation's tourism industry in the process. Yet, some industry experts say that a Romney presidency could bring about much-needed efficiency and accountability to the management of the nation's parkland, which could in turn improve the visitor experience.

Romney's energy plan, which was a topic in the second presidential debate, focuses extensively on turning energy development on federal public lands over to the states, which historically have a record of developing natural resources.

While Romney's team hasn't detailed how public lands would be managed and funded, some tour operators and environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, fear his plan would endanger some of the country's most spectacular protected wilderness areas. The Center for American Progress, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, says that a Romney-led administration may open up at least five popular national parks – Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Grand Teton, Arches, and Theodore Roosevelt – to extractive industries. Each of those parks, the Center noted, are already at risk for encroachment by uranium, natural gas, and timber interests.

"It's safe to say that if a Romney-[running mate Paul] Ryan ticket were successful, given the track record of the current Republican Party in Congress, tourism in the national parks would be at risk," Hunter McIntosh, an executive with The Boat Company, an educational nonprofit offering small luxury cruises in southeast Alaska, told FoxNews.com. "If you do that, you're taking public land away from me and my daughter and my future grandkids, and it also impacts the tourism industry exponentially, especially at a time when tourism to the U.S. has been on an increase. It frightens the heck out of me."

But others who frequent national parks, such as Texas rancher and artist Pablo Solomon, maintain that Romney's proposed plan doesn't present an imminent danger to tourism in protected areas. The presidential hopeful, Solomon says, is suggesting a more

capitalistic approach to the management of public lands and the National Park Service, which has struggled with drastic budget cuts in recent years.

“The National Park Service frankly should not be losing money, but rather it should be making money,” said Solomon, a self-described environmentalist who participated in the first Earth Day in 1970. “It needs to be run efficiently, there needs to be accountability, and this is pretty much what I hear Romney saying what he wants to do -- make it more accountable to the people.”

According to the National Park Service, people make about 280 million trips to national parks annually, a number that’s increased steadily over the years. In 2010, visitors to national park properties spent \$12 billion on food, lodging and retail purchases and helped sustain 258,000 jobs. Every dollar spent in a national park generates \$10 for the local economy, the NPS says, and the country’s 397 national parks remain a strong draw for tourists despite the fact that they represent a scant part -- less than 1/14th of 1 percent -- of the federal budget.

However, America’s national parks have been facing ever-growing strains. According to figures from the National Parks Conservation Association, the NPS currently suffers from an annual operating shortfall of more than \$500 million, which has led to closures of facilities and visitor centers, unfilled positions, and overgrown, unkempt landscapes, trails, and buildings.

The situation could soon become more dire, with the looming threat of a sequester scheduled for January 2013. If Congress doesn’t agree on a budget, the Park Service could face cuts of up to 10 percent, according to NPCA figures.

“It’s kind of like when you fill your car up with gas, and if you put in a little less and a little less, you’re eventually going to run out of gas,” Craig Obey, senior vice president of government affairs for the NPCA, told FoxNews.com. “That’s the situation we have right now, and if this sequester hits, that will put a hole in the tank.”

Sequester or not, proponents of Romney’s proposed plan point out that some parks could get a much-needed boost by turning them over to states or private nonprofits, who are better equipped to manage them efficiently. In fact, one such model that’s already established itself as a success story is Mount Vernon, the restored Virginia home and estate of George Washington, designated by the NPS as a National Historic Monument. A little-known fact among the approximately one million visitors who tour the grounds every year: The 152-year-old site does not receive a cent of public funds. Instead, it’s run by the nonprofit Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, the oldest national preservation organization in the country.

“It’s well run, and you never read stories about scandals or problems there,” Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute, told FoxNews.com. “That’s a model that works. The Park Service is spread so thin and by trimming the number of parks and decentralizing some of them to states or private nonprofits, federal government could do a much better job and have a better budget for maintaining the truly national parks.”

Still, other tour operators remain fearful about the prospect of turning over protected wilderness areas to states’ control, and the damaging effect it could have on both the place and the people who enjoy it.

“My company has already had to scale back our Redwood National Park trip because of campsite closures,” Steve Silberberg, owner and head guide of Fitpacking, an operator that runs backpacking trips in national parks, told FoxNews.com. “Turning over public lands to private states or to extractive industries – this is the type of thing that could put me out of business. The bottom line is less access to the public and less enjoyment of our national parks, for the citizens who want to go.”