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A Running Commentary on the News

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Guns in Parks: Safe, Scary or a Sideshow?By *THE EDITORS*

(Photo: Anne Sherwood for The New York Times) Bison aren't afraid of visitors at Yellowstone National Park. **Updated, May 22, 6:57 p.m.** | Carolyn D. Meadows, a board member of the N.R.A., and Kristen Brengel of the National Parks Conservation Association have joined our discussion.

When the [Senate and House overwhelmingly approved legislation](#) regulating the credit card industry, they also endorsed a measure attached to the bill that would allow people to carry loaded guns in national parks and refuges. President Obama signed the legislation on Friday.

Gun-control groups, park police organizations and animal-rights groups criticized the Democrats for approving the bill with the gun measure in it. They said that allowing loaded guns will make it easier for poachers as well as pose dangers for hikers and other park visitors. But gun rights groups said that the widespread support for lifting the ban was justified. State laws allowing people to carry concealed weapons have not led to increases in crime and violence, the [National Rifle Association](#) said. In the parks, the N.R.A. adds, guns carried by law-abiding visitors might increase safety, against criminals and dangerous animals.

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[David B. Kopel](#), Independence Institute

[Paula Dinerstein](#), Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

[John R. Lott Jr.](#), author, "The Bias Against Guns"

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Pack Pepper Spray, Not a Pistol

Ted Kerasote is *the author* of "[Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog](#)," "[Out There](#)" and the forthcoming "[Why Dogs Die Young and What We Can Do About It](#)."

Ever since Yellowstone, the world's first national park, was created in 1872, parks and wildlife refuges have been the de facto hunting grounds of armed people tempted by animals who have lost their wariness. Living within Grand Teton National Park, I see this all the time: a deer gunned down by the side of the road, its antlers chopped off; a moose waylaid just inside the park boundary; a coyote shot as it watches a car go by. These killings are perennial, often remove spectacular, genetically fit individuals, and create one more enforcement burden for park rangers.

Allowing visitors to carry loaded firearms in national parks and wildlife refuges will only worsen the poaching problem.

Allowing visitors to carry loaded firearms in national parks and wildlife refuges, as legislation just passed by Congress does, will only make such poaching worse while making a ranger's job more risky. And I don't say this as some bleeding-heart liberal with an anti-gun agenda. There's

a rack of rifles and shotguns in my shed and, during Wyoming's hunting season, I shoot an elk, an antelope and a variety of game birds — food for me and mine during the ensuing year. I'd be the last person in the world to outlaw guns.

Yet, in a time when gun violence cuts down Americans in schools and malls, how wonderful it has been to have large tracts of our nation where guns had to be put away, where that edgy sense of personal risk from some gun-toting stranger, has faded. Granted, there are also bears, moose and bison in the parks, and they can be dangerous. But pepper spray is a far better deterrent than a .44 magnum, especially in the hands of the inexperienced. I've now used it to turn a charging moose, dissuade a cantankerous bison and send a bear scurrying. The animals had a coughing fit, and I a scare, a far better outcome than guns often produce.

Respecting States' Wishes

David B. Kopel is the research director of the *Independence Institute*, based in Golden, Colo., and an associate policy analyst with the *Cato Institute*. He is the co-author of "*Gun Control and Gun Rights*."

"What works in Chicago may not work in Cheyenne," the presidential candidate Barack Obama often said when discussing gun policy. President Obama has put his principle into practice, signing a bill which, besides changing the laws about credit cards, repeals an inappropriate federal regulation.

The old regulation had prohibited defensive gun possession or carrying in national parks. Thanks to the new law, the federal rules about guns in national parks and wildlife refuges will be the same as the laws of the host states.

So in Manhattan, where handgun carry permits are reserved for diamond merchants, the political-social-celebrity elite and a few other favored groups, there will not be a mass of people carrying guns at the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace, on 20th Street. (This result might have appalled Teddy Roosevelt, a N.R.A. member who as president carried his own revolver for protection.)

In Colorado, you don't need a permit to keep a handgun in your car; the same will be true for people driving through national parks in Colorado.

In Colorado, as in 39 other states, adults who pass a fingerprint-based background check, and a safety class, are issued permits to carry concealed handguns. So in Colorado state parks, people carry firearms lawfully for protection from mountain lions or bears, or, occasionally, human predators. Now, the same system will apply in national parks within Colorado. In Colorado, you don't need a permit to keep a defensive handgun in your own automobile; the same will be true for people driving through national parks in Colorado.

Opponents of lawful carry always predict disaster, but the record of decades of state experience with licensed carry belies the professional hysterics. Moreover, gun carrying has always been allowed in national forests and on Bureau of Land Management property.

Recognizing that every state has its own unique attitudes about firearms, the new federal statute celebrates diversity. In Colorado, we think that a woman camping in the deep back country of Rocky Mountain National Park has the right to protect herself. New Yorkers don't want guns in

the hands of teenagers who fly model airplanes at the Gateway National Recreation Area on Staten Island. Thanks to President Obama, federal law will now respect the decisions of both states.

Why Poaching Will Be Easier

Paula Dinerstein is senior counsel for *Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility*.

Opposition to the measure allowing loaded, concealed weapons in national parks is grounded in the purpose of the existing regulations — to reduce the illegal take of wildlife. The National Park Service has had regulations restricting firearms in national parks since 1936 for this reason.

A core purpose of the national park system is to provide a strict sanctuary for wildlife. Rangers are few, and the miles of roads and trails in the park system are many. Park wildlife is often unafraid of people. Parks, which contain some of the most valuable and spectacular trophy specimens, are places that tempt and reward poachers already. If carrying concealed and loaded weapons becomes legal, there will be little ability to enforce rules against poaching. Currently, a ranger can in effect assume that a loaded weapon will be used for poaching and prevent its use, without having to catch someone in the act in a remote place.

On public lands where guns are not restricted, the reckless use of them has caused problems. Another problem with the legislation is that it creates a confused patchwork of rules based on the state laws where the parks are located, ignoring the fact that the national parks are a unified system intended to be governed by uniform rules and policies.

On other public lands, such as national forests and Bureau of Land Management land, where guns are not so restricted, the reckless use of them — as in target practice and hunting near hiking trails — has caused problems.

Our national parks are simply not appropriate places for loaded, concealed weapons.

These Guns Require Permits, So What's the Problem?

John R. Lott Jr. is a senior research scientist at the University of Maryland and the author of *“More Guns, Less Crime”* and *“The Bias Against Guns.”*

Massive majorities in the House and Senate, both Republicans and Democrats, voted to eliminate the gun ban in national parks. The new federal law is hardly radical, as it simply defers to state law. If a state allows people to carry permitted concealed handguns, permit holders can carry their guns in the national parks in that state.

Opponents worry about the possibility that permit holders will accidentally shoot others or use their guns to commit crimes such as poaching. But this isn't the first time people have been able to carry

guns in national parks. They were allowed to do so for over two months this year, from January through March, and absolutely no problems were reported.

When concealed-handgun laws were originally passed, gun control advocates warned that there would be blood in the streets. Obviously that never happened.

When concealed-handgun laws were originally passed, gun control advocates then also warned

that permit holders would lose their tempers and there would be blood in the streets.

Obviously that never happened. We now have a lot of experience with concealed-handgun permit holders. In 2007, about 5 million Americans were permitted to carry concealed handguns.

Take Florida, for example. Between Oct. 1, 1987, and March 31, 2009, [Florida issued permits to 1,480,704 people](#), many of whom renewed their permits multiple times. Only 166 had their permits revoked for a firearms-related violation — about 0.01 percent.

Even though the adoption of right-to-carry laws was highly controversial in some states, the laws were so successful that no state has ever rescinded one. Indeed, no state has even held a legislative hearing to consider rescinding concealed-carry.

Everyone wants to keep guns away from criminals. The problem is that law-abiding citizens are the ones most likely to obey the gun control laws, leaving them disarmed and vulnerable and making it easier for criminals to commit crime.

Police are extremely important in deterring crime — according to [my research](#), the most important factor. But the police almost always arrive after the crime has been committed. In national parks, with vast land areas and few roads, this problem is exacerbated. Even if one can quickly reach park rangers by using a cellphone, it can be hours before they can arrive at the crime scene.

Wild animals also sometimes do attack humans, and guns can come in handy. According to a study by [Professor Gary Mauser](#) at Simon Fraser University, guns were used about 36,000 times a year to stop animal attacks in Canada.

Here is a prediction. Just like the ruckus over passing concealed handgun laws, the fears about guns in national parks will soon be forgotten.

Gun Violence: The Real Story

[Jens Ludwig](#) is the McCormick Foundation professor of social service administration, law and public policy at the University of Chicago.

People used to have to keep their guns unloaded and stored away when visiting our national parks. But the law passed by Congress this week to reform credit cards, of all things, now allows gun owners with state permits to carry guns in public to take their loaded handguns and other firearms into the parks.

The National Rifle Association is elated. Gun control proponents are despondent. Both sides are over-reacting, which at least has the virtue of distracting the American public from reflecting on what a strange, perhaps troubling, form of government we have that would enable such a cynical amendment to be attached to such a totally unrelated piece of legislation.

It does not take an advanced degree to speculate that the new law is not likely to have much impact on the carrying of loaded guns in our national parks. Statewide laws that make it easier for people to get permits to carry concealed handguns in public are unlikely to have much impact on crime one way or the other because a relatively small share of people wind up getting

such permits, those who do are typically at low risk for crime victimization or offending, and most gun carrying in the U.S. probably occurs without a permit anyway.

The real danger of permissive gun-carrying laws may come from a chilling effect on the prosecution of killings invoking questionable claims of self-defense.

One would have thought that the risk of being caught carrying illegally in a national park in particular would have been low even before this week, given that most of these parks are big places and park rangers have other things to worry about.

The real danger of permissive gun-carrying laws may come from a chilling effect on the prosecution of killings invoking questionable claims of self-defense, but such cases are presumably not very common in national parks.

The N.R.A. should in any case be congratulated for the achievement of putting gun policy on the front page of every newspaper in America, something that the 30,000 people dead from gunfire each year seems not to do often enough.

The Great Equalizer

Carolyn Dogden Meadows is a member of the board of the National Rifle Association.

Most women live with fear every day. It's in the way we park our cars, walk down the street, and use mass transportation.

I have a good friend. Her name is Jenny, and she has three children. She's an avid cyclist and, on a hot Georgia day, Jenny took off on a routine ride along the Silver Comet Trail.

The right to carry a firearm — especially for a woman — gives us, at least, a choice to have a chance, even against a stronger assailant.

Someone else was on that trail. He wasn't a cyclist. He was a convicted rapist, free again. Not out for exercise, but for evil. Jenny's a fighter. And she fought hard while he raped, sodomized, kicked and beat her.

Jenny is dead.

I don't know if she wanted to carry a firearm along that trail, and I can't say for sure if it would have saved her life. But I do know Jenny never had that choice. And she never had that chance.

What some people don't get is that the right to carry a firearm — especially for a woman — is truly the great equalizer. It gives us, at least, a choice to have a chance, even against a stronger assailant.

Yes, if a woman goes through the proper training and background check required to obtain a permit to carry a firearm, that woman should be able to carry that firearm anywhere — including in a national park. And so should any man who has gone through the same thorough process. This is common sense and that is why a bipartisan majority in Congress voted to do just that this week.

For anyone, man or woman, the right to protect oneself and family should never end at a boundary line drawn on a map. I wish Jenny had had that choice. And everyone should have that chance.

Introducing the Fear Factor

Kristen Brengel is director of legislative and government affairs at the [National Parks Conservation Association](#).

In about nine months, guns will be allowed to be carried loaded throughout national parks if the state they are in permits guns in that state. This is a change from current regulation that generally allows only unloaded and stored guns. Senator Tom Coburn, who wrote the amendment, suggested that one benefit of this change is that people will be safer in parks.

Let me be blunt: Carrying a gun is not going to make me feel safer in a national park. As an avid hiker and skier in our national parks, I know it is most important to make sure you have a map, a compass, a watch, plenty of water, good boots and adequate clothing. That will better ensure a safe, fun hike through a national park. Most visitors are out enjoying these places that dazzle the senses. As you are listening to birds singing and following a trail, I would bet most people hiking are not afraid to continue along a trail or feel the need to have a gun.

Visitors to national parks such as Yellowstone will begin to see guns visibly displayed in vehicles or being carried. After the amendment takes effect, visitors to national parks such as Yellowstone in Wyoming will begin to see guns visibly displayed in vehicles or being carried. Visitors to monuments and battlefields including Gettysburg National Military Park and Mount Rushmore will also now also be able to carry guns if the site is within a state that permits them.

Hikers in the back country will have a different experience. I will probably be discouraged from many hikes if other visitors are walking around openly carrying guns. Frankly, it is threatening to see a person hiking with a gun when it isn't hunting season.

National parks were created to be unique — unlike any other places in our country. One argument for the Coburn amendment was the need to allow guns because people should be able to carry them on all federal lands. National parks were always supposed to stand out as different - as places Americans could enjoy nature, learn about history, and appreciate the sacrifices of the past, in the case of battlefields and cemeteries.

The American idea that our nation's spectacular places should be treated in a special way evolved from a changing view of nature. Wallace Stegner wrote: "The national park idea, the best idea we ever had, was inevitable as soon as Americans learned to confront the wild continent not with fear and cupidity, but with delight, wonder and awe."

As inevitable as that idea might be, it took some struggle to ensure protection for treasures such as Yosemite Valley's waterfalls, the Grand Canyon's dramatic vistas, the geysers of Yellowstone, or the forests in the Great Smoky Mountains. We Americans will continually have to remember the reasons for delight in the face of those who instead focus on fear, to ensure these special places are preserved for our children and grandchildren.