



COURTESY ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

Feeling the Cuts

A hard look at the effects of budget sequestration on Colorado's National Parks—and what you can do to help protect the places where we play.

By Jayme Moye

With all the ballyhoo about the U.S. fiscal cliff earlier this year, speculation on the impacts to public land was absent from the discourse. Perhaps rightfully so—closing one of Rocky Mountain National Park's five visitor centers this summer seems a small price to pay for avoiding a recession. But as we head into the height of tourist season for Colorado's 12 national parks, monuments and historic sites, the effects of mass federal spending cuts, known as sequestration, are starting to become painfully clear. Here's what you need to know.

WHERE IT HURTS

The National Park Service has been required to trim \$134 million from its national budget by the end of the year. As a result, Colorado national parks must reduce their operating budget by 5 percent. For Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP), that's \$623,200. This will mean fewer ranger-led programs, reduced visitor center hours, limited campsite availability and less staff

POLITICAL CASUALTY? THE SEQUESTER CUTS WILL IMPACT JOBS AT ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES, BUT IT MAY BE THE LAND THAT FEELS THE HARDEST IMPACT.

(see sidebar). And not just any staff—cuts include rangers critical for law enforcement, education and search and rescue. RMNP is planning a 30 percent reduction in interpretive/education rangers alone (down from 30 to 21), and a 35 percent decrease in programs. Even small parks will feel deep cuts. Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve will be down eight total rangers this season.

Similarly, the USDA Forest Service is suffering from the impacts of sequestration. According to a spokesperson for the USDA, the Forest Service is planning for the possible closure of 670 campgrounds, trailheads and picnic sites around the country this summer. At press time, the Forest Service had not yet determined which would be impacted, but Colorado areas like the Indian Peaks Wilderness could be affected.

While proponents argue that sequestration is necessary to rebalance the economy, opponents are quick to point out the potential negative impacts to Colorado tourism. A National Park

THE DAMAGE

While Colorado's national parks, monuments and historic sites don't yet have all the details worked out on how they'll absorb the budget cuts from sequestration, these are the cuts that have been confirmed so far at our four national parks.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

SIZE: 415 square miles

2011 VISITORS: 3,176,941

SEQUESTRATION CUT: \$623,200

- Hiring freeze
- Decreasing interpretive rangers by nine
- Interpretive/education programs reduced by 35% during the summer
- Decreasing backcountry rangers by two
- Glacier Basin Campground (148 single campsites and 13 group campsites) will remain closed for the season
- Eliminating five seasonal campground staff positions
- Reducing visitor center hours
- The Moraine Park Visitor Center will not be opened for the season
- Minimizing non-emergency overtime, which could affect the park's ability to reopen Trail Ridge Road

GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

SIZE: 133 square miles

2011 VISITORS: 280,058

SEQUESTRATION CUT: \$113,000

- Decreasing rangers by eight
- Decreasing ranger-led programs
- Two- to three-week delay in hiring seasonal staff for the spring/summer
- Closing of backcountry campsites

MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK

SIZE: 81.4 square miles

2011 VISITORS: 572,329

SEQUESTRATION CUT: \$335,000

- Hiring freeze
- Will be closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day
- Using term appointments rather than permanent appointments
- Decreasing vehicles in fleet

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON

SIZE: 48 square miles

2011 VISITORS: 168,336

SEQUESTRATION CUT: \$82,000

- Hiring freeze
- Current job openings will not be filled



WITHOUT A TRACE? WITH FEWER RANGERS TO LEAD EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS—AND TO ENFORCE RULES TO PROTECT FRAGILE ENVIRONMENTS—THE TUNDRA IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK MAY FEEL THE BRUNT OF 3 MILLION FOOTFALLS.

Service report shows that more than 5.8 million people visited Colorado's national parks in 2011. They spent \$334 million and supported 4,809 jobs in the state. Diminishing the visitor experience through fewer rangers and programs could result in a cumulative effect over time if the funding doesn't return. Or not. "A lot of it depends on the visitor," says Kyle Patterson, RMNP's Public Information Officer. "A family who is looking for a rich experience with ranger-led programs may miss out, while one who just drives through the park and occasionally gets out to snap a photo may not."

BIGGER IMPACTS

It's the land, however, rather than economies, that may be most impacted by sequestration. "If

agencies don't have money to educate visitors about enjoying the area responsibly, it's a domino effect in many ways," says Ben Lawhon, the Education Director for the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics in Boulder. "Those visitors can unknowingly create impacts that not only negatively effect the wildlife, plant species, water quality and perhaps even other visitors, but also set in motion problems that have to eventually be fixed, and typically at a higher price than it would have cost to educate the visitor about how to minimize the impact in the first place."

Seemingly small actions, like walking off a path to avoid mud, can cause big problems in places like Rocky Mountain National Park, when multiplied by its 3 million annual visitors. In which case, the best defense against budget cuts may

be offense—an educated and informed public who understand how to care for our national parks, before ever setting foot in one. "The right time to educate someone about Leave No Trace principles, in terms of their recreational visit, is during what we call the anticipation stage," says Lawhon, "when they're planning their trip and haven't even left home yet."

Time will tell what the true impacts of sequestration will be to Colorado's national parks this season, but Lawhon remains cautiously optimistic. In his twelve years with Leave No Trace, he's witnessed a steady decline in federal funding for things like visitor education. Meanwhile, organizations like Leave No Trace continue to increase their reach. Each year, millions of Americans are exposed to Leave No Trace principles through direct training, educational tools and information. To date, more than 30,000 individuals have taken the two-day Leave No Trace Trainer course, and each year 150,000 kids go through the PEAK Program (Promoting Environmental Awareness in Kids). "I'm not saying sequestration isn't a legitimate concern," says Lawhon. "But people continue to educate themselves about land ethics and conservation, and that's the most powerful protection."

Elevation Outdoors' managing editor Jayme Moye has won a "Top of the Rockies" award for Environmental Reporting from the Society of Professional Journalists for her work in EO.

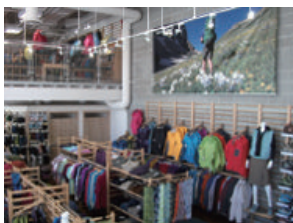
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