

Striking a natural balance at Yosemite

by Michael Gardner

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK - Brian Ouzounian remembers the day, although more than a half-century has passed, when he first came to understand the heart of Yosemite.

A late-arriving family of campers was being shut out until his grandparents moved their tent to make room. Those few days of sharing a campfire grew into generations of friendship that endure today.

"That's Yosemite. That's the Yosemite we are losing," said Ouzounian, a Los Angeles-area general contractor.

But are we?

With Memorial Day signaling the start of the summer vacation season, it is easy to overlook quarrels about the park's future while gazing up at Half Dome or listening to the roar of Yosemite Falls.

"A step from heaven," gushed Barbara Reeder of Epsom, England, posing for a family picture in front of Bridalveil Fall.

When the valley floor flooded with as much as 13 feet of water in January 1997, park managers were given a rare chance to shape a new Yosemite experience for visitors.

Yet despite some progress, the future remains unsettled. Litigation over protecting the Merced River has put

a hold on about \$80 million in projects, from road improvements to an overhaul of campgrounds and lodging.

The federal lawsuit also has brought fresh debate over questions that have nagged the national park for decades. How many visitors are too many? Are day-use reservations for popular weekends likely? Should most private cars be banned?

The National Park Service renovation has drawn charges of elitism. The plan, some critics contend, is slanted to increase profits for Delaware North - the New York company that took over the concessions at Old Town San Diego State Historic Park amid heated controversy.

There is worry that the most affordable accommodations will be lost.

Those who secured a favorable ruling from U.S. District Judge Anthony Ishii of Fresno, Calif., to force park managers to redraw their master plan for the park have been called obstructionists.

"You have a constant state of bickering, legal challenges and personal attacks," said Fresno, Calif., photographer Phil Hawkins, who maintains a Web site dedicated to Yosemite. "It stops all programs and wastes a mind-boggling amount of money."

DROP IN POPULARITY

The nation's third most-visited national park, Yosemite trails only the Great Smoky Mountains and the Grand Canyon. But the crowds are dwindling. Visitation numbers dropped from a high of nearly 4.2 million in 1996 to 3.36 million in 2006 - the lowest in 16 years, according to park service figures.

Explanations vary. Higher gas prices, limited camping spots, shorter vacations and resistance to trading high-definition televisions for the great outdoors are among the reasons cited. The \$20 per car entry fee - good for seven days - may be another reason, even though it is still cheaper than taking the family to a movie, much less to Disneyland. The park service soon expects to announce whether the entry fee will go up \$5 next year.

Competition for parking spots sometimes can take on the urgency of Christmas Eve at the mall. An ant-like march snaking up the Mist Trail is typical during the heavily used summer months.

"This place is huge. They should make room for more people," said Chris Schwaab of San Diego, who paid \$60 for two nights at a riverside campsite.

Others feel the squeeze on the valley floor, just 1 mile wide and 7 miles long. Day-tripper Jane McGibbon of Sacramento, Calif., conceded "limits may be necessary."

There is no shortage of advice. Some visitors suggest discounting admission fees for those willing to leave their cars outside the park. Or, perhaps those without a day-use reservation should take the bus in. The bottleneck at the junction of Yosemite Falls and Yosemite Lodge could be relieved by building a pedestrian overpass.

Kathie Gaylord of Los Gatos, Calif., is content riding the free valley bus.

"Once you find a parking spot, you don't want to have to find another," Gaylord said.

But she doesn't want to leave her car too far away in case she needs something - a view shared by many visitors.

Park Superintendent Michael Tollefson has dismissed day-use reservations and proposals to force motorists to leave their cars outside the park.

"We can accommodate, on any given day, the number of people who want to come to the park," Tollefson said.

Only a few times a year are visitors held at the gates or diverted to other areas, he said.

As for a satellite parking lot, Tollefson said: "It's very expensive. There's no need for it."

YOSEMITE - Mirror Lake in the valley of Yosemite National Park offers spectacular reflections of the surrounding peaks. Photo by Nancee E. Lewis.

YOSEMITE - Lower Yosemite Falls is among the most-visited at the national park, which was declared the country's first national reserve in 1864. The park service's master plan for Yosemite is unsettled because of litigation. Photo by Nancee E. Lewis.

For those seeking solitude, crowds thin along with the air. Most visitors congregate on the valley floor - elevation 4,000 feet - allocating about four hours to see the sights, enjoy a picnic and buy a T-shirt.

Yosemite's 800-mile network of trails take visitors far from Curry Village. Ninety-five percent of the park's 747,956 acres is set aside as wilderness.

Sticking to Tioga Road, but bypassing popular Tuolumne Meadows, offers an unspoiled escape to Ten Lakes or Tuolumne Peak. Climbing out of the valley, another route for hearty hikers is to skip Half Dome's cables and push on to the base of the 9,926-foot-high Cloud's Rest.

As the seasons change and temperatures drop, so too do the number of visitors. Aspens, oaks and dogwoods provide fall color. Winter is magical, and a visit to Badger Pass to snowshoe or cross-country ski beats long lift lines at Mammoth, Nordic enthusiasts agree. Yosemite's nine named waterfalls are the top spring draw.

"I only come in the slow times. The summer crowds are too much," said Shane Braninburg of Reno, Nev., enjoying a distant view of Yosemite Falls as he tried to corral a son hyped on s'mores. "There's no place else like this."

A RICH HERITAGE

Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and the legendary conservationist John Muir agreed. Lincoln declared Yosemite the country's first national reserve in 1864, and parts of the region became a national park in 1890. Prodded by Muir, Roosevelt added the valley and Mariposa Grove, then under California's control, to the park's boundaries in 1906.

Visitors were king at first. The fragile meadows of the valley floor were trampled. One hotelier cut trees to offer guests better views. Camping was pretty much a free-for-all. Crowds were treated to a 9 o'clock spectacle: a bonfire of red fir bark rolled off Glacier Point, creating an illusion of a waterfall of fire.

The unpopular decision to ban the firefall in 1968, and a crusade to persuade visitors to quit feeding bears for entertainment, marked a turning point for park management. Preservation and wildlife were given more

weight, setting the stage for continual clashes between those with differing interpretations of getting back to nature.

"One side would be happy to pull out all vestiges of civilization and chain it so we have to look at it from afar," said Hawkins, the photographer. "Another side wants to develop everything. Somewhere in the middle is where we should be."

That's where park managers are supposed to come in. Inside the park's administrative headquarters a question looms, literally, over the conference table: "Is it in the best interest of the park?" the sign asks.

The answer, when it comes to the court-delayed management plan, is definitely yes, Tollefson said.

Tollefson said the plan will help relieve pressures by reducing the number of lodging and camping units, and by rerouting traffic to flow more smoothly. There are also road improvements to keep distracted drivers from becoming part of the scenery.

The lawsuit has stalled plans to rehabilitate the walk-in Camp 4, where world-class mountain climbers intent on challenging El Capitan can bed down at the only campground on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Lower and Upper River campgrounds - closed since the floods - will not reopen to allow the banks and meadows to rejuvenate.

That decision has drawn howls of protest and prompted longtime camper Ouzounian to launch a Web-based petition drive.

"Why limit camping? Because it's not profitable," Ouzounian said. "This is supposed to be a public park, not a concession profit center."

If the park service moves forward, there would be 638 campsites in the valley, compared with 828 before the flood. There are 475 dotting the valley now.

Tollefson disputes Ouzounian's claim that decisions are driven by concession interests. He pointed out that there were 1,526 rooms, counting the housekeeping and Curry Village tent cabins, before the 1997 flood. There would be 1,262 rooms under the plan.

"I don't understand how that's expanding commercial use," Tollefson said.

Tollefson is looking to provide more camping off the floor, in Hodgdon Meadow and Crane Flat. He also is exploring ideas to improve or consolidate concessions in Tuolumne Meadows and at White Wolf. The goal is to spread out overnight visitors. That could add congestion on narrow roads leading down to the grocery store, the Ansel Adams Gallery, the swank Ahwahnee hotel and the trail to Vernal and Nevada falls.

ARE CHANGES AHEAD?

It takes a lot to run Yosemite. The budget for 2006 was \$24.3 million. Yosemite relies heavily on visitors opening wallets for souvenirs, supplies and sodas. Delaware North has paid \$56 million in fees since Oct. 1, 1993, said Dan Jensen, chief operating officer of the company's Yosemite operations.

In an interview, Jensen said changes might be in store at 7,200-foot Badger Pass, a 72-year-old ski facility that offers stunning Nordic opportunities, and at Curry Village, dozens of rustic, white tent-like cabins crowded near Happy Isles.

"There is no evidence the park service is going to require Badger Pass to be removed or abandoned," Jensen said, addressing rumors. "Badger Pass is part of the fabric of the park."

The park service and Delaware North are exploring ways to promote Badger Pass as a family-friendly destination, he said.

"We have dropped the focus on what we are," Jensen said.

Curry Village's cabins are "part of the history of the park" and should be preserved, Jensen said. "We are in the middle of looking at what Curry should look like."

That is the same question park managers, businesses, visitors and environmentalists are asking about the valley floor.

"We're only trying to be the wind in the sails to move them in the right direction," said Greg Adair, director of Friends of Yosemite Valley, the lead litigant.

Bridgett Kerr, vice chair of the Sierra Club's Yosemite Committee, supports the lawsuit.

"Commercialism has too much of a stronghold here," said Kerr, who lives in the community of El Portal inside the park's boundaries.

"I don't see the environment being protected. I don't see the public being presented with a range of affordable and accessible opportunities."

A coalition of other environmental groups - Friends of the River, the Wilderness Society and California Trout, among them - supports the park service's plans.

"These projects will protect both the natural habitat and visitor access while significantly shrinking the overall human footprint in the Merced River corridor," the coalition said in a statement.

Dueling aside, San Diego's Schwaab, like many visitors, is just happy to stand in the shadow of Half Dome.

"Look around," he said, toting firewood back to the camp. "This is Yosemite. What more can I say?"

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