



Harnessing Visitors' Enthusiasm for National Parks to Fund Cooperative Large-Landscape Conservation

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Why this analysis was needed

Wildlife are a major draw for visitors to protected areas globally, including national parks in the United States, but they forage, disperse, and migrate far beyond park boundaries. When they venture outside of protected areas, wildlife can cause dangerous highway collisions, damage crops, predate on livestock, spread disease, or otherwise create expensive management challenges. For example, in the region surrounding Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, various agencies, organizations, and landowners have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to conserve habitat, build highway crossing structures, modify fences, and compensate ranchers for livestock damages. Reliable funding for such conservation measures could alleviate the management challenges posed by wildlife that move across park boundaries while protecting those animals that park visitors travel from around the world to see.

In 2018, the Wyoming legislature put forward a proposal to collect a “conservation fee” from visitors to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, suggesting that those who benefit from observing the parks’ abundant wildlife should help shoulder the costs those animals place on the surrounding region. The purpose of this analysis is to explore that proposal in depth. In this study, the authors assess different options for collecting a conservation fee from park visitors, examine the legal hurdles to these options, and analyze their various revenue generating capacities.

About the authors

This study was a collaboration between researchers at four western universities.

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What the researchers found

The authors assess two approaches for generating conservation funds from visitors to protected areas: (1) increase park entrance fees and direct the additional dollars toward managing wildlife challenges in adjacent lands, as proposed in the Wyoming legislature's 2018 resolution, or, (2) increase either sales taxes or lodging taxes to generate similar funds.

Increase park entrance fees

While proposals to increase park entrance fees have been met with resistance in recent years, the National Park Service could implement a demonstration program and raise its entrance fee rate for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park by \$1 to \$10 per vehicle. Such a demonstration program could be limited to a set number of years and even exempt local residents. The parks would direct the revenue to Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana for

transboundary wildlife conservation. This would require a federal act of Congress, which the authors suggest could be very difficult, but not impossible, to achieve. This option could raise anywhere from \$1.3 million to \$13.4 million annually.

Increase sales or lodging taxes

Alternately, the Wyoming legislature could create a new special district or a resort district within or surrounding the two parks. Within the boundary of the new district, Wyoming could increase its sales tax rate (currently 4 percent) by 1 to 2 percent and/or charge a state lodging tax (currently \$0) of \$1-5 per bed or campsite per night. A 2 percent sales tax increase could generate up to \$22.1 million annually. The lodging fee approach could generate from \$0.6 million (\$1 lodging fee on beds only) to \$7.3 million (\$5 fee on beds and campsites).

Why it's important

Additional funding for transboundary wildlife conservation could help federal agencies, state agencies, landowners, and others mitigate impacts to wildlife and the public outside the boundary of the national parks while maintaining and/or improving wildlife resources increasingly important to states' tourism and recreation industries.

Visitors to national parks already spend money as they seek unique experiences, and prior research suggests they may be willing to pay more to benefit the areas they visit. One study even suggested that park visitors are willing to pay to compensate ranchers for wolf predation on their livestock in order to protect wolves and the opportunity to observe them in the parks.

Any strategy will need careful consideration. Addressing both the legal issues surrounding a proposed "conservation fee" levied on park visitors as well as potential fears that states might divert revenues to purposes that do not enhance park resources may require specific federal or state legislation and a collaborative approach to distributing funds.

Thoughtful tailoring of such "conservation fee" proposals may be able to overcome policy, governance, legal, and other concerns. As such, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem could serve as a broadly applicable model for large-scale landscape conservation which respects the needs of local communities. If successful, this approach to generating conservation dollars could expand to many other protected areas throughout the United States and elsewhere.

Read the paper

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