Thank you for for joining me today to talk about,

I think, a very important topic.

I've got Donny Leadbetter,

who's our tourism analyst for

the National Park Service.

And I'd like to just dive

into our first question,

which is what are some of the

tourism trends you've seen impact

the National Park Service the most?

Donny: Well, one big quick answer is technology.

The introduction over the last

few decades of home computers

and the Internet and now mobile

devices and social media and apps,

that's drastically changed

our everyday lives of course.

So that is of course also

gonna change how we travel,

how we experience and plan and share tourism

and that counts in the parks as well.

I will say though,

a bigger answer that I think is,

is a little a little deeper

perhaps over the last few decades,

there are just more options than

ever before when people are

considering travel and tourism.

So we've seen big increases in, say,

the cruise sector or all inclusive

resorts and theme parks traveling abroad,

urban destinations,

traveling for special events.

There's just this plethora of options

that the park system, so to speak,

is kind of competing with.

And so I think what you see is when.

People do choose to spend their

leisure time engaged in travel

and tourism and of course there

are lots of other things we can

do with our leisure time too,

more than ever, ever before.

But when they do decide to do some travel,

they tend to gravitate towards some

of the best known, well known,

very visible,

very famous parks that kind

of have a gravity to them.

And we really see that phenomena

and some of our visitation trends.

Sally: Yeah,

what are some positive impacts as

well as negative ones that were that

the Park Service is experiencing.

Donny: Well,

it is of course always positive

that when people are interested in

visiting national parks, you know,

these places belong to the American public,

really to the world, I would say.

And we want people visiting their parks

and having great experiences in nature,

connecting with history

and heritage and culture,

and ideally seeing how much

humans are a part of nature.

You know,

we are a part of these systems and hopefully

those experiences really reinforce that.

But it is true some of

these visitation trends,

when that visitation is highly

concentrated in particular places

or particular periods of time,

that can be a challenge to make sure it

continues to be a high quality experience,

make sure that it's safe and that it's

compatible with conservation and stewardship.

That can be a challenge.

And so we always are trying

to wrap our arms around that.

Sally: Not an easy solution to all of that.

How does your office engage with tourism?

Can you give us a few examples of that?

Donny: Yeah.

So I work in our headquarters in Washington,

DC,

and any given day I might be doing

things like having a meeting with a

national partner in the tourism industry.

There are some nonprofits and

other organizations that we

have relationships with,

so I'm maybe working with them

on a project or something.

Maybe then I'll pivot and work with

a specific park that has an idea

or they're trying to figure out

some planning issue.

They're trying to do some

brainstorming and some analysis.

I might bring some tourism kind of

framing and expertise to their analysis.

I make a lot of presentations,

you know, I talk about tourism

concepts and trends and data.

So maybe then I'm,

I'm pivoting to a presentation

I'm giving in a couple of days.

Maybe I'm talking to a specific Tour

Company and they just have questions about

permit requirements or things like that.

So it's really a range of scales and

a range of issues I can get involved

with and that's really exciting,

keeps me going.

Sally: Keeps you on your toes, that's for sure.

So in 2022,

the Park Service had close to about

312 million recreational visits

and our data is telling us that

about 26% of those visits happen in

the top eight most visited parks.

So looking at tourism trends,

what might be some of the things

for visitors?

What? What could they do in order to have

a really good experience in visiting parks?

Donny: Well, there's a great one word answer

to remember plan. Do some planning.

There are a lot of vacation and travel

experiences where maybe you don't need

to proactively plan as much, you know,

a theme park or a cruise or something.

It's it's gonna kind of take care of itself.

You can kind of lean back a little,

you know, parks are a little different.

Parks are many of them very large,

lots of things that you might want to do.

And you wanna research that ahead of

time to think about crafting the great

experience that you want to have.

But also when you start doing that planning,

you'll quickly find out if you need to

make any reservations or if there's a.

shuttle system you can use or if there

are other transportation options,

maybe when you start doing that planning

and you see that some parks are really,

really crowded and certain times of year,

you might even think, well,

you know what,

maybe there's somewhere else we

could go and you might choose to go

to Lassen Volcanic National Park

instead of Yellowstone, for example.

So it starts with planning and

then that can take you, I think,

to a lot of great places to make sure you're

gonna ultimately have a great experience.

Sally: Yeah.

Thank you for that.

And in conclusion?

Of our questions for you today,

uh,

let's end by asking you how

visitors can help Park Service

preserve these beautiful treasures.

What is it that we can do when we go

visit parks to help that continuation?

Donny: Well,

I think it's critical that even when

you're on travel or tourism and and your

brain shifts a little bit into that mode.

We really need you to keep thinking about

the footprint you're having on the planet.

That's really the thing we all need

to be doing in our daily lives,

right?

So just because you're on travel

doesn't mean you shouldn't think about

the carbon footprint you're making.

Staying away from single use plastics,

using local transportation options,

thinking about where you're

spending your money,

make sure it's benefiting the community,

and that spending kind of

stays in the community.

So there are all of these kind of

sustainable travel steps and actions

that you can take that I think

are applicable to national parks.

And they're applicable to all kinds of

travel, but including national parks.

So really think about that impact

you're having when you do travel.

Sally: Yeah.

And some of those small steps do add

up to kind of making a big impact.

So we have to remember that even

the little things make a difference

Donny: 100% completely agree.

Sally: Well, thank you so much,

Donny,

for sharing and providing some insight

into how tourism is changing the

parks and how we can contribute to

keeping these national treasures intact.

Sally: My pleasure.

We'll see you out there in the parks.

Saly: Sounds good. Thank you.