



# United States Department of the Interior


## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20240

IN REPLY REFER TO:

[As amended by Memorandum dated March 3, 2025]

### **DIRECTOR'S ORDER #17: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TOURISM**

Approved:   
Director, National Park Service

Effective Date: September 28, 1991

Sunset Date: SEP 28 2003

#### **1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

National parks have been interwoven with tourism from the earliest days of the National Park Service. Railroads developed resorts at natural wonders and scenic attractions before parks were established. The lure of both natural and cultural areas as magnets for tourism and related economic activity has been understood and capitalized on by many interests. In the early part of this century, National Park Service leaders Stephen Mather and Horace Albright believed the public needed to be enticed into the parks to experience them first hand in order to understand and support their values and importance. Today, the Service is challenged to protect park resources in the face of unprecedented visitation demands, particularly in the high use portions of the most heavily visited parks.

Travel and tourism is the number one or two industry in most states and will soon be the leading industry worldwide. Tourism in the U.S. is a half-trillion dollars-a-year industry that employs more than 15.5 million people directly and indirectly. Many national parks are icons that are on "must see" lists for domestic and international travelers. International travel is this country's largest export earner in the "services" category.

The purpose of this Tourism Policy is to promote and support sustainable, responsible, informed, and managed visitor use through cooperation and coordination with the tourism industry.

## **2. AUTHORITY TO ISSUE THIS DIRECTOR'S ORDER**

Authority to issue this Director's Order is found in 16 USC 1 through 4 (the National Park Service Organic Act) and Part 245 of the Department of the Interior Manual.

## **3. OPERATING PREMISES**

3.1 The National Park Service (NPS) is dedicated to conserving unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations. This mission can be partially achieved through a National Tourism Policy that addresses the needs and concerns of the National Park Service, park visitors, park neighbors, and the tourism industry (i.e., businesses that stage, transport, house, feed, and otherwise provide services to our actual and potential visitors).

3.2 At the core of the Park Service tourism policy is the reality that it is in the best interest of the Service that we understand and pro-actively communicate with tourism businesses and those who visit the parks as tourists. It is to each park's advantage to find common ground with tourism interests. In doing this, the parks must communicate the Service's mission goals and identify the unique limitations and constraints for each park. There must be a clear understanding that: (1) resource protection is the highest priority of any park; (2) the mandate of preserving essential park resources unimpaired for future generations may limit our ability to meet the desires of the commercial tourism industry; (3) high visitation numbers are not necessarily a desired goal of park management; and (4) the Service must take into account the negative as well as the positive impacts that tourism may have on park neighbors. Conversely, the Service must seek to understand the goals, capabilities, and limitations of the tourism industry, and recognize that tourism businesses have financial obligations to meet and investments to protect.

3.3 Although the missions of the NPS and the tourism industry differ, our interests are often similar. Most park units contribute to local and regional economies, and are featured destinations for tour operators and for tourism service providers. These economic development and tourism interests provide a vocal demand for continued/expanded access. They also have an interest in protecting the park values that attract their clients and customers, because those values help ensure a sustained financial yield over the long term. At the same time, park managers are challenged with limited budgets and staffing; operational difficulties such as catastrophic or unusual acts of nature; resource management responsibilities; providing a quality experience for visitors in a safe and healthy environment; and the need to maintain cooperative relationships with park neighbors who may be adversely affected by tourism.

3.4 The NPS can successfully partner with the tourism industry to emphasize: delivery of core National Park Service messages; better visitor information; awareness and responsibility; sustainable practices and ecosystem management; greater respect for natural and cultural resources; and the avoidance of conflicts. Furthermore, while the tourism industry places demands on parks, it can also be an effective voice in speaking on behalf of parks and in using its considerable influence for the benefit of parks.

#### **4. OPERATIONAL POLICIES**

The 1995 White House Conference on Travel and Tourism established a basis and framework for closer cooperation and mutual understanding between land-managing agencies and the tourism industry. Regional and state tourism conferences have brought park managers and tourism operators together. This dialogue has fostered many of the principles incorporated in the following operational policies:

*It is National Park Service policy to--*

4.1 Develop and maintain a constructive dialogue and outreach effort with state tourism and travel offices, and other public and private organizations and businesses, using a variety of strategies, including but not limited to memberships in organizations, participation in conferences and symposia, and internet-based information resources.

4.2 Collaborate with industry professionals to promote sustainable and informed tourism that incorporates socio-cultural, economic, and ecological concerns, and supports long-term preservation of park resources and quality visitor experiences. This collaboration will be used as an opportunity to encourage and showcase environmental leadership by the Service and by the tourism industry, including park concessioners.

4.3 Encourage practices that highlight America's heritage and welcome park visitation by people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, ages, physical abilities, and economic and educational means.

4.4 Foster good relationships with park neighbors by promoting visitor and industry understanding of, and sensitivity toward, local cultures, customs, and concerns.

4.5 Provide cost-effective park visitor orientation and information services to visitors in parks and, as funding and partnerships allow, at the visit planning stage, at park gateway communities, and at appropriate threshold locations within park units. As part of this effort, the Service will work to ensure that all who provide information to visitors are well informed and provide accurate information about park activities and resources, including current conditions and seasonal variations.

4.6 Pursue practices, such as the use of universal design and the inclusion of metric measures on signs and printed media, that will contribute to the safety and friendly accommodation of all visitors.

4.7 Encourage visitor use of lesser-known parks and underutilized areas; use during non-peak seasons, days of the week, and times of the day; and visitation to related sites beyond park boundaries, as appropriate, to enhance overall visitor experiences and protection of resources.

4.8 Specifically address long term tourism-related trends and issues, and their implications for park plans and management decisions.

- 4.9 Represent park needs and realities during the preparation of plans and proposals for gateway community services and park tour operations that could impact park visitation, resources, visitor services, and infrastructure support.
- 4.10 Promote positive and effective working relationships between park concessioners and others in the tourism industry to ensure a high quality of service to park visitors.
- 4.11 Identify desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, and work to establish supportable, science-based park carrying capacities, as the basis for communicating acceptable levels and types of visitor use, recreation equipment use, tours, and services. Carrying capacities are defined for each park as an outcome of the National Park Service planning process.
- 4.12 Participate in and monitor travel industry research, data gathering, and marketing initiatives to ensure that the Service is fully informed of demographic changes and visitor trends.
- 4.13 Work with partners to provide timely, accurate, and effective park information, and to ensure that realistic situations and safe, resource-sensitive recreational practices are depicted in promotional materials and advertising. This includes providing appropriate information as early as possible to the tourism industry regarding changes in operations and fees.
- 4.14 When feasible, and consistent with park resource protection and budgetary needs, schedule construction, repairs, and resource management practices, such as prescribed burns, in ways and at times which keep key visitor attractions and services accessible for public use during peak visitation periods. This will help to minimize adverse impacts on visitors, as well as on park-visitor-dependent businesses.
- 4.15 Establish and maintain lines of communication and protocols to handle the impact of park emergencies and temporary closures so that state tourism offices and the public, including tourism communities and tourism-related businesses, have the best and most current information on when park services will be restored.
- 4.16 Inform visitors, state tourism offices, gateway communities and tourism-related businesses about current conditions of key park resources and current protection and recovery/restoration measures. Establish a common understanding on what is needed to ensure adequate protection of those resources for present and future enjoyment and how this can contribute to sustainable park-related businesses and economies.
- 4.17 Develop new partnerships to help implement Service-wide priorities, and seek partnership opportunities with the industry to fund products and programs mutually beneficial to accomplish National Park Service mission goals.

## **5. RESPONSIBILITIES**

- 5.1 The WASO Director of Tourism is the primary point of contact with the tourism industry at the national and international levels, provides overall support and direction for the tourism

program, and ensures that this Director's Order is reviewed annually and updated as needed.

5.2 Regional tourism coordinators, designated by regional directors, are the primary points of contact for tourism issues at the regional level, and are responsible for supporting superintendents in their implementation of this Director's Order.

5.3 Park superintendents are responsible for implementing this Director's Order at the park level.

## **6. REFERENCES**

Other policies and requirements having implications for tourism may be found in appropriate sections of NPS *Management Policies*, and in numerous Director's Orders. In particular:

Director's Order #2: Park Planning

Director's Order #6: Interpretation

Director's Order #13: Environmental Leadership

Director's Order #42: Accessibility for People With Disabilities

Director's Order #48: Concessions Management and Commercial Use Authorizations

Director's Order #52: Park Signage

Director's Order #56: International Affairs

Director's Order #75: Media Relations