

Great Smoky Mountains National Park | Visitor Experience Stewardship Newsletter | October 2020

Great Smoky Mountains National Park seeks public input to guide the development of solutions to improve visitor experiences and alleviate park congestion. The public can provide input through participation in a virtual workshop and/or by contributing through an online feedback form at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/grsmves>.

Park staff will work hand-in-hand with stakeholders, gateway community members, and visitors to seek innovative solutions to improve visitor experiences and access, reduce congestion and sustain the tremendous economic engine that the park provides to our local communities.

The park is situated within a day's drive of one third to one half of the population of the United States and was visited more than 12 million times in 2019, making it the most-visited national park in the country. Park service staff want every visitor to have a high-quality national park experience. Providing a high-quality visitor experience is more challenging due to recent increased visitation. Since 2009, annual visitation to the Smokies has increased by more than 25%, resulting in overflowing parking lots, a rise in traffic jams, roadside soil erosion vegetation trampling, and unsanitary conditions around busy bathrooms.

The park has not begun a formal visitor experience stewardship planning process. The park will be continuing to work to understand the impacts of increasing visitation on: 1) park resources, 2) staffing, operations, and infrastructure, 3) the visitor experience, and 4) gateway communities and partners.

Background:

- Most of the park's infrastructure; roadways, parking areas, campgrounds, picnic areas, visitor centers, and comfort stations-were developed in the 1950s and 1960s when the park had approximately 5 million visitors. While the planning for existing facilities anticipated growth, the infrastructure was not designed to serve over 12 million visitors.
- Providing a quality visitor experience has become more challenging due to the large and rapid increase in the number of people visiting, as well as the expansion of visitation in the shoulder seasons.
- GRSM now has over 1 million visitors in each month from April through October. Over 700,000 visitors come in March, November, and December. Over 400,000 visitors come to the park in January and February. The significant rise in visitation during shoulder season and off-season months is particularly challenging due to our lower staffing levels during these time periods.
- GRSM visitors are experiencing significant congestion along roadways, trails, and in facilities in at least ten park locations.
- Infrastructure such as roadway shoulders and trails are being degraded and eroded at these sites.