



# Rocky Mountain National Park

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## Pre-NEPA Report for Day Use Visitor Access Strategy Executive Summary

### TRENDS IN PARK VISITATION

Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) - like other public lands in Colorado - has seen a dramatic increase in visitation over the last ten years, accompanied by impacts to resources, safety, operations, and the visitor experience. Colorado’s growing population and demand for recreation is straining the capacity of our public lands. Park managers are part of NoCo 2050, a group of front range counties, state, and federal entities, focused on addressing recreation pressures increasing on Northern Colorado’s public lands. Colorado’s population grew by nearly 15 percent between 2010 and 2020, from 5 million in 2010 to about 5.75 million in 2020. In 2000, a RMNP transportation study estimated that within 20 years visitation would reach 5 million. Visitation in 2019, pre-pandemic, reached a record 4.6 million with record visitation almost every month of that year. Without managed access and a global pandemic, RMNP would likely have reached 5 million in 2020.

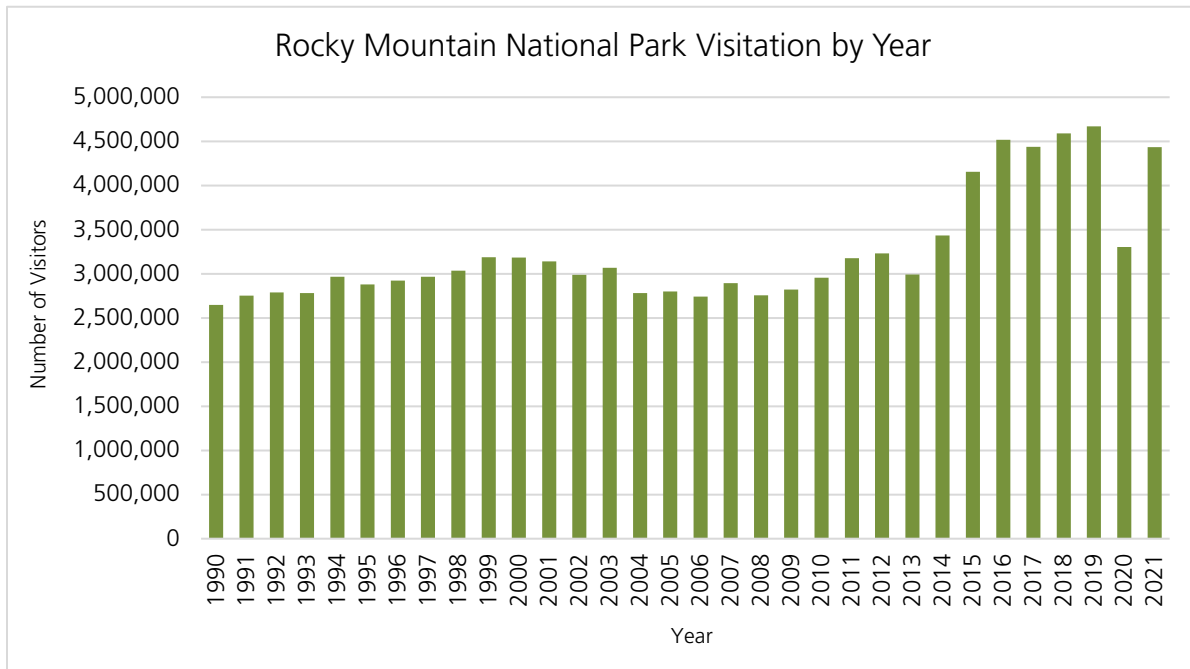


Figure 1: RMNP Visitation from 1990-2021

### DAY-USE VISITOR ACCESS MANAGEMENT AT RMNP

The park piloted several management strategies from 2016 through 2021 to address visitation challenges that it faced. The pilot programs included the following:

- Timed-entry permit reservation system (TEPS) (2020-2021)
- Vehicle restrictions in some of the most heavily used areas of the park, including Bear Lake Road and Wild Basin (2016-2019)
- Managed access of the Alpine Visitor Center parking lot (2016-2019)
- Roadside parking deterrents and parking lot reconfigurations (2016-2019)
- Shuttle bus schedule adjustments (2016-2019)

### PRELIMINARY PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the Day Use Visitation Access Strategy (DUVAS) is to provide day-use visitor access in a way that protects and enhances the fundamental resources and values for which the park was designated. This DUVAS is needed to address a wide range of issues, grouped into 4 main tenets:

- Natural and cultural resource impacts
- Diminishing quality of the visitor experience
- Visitor and staff safety concerns
- Heavy strain on the park’s facilities and ability to perform daily operations

## KEY ISSUES



Image 1: Park staff inspect widening trail conditions and off- trail created gathering site in the tundra along Old Fall River Road

### Resource Impacts:

Damage to sensitive environments, through trail widening, off-trail travel, native vegetation trampling, increased presence of exotic plants, and disruption in wildlife behaviors are occurring. Increased roadside parking and idling causes vegetation damage and decreased air quality. Damage and vandalism to cultural resources and illegal collection of artifacts negatively impacts the integrity of cultural sites and is of particular concern to tribal interests. High visitation has resulted in increased human waste and litter along trails and destinations.

### Visitor Experience:

High visitation leads to traffic congestion and subsequent road restrictions, which diminishes visitor enjoyment by displacing visitors from their primary destinations. High visitation along with increased traffic volumes impede park staff's ability to provide basic park functions such as interpretive programs, daily maintenance, and emergency response.



Image 2: Roadside parking impeding traffic flow and wildlife migration in the Bear Lake Road



Image 3: Wildland firefighter extinguishing illegal campfire near Dream Lake

### Staff and Visitor Safety:

Parking and traffic congestion has led to visitor frustration and an increase in hostile interactions between visitors and park staff. Additionally, vehicles parked along narrow roadsides often extend into the flow of traffic, which creates unsafe conditions for all. With higher visitor use levels, illegal activities are increasing. Examples include:

- Illegal human caused fires, which increase wildfire risk in the park and beyond the boundaries into neighboring communities.
- Increased traffic, graffiti and vandalism violations.
- Dogs illegally brought on trails causes safety concerns to other park visitors. Dogs are predators that can chase, scare and transmit diseases to wildlife.
- Visitors entering closed areas.
- Feeding and harassing wildlife.

### Park Operations and Facilities:

Higher visitation results in excessive wear and tear on facilities causing the need to triage repairs and focus on the most heavily used areas of the park causing other areas of the park to degrade further. Long lines to get to job sites for facilities, law enforcement and interpretation staff hampers the park's abilities to provide critical services like maintaining restrooms, responding to emergencies, providing in person program and outreach. Higher water use and wastewater generation than systems can support causes increased frequency and costs of sewage pumping at parkwide vault toilets.



Image 4: Visitors crowd the shuttle bus stop at Bear Lake



## PROPOSED VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT ZONES

These zones were established to describe desired visitor use by destination.

Visitor Use Management Zone 1: Encompasses lowest-use trails, the least resilient areas and the most remote areas of the park. Day access and physical challenge of these areas are moderate to difficult, and much of the zone requires furthest travel from hardened areas. This zone is entirely composed of designated wilderness.

Visitor Use Management Zone 2: Provides easy to moderate access to wilderness. Well maintained trails give visitors a wide variety of recreational opportunities in relatively closer proximity to facilities and hardened areas than Visitor Use Management Zone 1 but provide more solitude with less modern human impact than Visitor Use Management Zone 3.

Visitor Use Management Zone 3: Encompasses hardened areas such as roads, parking lots, roadside pull-offs, visitor centers, campgrounds, and the most popular trails.

## DESIRED CONDITIONS

Desired conditions are statements of aspiration that describe resource conditions, visitor experiences and opportunities, and facilities and services for an area.

### Overarching Desired Conditions:

- Visitors have a reasonable opportunity to connect with nature, learn from park staff, and develop a personal connection to the park.
- RMNP offers a variety of recreational opportunities through access to scenic views, wildlife viewing, natural features and processes, historic structures, cultural objects, and pristine wilderness.

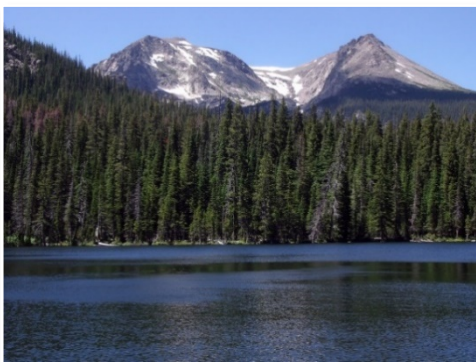


Image 5: View of Fern Lake within Zone 1

Ecosystems retain natural integrity; wildlife habitats and migration behaviors are not compromised. Visitors honor park values to preserve natural and cultural resources for future generations. Staff are intermittently present to provide information and to help ensure public safety.

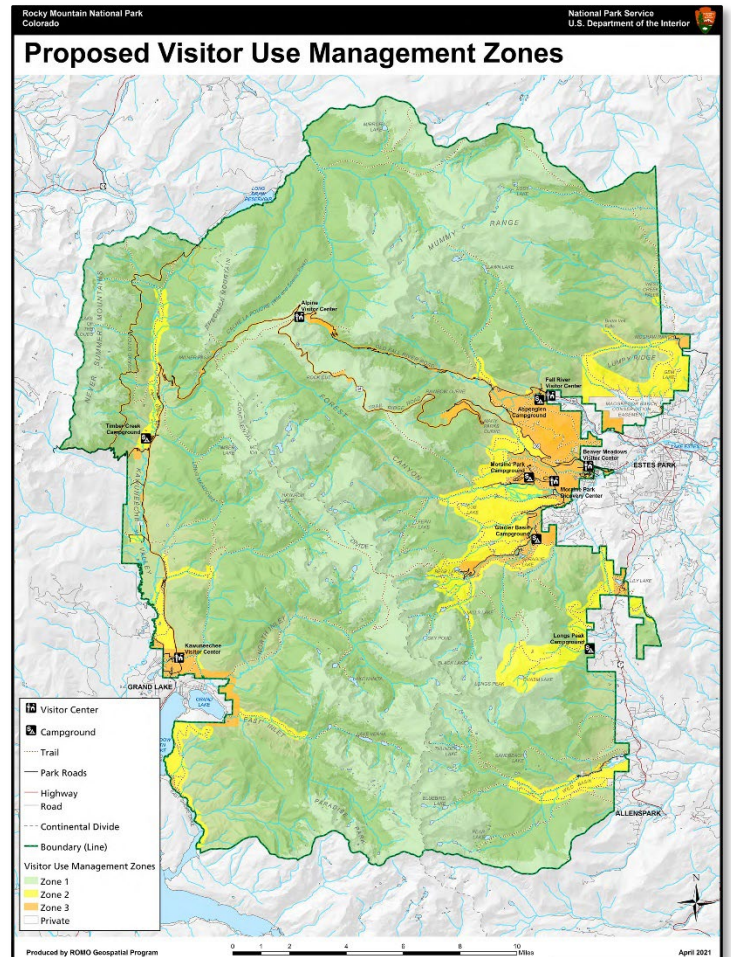


Figure 2: Proposed Management Zones Map

Desired conditions are further broken down by Management Zone to capture each zone's characteristics.

Zone 1: Wilderness conditions are pristine, native wildlife and vegetation populations thrive with high water quality and minimal human influence or conflicts. Visitors enjoy exceptional access to wild places and remote destinations by way of moderate to difficult trails. Established trails meet design criteria for a wilderness trail. Visitor-created trails are nonexistent.

Zone 2: Wilderness recreation is plentiful; extensive trail systems provide easy to difficult access to wilderness adventures. Visitors experience moderate to higher visitation in wilderness. Park staff can sustain trail maintenance according to trail class design specifications. Public facilities are moderately available to visitors and remain in good condition.

Zone 3: Visitors are provided with information to plan for their visit and travel with ease to their preferred destinations via private vehicle or alternative transportation. Interpretive and educational programs provide opportunities for visitors to increase understanding and appreciation for park landscapes and resources. The pace of visitation is at a level where park staff can interact with visitors to ensure that visitors are informed, prepared and use best safety practices. Surfaces are hardened to isolate use to specific areas and minimize resource damage. Resource impacts are limited to the immediate trail corridor, specific viewpoints, or layover spots. Established trails do not exceed design specifications, and visitor-created trails and trail widening are minimal to nonexistent. Visitors experience clean and accessible public facilities, and park staff are able to access facilities and work areas in a timely manner due to less roadway congestion.

### **INDICATORS, THRESHOLDS, AND VISITOR CAPACITIES**

Indicators are used to measure identified desired conditions. Monitoring conditions over time informs strategies used by park managers to maintain desired conditions. This iterative practice of monitoring, implementing management actions, and then continuing to monitor allows park managers to gauge management effectiveness. This process maximizes benefits for visitors while achieving and maintaining desired conditions for resources and visitor experiences in a dynamic setting.

By identifying and managing the capacity, or the maximum amount and types of visitor use, the park can help ensure that resources are protected, and visitors have the opportunity for a range of high-quality experiences.

### **PROPOSED MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

The park identified several strategies (proposed actions) to address day use management. The preliminary range of management strategies originated from lessons learned from the various visitor use management pilots, collaborative discussions among other parks and, visitor use specialists in the NPS, and suggestions made by the public. These strategies are not mutually exclusive and various elements of each may be used in combination with each other.

- **Timed-Entry Permit Reservation System:** The goal of the TEPS would be to spread visitation more evenly throughout the day and park to achieve desired resource conditions and a quality visitor experience.
- **Adjusting Recreational Opportunities:** This strategy would address issues associated with diminished visitor experience in specific recreation areas of the park (such as lack of solitude in Zone 1). For example, seasonal day-use hiking permits could be required for high-use areas and trails and, to manage an area within identified visitor capacities.
- **Parking and Transportation System Measures:** Consideration of a "metering concept" for entrance stations and/or parking lots, that entails a one-in one-out approach, based on a carrying capacity target that could be applied hourly or daily.
- **Education, Enforcement, and Staffing Management Plan:** Park staff and the public agree that these are essential elements in the implementation of DUVAS.

### **NEXT STEPS**

By early 2022, the park will complete the refinement of indicators, thresholds, and visitor capacity. During summer of 2022, the park will conduct more research and plan for the formal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, which will kick off in early 2023. Public scoping will occur during the NEPA process to gain public insight on the proposed final long-range day use visitor access strategies. The park is eager to continue engaging with stakeholders and connect with park visitors from near and far, to help identify shared values, clarify key issues, and develop potential management strategies for our long-range day use strategy.