

TUWEEP DAY-USE RESERVATION PILOT PROGRAM RESPONSE TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT 2022

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

Grand Canyon National Park conducted civic engagement between March 24-April 6, 2022, to seek comments on implementing a three-year pilot advance day-use reservation system to manage day-use visitation to the Tuweep Visitor Use Area including all park areas within Toroweap Valley and the Kanab Plateau. A \$2 ticket fee per vehicle is proposed for visitors to get to Tuweep. There were 333 comments submitted during the public comment period; of those, 178 were in a form-letter format. Of the comments received, they were categorized into six primary topic areas for which National Park Service (NPS) responses have been provided below.

Topic. Information Needed to Understand Day-use Reservation System

Concern Summary. Commentors stated that more information is needed regarding the day-use reservation system for Grand Canyon National Park management to make restrictive decisions on the Tuweep Visitor Use Area.

Response. The 1995 Grand Canyon National Park General Management Plan (GMP) was developed based on NPS management policies and extensive public participation and input. The management objective identified in the GMP for the Tuweep area is to preserve the character of Tuweep as an uncrowded, rustic, and remote experience that is dominated by nature and solitude. The GMP further establishes a carrying capacity of 30 vehicles or 85 visitors in the Tuweep area, including visitors at Toroweap Overlook, the campground, Vulcans Throne area, and local trails. The NPS installed roadside signs and provided other information sources to achieve this limit, as outlined in the GMP. The GMP directs that a reservation system may be required if roadside signs and other information sources are unsuccessful.

The intent of the pilot day-use reservation system is to facilitate the management of the carrying capacity set for the Tuweep area. Housing the reservation system on Recreation.gov will enable visitors to easily secure reservations online and plan a safe visit to this remote location by reading the Tuweep preparation material.

As a three-year pilot program, it will include monitoring and review of visitation patterns to make further adjustments with the potential for updates to the proposed day-use vehicle limit and timed entry system, or other actions. Data on visitor use patterns from the pilot program for the Tuweep area will be used to determine high visitation and commercial transportation patterns, enhance the overall visitor experience, and improve public information resources.

The proposed pilot day-use reservation system applies to the Tuweep area of Grand Canyon National Park, including all park areas within Toroweap Valley and on the Kanab Plateau. It excludes the North and South Rim developed areas and overlooks. The Schmutz Trailhead, 150 Mile Canyon Trailhead, and Kanab Point are located within the Tuweep area and would require a visitor to make a day-use ticket reservation unless they had a backcountry permit for overnight camping within the Tuweep area.

Many days are relatively quiet at Tuweep; however, on busy visitation days, especially Friday-Monday, up to 50 or more vehicles often travel into Tuweep around the same time of day, which is, in part, a function of the remote nature and travel time necessary to reach Tuweep. This results in road congestion and long waits to access the Toroweap Overlook, overcrowding in popular locations, impacts to resources, and excessive noise.

The park regulation for group sizes traveling together in the Tuweep area is limited to four vehicles and 11 people. Under 36 CFR Section 2.12, the noise threshold limit is 60 A-weighted decibels or dBA, at 50 feet, which is the equivalent of a normal conversation. Informal sound measurements taken over the course of spring-fall 2021 revealed some passenger vehicles and most off highway vehicles exceeded this limit, contributing to a decrease in the overall visitor experience and impacts to wildlife.

Tuweep received approximately 25,000 visitors during 2021, which is an increase from approximately 8,500 in 1995. Visitation at Tuweep has steadily increased since 1995 and is not considered a direct result of COVID-19 visitation trends, as there were more than 22,900 visitors in 2018. NPS visitor use statistics, including traffic count data, is available at: <https://irma.nps.gov/STATS/Reports/Park/GRCA>. With the current rate of annual visitation at 25,000, the average daily vehicles rate is about 23, including day and overnight users.

The day-use ticket system will authorize 20 vehicles for daily entrance in addition to 10 existing backcountry vehicle permit holders per day, for a total of 30 vehicles per day. Of the 20 vehicles with day-use tickets, 18 tickets will be reserved for private vehicles and two tickets will be reserved for authorized Tuweep Tour commercial use authorization holders. Six of the private vehicle day-use tickets will be available for purchase on Recreation.gov 120 days in advance of a visitation date and the remaining 12 private vehicle day-use tickets will be available to reserve two days in advance up through the day of the visit. Any unclaimed tickets from the 120- and 2-day release dates will remain available until the day of the visit. Having most of the day-use tickets available to reserve up to two days in advance of a visit enables visitors the opportunity to plan a trip based on more current and reliable weather forecasts.

Topic. Commercial Use

Concern Summary. Commentors feel the reduced numbers of commercial permits could impact the local economy and will not allow for flexibility when weather dictates a different plan on a reserved commercial tour date.

Response. Grand Canyon National Park issued seven commercial use authorizations (CUA) for Tuweep tours in 2022. Data from the park CUA permitting program and visitation trend data suggest that Tuweep tour CUA holders are infrequently visiting the Tuweep area of the park. The implementation of a reservation system would further enable them to plan excursions consistent with an uncrowded, rustic, and remote experience by preventing overcrowding on peak visitation days. The proposed pilot day-use ticket reservation system will spread out visits to Tuweep across days.

The National Park Service (NPS) must manage CUAs to protect the resources and values of the park unit and the purposes for which it was established, as well as protect visitors and provide for their enjoyment of the park unit. To meet this obligation, as outlined in the NPS Commercial

Service Guide, the NPS may manage CUA activity through limiting conditions or by limiting the number of CUAs issued. The decision to limit CUAs must be based on reasoned, defensible logic. The reasons the NPS may consider limiting CUA operations include, but are not limited to, the following: Implementation of appropriate park management plans or carrying capacity decisions; to evaluate resource impacts, ensure protection of sensitive ecosystems, provide for visitor safety; enhance visitor experience; balance visitor access between CUA and non-CUA users.

Topic. Stakeholder and Tribal Engagement

Concern Summary. Commentors requested that Grand Canyon National Park engage with Tribes for continued traditional use, consider underrepresented communities and persons with disabilities, and work with off-road groups to help mitigate resource impacts before implementing a reservation system.

Response. The Tuweep area of Grand Canyon National Park is located near other public lands managed by various federal land management agencies with differing regulations. Park representatives engage in regular coordination and collaboration with interagency partners. Over the past 15 years, they've adapted regional area management actions, including the NPS's 1995 GMP, based on concerns and collaborative conversations with neighboring land management agencies and communities. Grand Canyon National Park rangers have worked closely with agency partners, interagency visitor centers, and area stakeholders to encourage visitors to travel in higher occupancy vehicles and stagger their visits throughout the day and week.

Further, the NPS considered local communities' ability to access the Tuweep area, often done without advanced planning as part of this pilot day-use reservation system. Given the adjacent communities' typical use of the area, releasing the majority of day-use reservation tickets within the 2-day timeframe before the day of the visit though the day of the visit was proposed as part of this pilot to accommodate local community user groups.

Grand Canyon National Park works directly with tribal communities to accommodate access and use of their traditional homelands within Grand Canyon National Park as a matter of general policy. Nothing in the proposed pilot day-use reservation system alters standing policy or restricts access to tribal members. Traditional access and uses for tribal members will be managed through a separate administrative system outside of the public reservation system.

Topic. Resource Management Protection, Education, and Enforcement

Concern Summary. Commentors requested to know what considerations Grand Canyon National Park has made regarding the implementation of a reservation system and its potential for spillover to other federal lands and impacting resources elsewhere. Some commentors questioned whether the park has ample signage along roadsides, enough staff in the area, and how the fee money from the reservations will be used. Other commentors suggested the park resolve this issue with the enforcement of fines.

Response. Please refer to the response provided under "Stakeholder and Tribal Engagement" related to concerns of impact spillover to adjacent lands.

The park provides information online and on posted bulletin material serving the Tuweep Area, which aims to educate visitors about the area's history, cultural and natural resources,

regulations, and conditions. As a result, more people have accessed Tuweep with fewer vehicles and less congestion. However, these steps have not alleviated the problems associated with growing visitation. Many visitors arrive during the same timeframe and are ill-equipped for their visit. Long convoys of off-highway vehicles that do not meet group limitations, vehicle regulations, or noise requirements are increasingly common.

As directed in the 1995 GMP, signage has previously been installed to help manage use within the established carrying capacity for Tuweep. However, these roadside signs have been repeatedly damaged or destroyed by inclement weather conditions, vehicles, and other remote challenges. As part of this pilot, new roadside signs will also be installed on county roads adjacent to highway turn-offs on the three main routes from Fredonia and Colorado City, Arizona and St. George, Utah, to Tuweep as an additional reminder of the pilot day-use reservation system for potential visitors still traveling in cellular range. Additional signs will be installed at park boundaries and remote entrances.

The \$2 reservation fee is assessed as a contractor fee for administration of the pilot program utilizing recreation.gov. Visitors must also have a valid entrance pass to visit Tuweep, as required in all other locations within Grand Canyon National Park. Issuing designated day-use vehicle tickets will help to reduce vehicle congestion, will help retain a remote, uncrowded visitor experience, and protect sensitive natural and cultural resources at Tuweep. The park intends to enforce the ticket reservation system during the course of the pilot study using existing on-site commissioned staff.

Topic. Reservation System Issues

Concern Summary. Commentors suggested waiting to implement a system until after post-COVID-19 visitation numbers stabilize, implementing a reservation system only during peak seasons, or to use a timed entry system for morning and afternoon entry. Other commentors questioned the impact a reservation system would have on marginalized groups and on visitors' capability to make impromptu trips, the overall equity of a system, and whether the system meets the intent of the Grand Canyon National Park 1995 General Management Plan (GMP).

Response. Please refer to the responses provided for "Information Needed to Understand Day-use Reservation System", and Stakeholder and Tribal Engagement, above. As stated previously, this proposal is for a three-year pilot reservation system; if during the course of the pilot, it is found that aspects of the reservation system are not functional or not achieving the desired management objectives for the Tuweep area, the reservation system can be adjusted to address any unforeseen issues.

Topic. Safety

Concern Summary. Commentors suggested that traveling in groups for safety is ideal and a reservation system would discourage that. Some comments indicated that reservations may cause people to take more risks to use their ticket on their reserved day.

Response. The NPS considered many factors including impacts to resources, the uncrowded and primitive visitor experience discussed in the 1995 GMP, safety, and the possibility of inclement weather as an impact for visitors to complete a trip to Tuweep. Existing park regulations for the Tuweep area will continue to apply along with the pilot day-use reservation system. The park

regulation for group sizes traveling together in the Tuweep area is set at four vehicles and 11 people.

Having most of the day-use tickets available to reserve the day of and up to two days in advance of a visit enables visitors the opportunity to plan a trip based on more current and reliable weather forecasts. Housing the reservation system on Recreation.gov will enable visitors to easily secure reservations online and plan a safe visit to this remote location by reading the Tuweep preparation material. Visitors can learn about park regulations for the Tuweep area online.