

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Testimony

John Bachrach / Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association
Testimony before:
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND LANDS,
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Chairman James V. Hansen
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts on the Fee Demonstration / Cost Recovery program implemented in 1997. We recognize the importance of this issue to the huge population of people who cherish and seek to access our public lands.

My name is John Bachrach and I have come from Flagstaff, Arizona to represent the Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association. The boating public is one component of the outdoor community. We are a 501C3 non-profit corporation that was formed in 1996 to give a voice to private / non commercial or self-guided river running population who, until now have had no voice in NPS policy matters that affect the boating community.

Briefly I will outline the fees a person must pay in order to conduct or participate in a private, self-guided river trip on the Colorado River. First, in order to be accepted onto the Grand Canyon National Park's wait list and secure a position on that list you have to pay \$100. Then to remain on this list until your turn has come up you will have to pay \$25 per year. The current wait is eighteen years so you will pay a total of \$450. When you are able to launch you will pay another \$200 for that privilege. You, and each participant in your trip will then pay \$10 for entry into the park, additionally each of you will be assessed \$4 per night for every night you spend in the park.

The current structure was implemented after the December 1996 Fee Demonstration and Cost Recovery Programs were authorized by Congress. River running fees were raised 1200% with no public input.

The concept of paying fees at Grand Canyon National Park to recreate is not new to non-commercial river runners, however the new fee program at Grand Canyon National Park is inconsistent with other recreation and use fees on public lands. Before the Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association could support continued application or further expansion and implementation of the fee demonstration program, we would need to be assured that the program meets several important criteria. They are as follows:

- 1) Fees must be applied equitably and fairly to all persons, businesses and corporate entities engaged in similar activities on America's public lands
- 2) Fees must not be used as a tool to limit access to Americas public lands or waterways
- 3) Fees must be consistent in both their assessment and administration

As a group we are very concerned that the fee demonstration program does not currently pass any of these fairness tests.

1) In the case of Grand Canyon river running, fees are not presently applied fairly to all users engaged in similar activities.

Most of our members, and private boaters that we have surveyed have no objection to paying their fair share of the parks operating costs, but in contrast to the collected non commercial fees, fees paid by commercial outfitters are not used to recover the NPS' management expenses. Outfitters pay franchise fees, and in the case of the Grand Canyon, river outfitters pay into the Colorado River Fund. Neither of these fees are used to offset river operations costs. Consequently, outfitted patrons pay no fees directly to the park, thereby being insulated from the increased awareness generated by direct contact with park staff and park needs.

Policy should be crafted that brings to all users greater awareness of the costs involved with our public lands operations and would help instill a sense of participation, ownership and preservation among all users. Making sure commercial patrons paid the same fees for the same kinds of uses as the self-guided could help to raise awareness and would be fair.

2) The imposition of fees apparently has been used as a tool to limit access for the private boater in the Grand Canyon.

The Department of Interior's press releases assured the public that they would be involved in development of the fee demonstration program process, but, as far as the Grand Canyon is concerned, not one public hearing was conducted before the announcement and implementation of the new fee structure.

The sudden and enormous fee increase to the boating public by surprise and resulted in slowing the growth rate of the parks wait list by 30%. In 1998, for the first time in the history of Colorado river running, the total number of hopefuls on the wait list declined by more than 1000 people out of 6000 did not renew their names on the waiting list. If the point of raising the price was to discourage self-guided use of the canyon, then the fee demo program has been a big success. The long wait coupled with the high fees has nurtured the feeling amongst the river community that the annual fee is actually a penalty meant to discourage them from future participation.

Current and former NPS employees at Grand Canyon stated they felt fee demonstration charges were being used to curb the growth of the Park's private boating wait list, and that park staff calculated an attrition rate of up to 30% for the non-commercial boating wait list.

3) The current fee demonstration program is inconsistent and unfair when compared with other fee programs imposed upon public lands.

Comparing the use of public lands by cows to humans would seem ridiculous, but everyone of us living in the west knows from simple observation that cows do far more damage to public lands than do humans. Over grazing, by itself causes more damage to the resources in question, than wilderness use by humans. And lets not forget the cows trampling of archeological sites. Boaters and hikers presently pay \$4.00 per night for every night they spend in the Grand Canyon, contrast that to the cost of grazing a cow for a year on public lands. If grazing were to be assessed at the same rate people are, it would cost \$1460 to graze a cow for a year. Presently it costs less than \$10 for a cow to spend a year in the wilderness. Hikers and boaters would be better off if they were treated equally to cows!

This comparison looks even more extreme when fitted into the larger picture that includes annual fees for mining, logging and other resource consuming activities that take place on public lands.

Additionally we are concerned with the classification of river running at GCNP as a "special use," and the precedent that "special use classification" may set for other low impact, human-powered activities on public lands.

Because GCNP has classified non-commercial river running as a "special park use" the park attempts to recover 100% of the costs of managing this use, in contrast to other park activities which receive almost all their funding from the parks general funds. "Special park uses" include activities that are outside of the normal range of activities in a park, for example holding a wedding ceremony, or filming a movie. Historically speaking, the first use of what eventually became GCNP began with river running and a character named John Wesley Powell. A river trip on the Colorado is a special experience, for sure, but, river running is definitely not outside the "normal range of activities" in the park, it is most definitely not a special use.

The Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association would like to encourage the distinguished members of this committee and Congress to reexamine federal funding policies that make it necessary for our National Park system to resort to drastic and sudden measures like the Cost Recovery / Fee Demonstration program imposed upon non-commercial boaters and hikers at GCNP in order to survive and continue to provide American's and our visitors from all over the world access to these natural treasures.

In closing before private boaters can support the fee demonstration program, we need to be sure that a criteria for fairness is in place, we once again submit the following as guidelines:

- 1) Fees must be applied fairly to all users engaged in similar activities.
- 2) Fees must not be used as a tool to limit access.
- 3) Administration of fees must be consistently assessed across all resource users.

We sincerely thank Rep. Hansen's office for this opportunity present our perspective and we are sure you will give our thoughts consideration.

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