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# PROMOTING AND CONSERVING AMERICA'S GREATEST IDEAS

**As national parks and other public lands see increased visitation, the Club and its partners continue to focus on creating the best experience possible—and that includes what's best for wildlife.**

No other country in the world has a system of public lands like we do here in the United States. We have forests, grasslands, wetlands, mountain meadows, tundra, and incredible desert ecosystems that all of us are privileged to own. The federal government has made huge investments in building roads, bridges, trails, campsites, and interpretive facilities. By and large, we can visit these places with minimal restrictions on time or place.

In the four years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, people have realized that they want to be outside more than any other time in the last century.

Americans are participating in nearly all forms of outdoor recreation at greater rates. As perhaps the most curated natural experiences, our national parks have taken the brunt of this crowding, but it's quickly spilled over onto national forests, Bureau of Land Management lands, and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

While visitation varies greatly across the 245 million acres of BLM land, 85 million acres of National Park Service (NPS) lands, 193 million acres of national forests, and 95 million acres of National Wildlife Refuge System lands, it has increased by historic margins overall. However, it's not just a matter of too many people; it's also a matter of

their distribution. Beyond mere growth in visitation, patterns in public land use have also evolved, as places that used to have distinct tourist seasons now see no discernable difference in visitation throughout the year. In some places, like the Intermountain West region, greater numbers of hikers, mountain bikers, boaters, and wildlife watchers present a near-constant barrage. That's a problem for people, especially those who retreat to our public lands for solitude, but also for the wildlife that occupy these lands. All this visitation and use requires new strategies—and greater investments—in human, wildlife, and overall natural resource management.

Our government, both in the Interior and Agriculture Departments and Congress, has taken steps to address the impacts this influx

of visitors continues to have on the infrastructure of our parks and public lands, but we've yet to reckon with the lethal and sublethal impacts of our presence has on wildlife in these wild places.

The Boone and Crockett Club, along with many of our colleagues in the American Wildlife Conservation Partnership, passed robust funding in the Great American Outdoors Act of 2020. This legislation established the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (NPPLRF) to address an extensive backlog of deferred maintenance on all our federal public lands. However, the challenge amid the pandemic has now turned to implementation—such as fixing old roads, bridges, and trails funded by the NPPLRF, as well as building new facilities to improve visitor experiences. Some agencies

are further along than others in planning this work. Notably, NPS maintains a robust database of projects at a park unit level and involves local “friends” organizations in planning these projects to ensure these investments best meet the needs of visitors and maintain the natural and cultural resources these parks provide.

Further, as you're reading this in the summer of 2024, more than ten national parks will require some form of online reservation for entry. The same units continue to emphasize the importance of public or shared transit in visiting



Crowds explore the thermal basins in Yellowstone National Park.

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these places, be it carpooling with friends on a rafting trip or by riding through Glacier National Park in one of their iconic red buses. These strategies are not new. Land management agencies have been employing tools like permit systems for trailhead use and overnight camping in Wilderness and backcountry areas for decades. However, their use continues to expand as they are some of the only tools available to agency personnel looking to reduce the effect of public land use. The same is true of hunting opportunities, notably for waterfowl, on our national wildlife refuges.

It is a fact that most species of wildlife require periods of respite from human incursion, though some (think raccoons) are more tolerant than others (like wolverines). We often think of impacts to wildlife in terms of life and death. Cars striking and killing wild animals is a bad thing, as is a mountain lion attacking a hiker. Anything less than an incident involving a fatality has historically been considered a success. But that dynamic is changing. New problems are emerging that wildlife and land managers are ill-equipped to deal with.

Take, for example, an increase in mountain biking or OHV activity in historic elk summer range. While those bikers aren't killing those elk, they are certainly driving them out of where they would be absent the cyclists. A 2018 study conducted at the Pacific Northwest Research Station showed collared elk (in real-time) doing their very best to avoid GPS-tracked recreationists. Naturally,

those elk have to go somewhere—and that somewhere must have ample food, water, and cover, as well as some semblance of security. More often than not, those elk find themselves in a rancher's alfalfa field, creating an entirely new problem and casting a novel relationship dynamic. In short, we find ourselves in a situation where there are too many elk in the "wrong" places and, when fall hunting seasons come around, not enough elk in the "right" places. Problems persist even when the animals remain in places where they experience stress from humans. Scientists call these impacts "sublethal," and they are becoming an evermore important factor to consider in wildlife and public land management decisions.

The Boone and Crockett Club remains dedicated to ensuring all people have high-quality experiences on our public lands, while also ensuring each land management agency is fulfilling its congressional charter. Leaders of the Club founded most of these agencies and have been involved in every major iteration of their policies since. Today is no different. As leaders in conservation, we must adapt to the challenges of the day while never losing sight of our century-long commitment to promoting the conservation and management of wildlife, especially big game, and its habitat, to preserve and encourage hunting, and maintain the highest ethical standards of fair chase and sportsmanship in North America. ■



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Elk cows graze sagebrush in Grand Teton National Park.