

# National parks in peril call for help

NATALIE JACEWICZ 5:17 p.m. PST November 4, 2015



(Photo: AP/Dino Vournas)

Campers of the future might squint through haze to glimpse the towering peak of Yosemite's Half Dome.

The non-profit National Parks Conservation Association listed polluting smog as one of many threats to national parks in today's call to action, #ParksinPeril. As the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service approaches next year, NPCA argues that the Obama administration should seize the opportunity to protect parks.

"This can be the president's legacy," said Mark Wenzler, National Parks Conservation Association vice president of conservation programs.

The group has identified nine different parks in peril that can be protected through specific executive actions without the need for congressional or court approval, Wenzler explained.

Most of the protections target parks' immediate surroundings.

"The truth is parks are really only as protected as their surrounding ecosystems," Wenzler said.

Though the federal government determines the borders of many parks, it cannot always afford to acquire the land within those boundaries. If a state sells the land, property can slip out to private construction. This phenomenon, Wenzler said, enabled the construction of a private mansion in the middle of Zion National Park.

The initiative calls to block drilling near Arches National Park and Glacier National Park, as well as prevent a renewable energy project next to an important wildlife corridor in Mojave National Preserve. The group also aims to prevent construction in or around Jamestown's Colonial National Historical Park, Grand Canyon National Park, and Grand Teton National Park.

In a nod to biodiversity, the plan advocates for a marine reserve to renew depleted fisheries in Biscayne National Park, as well as an end to hunting bison for population control in Yellowstone.

But Yosemite faces a particularly invasive threat — air pollution.

Wenzler said emissions from diesel-fueled machinery powering California agriculture are bathing the park in unhealthy fumes.

The Regional Haze Rule under the Clean Air Act provides executive agencies with their chief tool for preventing air pollution, according to Stephanie Kodish, Clean Air Program Director for the National Parks Conservation Association. But under current plans, Yosemite's air quality will not be improved until 2160, she said.

NPCA's plan urges the Obama administration to close loopholes in the rule's enforcement, and hold any polluter accountable for cleaning up their act.

"It's making sure that where you have a coal fired power plant ... it installs industry standard emission controls," Kodish said. "And that every state contributes to the solution."

She noted that many of the safeguards are cost-effective and would not put an undue burden on emitters.

The National Park Service has not yet pledged specific actions in response to the NPCA campaign, but it issued a statement calling the report "a reminder of some of the challenges facing some of our nation's best known national parks."

The statement also notes that Obama has protected 260 million acres of public land and waters, more than any other president.

Notably missing from the list's protections are Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, both of which topped the charts in an evaluation NPCA conducted earlier this year to assess air quality. Also missing is Pinnacles National Park.

Wenzler said that the group chose Yosemite because of its large number of visitors, each of whom will be exposed to risks of air pollution, asthma among them.

But clean air rules that help Yosemite, he said, "will speed the cleanup in all the parks."

Colleen Bathe, Chief of Interpretation, Education and Partnerships, at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, confirmed the relevance of air quality in those areas.

"We have a number of exhibits that talk about air quality," she said. "It is something that is of interest to our visitors."

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