

Many national parks are under threat of pollution, mining and oil drilling

By Oliver Milman, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.31.16

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Elk graze in the meadows of Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, with Mount Holmes (left) and Mount Dome (right) in the background, August 15, 1997. AP Photo/Kevork Djanszian

National parks are large plots of land in the United States where nature is protected. Animals can roam freely. Millions of Americans visit the national parks each year to appreciate the fresh air and natural beauty.

President Theodore Roosevelt actively helped to invent the national park system 100 years ago. There's even a national park named after him.

Now, Theodore Roosevelt National Park, in North Dakota, is surrounded by oil and gas drilling.

National Parks Face Environmental Challenges

Wendy Ross, who helps run the park, worries that it will be ruined by pollution.

Other national parks are facing similar challenges.

What are the parks for? Who do they serve? Park officials and lawmakers are arguing over what should happen to the parks.

Some people believe that the national parks take up too much land. Businesses believe they should be able to use the land for mining and oil drilling.

Democrats and Republicans don't agree on much. In the past, though, they have often agreed that national parks are important.

Many lawmakers call themselves "anti-parks." Most of them are Republicans, who usually want fewer restrictions on businesses. Democrats usually try to protect national parks and nature.

"Reckless" Anti-Parks Lawmakers

Some Republicans are trying to pass more laws that take away some of the parks' protections.

Mark Wenzler, an official at the National Parks Conservation Association, said anti-parks lawmakers have become "reckless," or careless.

These beliefs have caused concern for Barack Obama and his staff, or helpers. They have set aside more land and water for protection than anyone before him. They created a park from a large part of Californian desert. They also protected some of the waters in Hawaii.

Lawmakers are fighting, but most people in America support the national parks. Polls suggest that more than 9 out of 10 Americans want them protected. Separate polls show that a large number of voters would be unhappy if lawmakers stopped protecting public land. Last year, almost 305,000,000 people visited Yosemite, Yellowstone, Gettysburg and other national park properties. It was a new record.

NPS Celebrates 100 Years

The National Park Service is upon its 100-year birthday in 2016, but there isn't much celebration now. The NPS has not gotten much government funding to deal with its problems. Parks need to maintain the visitor centers, trails, campgrounds and education programs. It could cost billions of dollars to repair it all.

A recent study found that the government has taken away much funding for the NPS over the past 15 years.

Though most people love national parks, they don't see reason enough to be concerned about them. More concern is put toward the military, protecting borders, and fixing the country's economic, or money-related, problems.

The recent events have many nature lovers and protectors feeling gloomy.

"When you speak to the rangers, they'll say, 'I used to have six people and now I have one,'" said Linda Bilmes, who helps lead and advise the National Park Service. "They are feeling overworked and concerned about the challenges they face."

Raising Money Can Be Difficult

The National Park Service has tried to raise money from wealthy people. But it's hard. Many wealthy, or rich, people aren't interested in helping the cause unless they can get something from it. It is appealing to have a trail named after them. The parks just need the trails to be repaired, though.

The National Park Service wants to get better at explaining why the parks are so important to modern people. They think the park land is worth more than money. Americans should be proud of it.

"There's a strong 100-years-plus reason why we have national parks," said Lynn Scarlett. She used to work for the Department of the Interior. It is a branch of the government that runs the National Park Service. Scarlett says the parks "reflect who we are as Americans."