

Hurting for Cash, U.S. National Parks Turn to Companies

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- The park service says its sites need \$12 billion in repairs
 - Corporate sponsorships are an increasing source of revenue
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Children play on the exposed sandy bottom of Mirror Lake that is normally underwater and used by visitors to photograph reflections of the Half Dome rock monolith at Yosemite National Park in California on June 4, 2015. *Photographer: MARK RALSTON/AFP/Getty Images*

The elevators that carried President Barack Obama 750 feet down into the caves of Carlsbad Caverns are working again, just in time for the first family's visit this week to the national park.

The President and his entourage, including the press, split up into about 8 groups to ride two small elevators down into the caves. Two other elevators, long-out of service, weren't fixed in time and stayed shut. It wasn't perfect, but it worked -- and saved Obama and his family the mile-long hike deep underground to view the New Mexico hidden wonder.

In a cavernous space known as the 'Big Room', he stared upward at stalactites and stalagmites, spiking down from above and shooting up from below. "How cool is this?" Obama said to reporters.

Out of service all year until last month, those elevators were part of the National Park Service's growing backlog of overdue maintenance projects. As Obama travels to New Mexico and California to mark the 100th anniversary of the park service, he'll find that one of the government's most popular programs, with a record 307 million visitors last year, is showing its age: a record \$12 billion in deferred maintenance.

That backlog has grown during Obama's presidency as Congress has refused to increase funding for the nation's parks. The park service increasingly looks to corporate sponsorships and licensing deals with companies like [Anheuser-Busch InBev NV](#), [American Express Co.](#) and [Subaru of America Inc.](#) to help defray its costs.

"It's old and cantankerous," park service spokesman Jeffrey Olson said of the elevator system at Carlsbad Caverns. "And there are things like that all over the park service."

[For a Bloomberg View editorial on the National Parks' budget, click here.](#)

<http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-06-07/a-little-commercialism-can-help-national-parks>

The Obama family will go from Carlsbad Caverns to visit Yosemite National Park on Saturday, according to the White House. After touring the popular sites, Obama will make remarks honoring the upcoming centennial of the park service, created by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916. On Thursday, administration officials lamented the state of the parks' budgets.

"We are relying more on donations every single year. And what used to be a donation to provide the margin of excellence is now really the margin of survival for a lot of these parks," Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said in a conference call with reporters on Thursday. "I didn't expect to be a fundraiser in this job, but I have been, from day one."

Mile-Long Climb

At the caverns, officials say they need about \$44 million to permanently fix the elevators and make other necessary upgrades. Visitors have been forced to make a steep, mile-long trek into and out of the caves this year after the elevators gave out. At Yosemite, park officials have had to delay more than \$555 million in maintenance, including upgrading leaking sewer lines, expanding parking facilities and rehabilitating the popular Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias.

While Obama's last two budget requests included more money for the parks during their centennial celebration, Congress has not approved the full amount. As the maintenance backlog has grown -- up \$440 million just last year -- the park service has considered new funding options, including changing its policy to allow closer relationships with corporate partners.

The NPS released a proposed policy directive in March that would allow corporate donors to have their logos displayed inside parks.

The park service waived its long-standing policy against partnering with alcohol companies last year when it entered into a \$2.5 million co-branding agreement with Anheuser-Busch, the world's largest brewery. It waived a separate policy to allow park vehicles to be outfitted with corporate logos, according to a December report by the Government Accountability Office.

"There's no way that we would do some kind of recognition that would be inconsistent with the overall visitor experience, or recognition of these parks as the nation's treasures," Jewell said. "We're not going to sell them off to the highest bidder."

Congressional funding for NPS declined about 8 percent between 2005 and 2014, adjusted for inflation, according to the GAO report. Fees, donations and other funding sources increased 39 percent during the same period.

At a House Oversight Committee hearing this week, Republican Chairman Jason Chaffetz of Utah criticized the park service director, Jonathan Jarvis, for the maintenance backlog.

"There's a lack of plans to deal with these backlogs," Chaffetz said. "Inconsistency in the enforcement of laws and rules. And these are just some of the things that plague the park service."

Leaky Pipes

The impact of deferred maintenance can be seen on the pockmarked roads, unsafe bridges and leaky bathrooms across more than 400 locations in the parks system.

At Grand Canyon National Park, where more than \$370 million in maintenance is overdue, an aging system of freshwater pipelines threatens drinking water supplies.

“It leaks like a sieve,” Olson said of the pipeline system, which requires regular repairs. “When serious problems arise, we have to deliver repair items by helicopter or mule.”

The backlog even affects the White House, a national monument that has about \$13 million in overdue maintenance projects.

Even as Congress has bucked Obama’s calls for more spending on the nation’s parks, the president has pushed forward with an expansion of the system. Obama has protected more than 265 million acres of federal lands and waters from development, more than any other president, according to the White House.

Obama administration officials call climate change the most dire threat to parks and public lands, and say that is largely what has driven Obama to increase the acreage under conservation.

(Updates with Obama tour in 2nd paragraph.)

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