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# National parks officials grappling with high volume as Instagram tourism booms

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If you're on Instagram, then chances are you have a friend who's taken a selfie at [Joshua Tree National Park](#) or one of the [poppy fields](#) in California, or maybe even atop a cliff overlooking the Colorado River known as Horseshoe Bend.

National parks and public lands across the country have seen an explosion in tourism in part due to the rise of social media and geo-tagging. However, amid the influx of crowds, there is a desperate effort to preserve the land for generations to come.

In Horseshoe Bend alone, tourism has risen from about 4,000 visitors a year to 2.2 million — that's over 4,000 in a single day. Tourism there took off in 2015, according to Michelle Kerns, deputy superintendent for the Glen Canyon Recreation Area, the unit of the U.S. National Parks Service that manages the Bend.

"We saw this huge rise in social media, especially Instagram," Kerns told "Nightline."  
"I think it's a huge contributor."

The spike in tourists to Horseshoe Bend has become so large that it's required Kerns and her team to add new safeguards not just for the people visiting — such as constructing a railing along the cliffside so that tourists can snap selfies safely — but also for the land itself so future sightseers will be able to experience the parks as they always have been.

"If we didn't, we would see a lot of resource damage," Kerns said. "We would see human waste, we would see trash. ... When you add two million visitors to a place

like Horseshoe Bend, you have to manage for their needs, and oftentimes, it's that really unsexy conversation of human waste and trash."

Striking this balance is paramount to those working in the parks as well as those who come to visit and experience some solitude in the wilderness. Jerry Ginsberg has spent the last 30 years taking photos of national parks and public lands across the U.S. He told "Nightline" that in his time as a photographer, he's seen the wilderness diminish as the population has grown.

"One thing that makes me very sad is to see canyons and forests and trees that were formerly pristine just completely destroyed," he said. "This sandstone that we're seeing here in the Southwest is really very soft and with a greater influx of people, it creates more wear and tear, and eventually, given enough time, they'll lose their scenic attractiveness."

Ginsburg spoke with "Nightline" at the Grand Canyon, a world wonder that's no stranger to tourists. He said that everyone should be able to capture the same gorgeous views as those before them, but also suggested that photographers look elsewhere. For example, while most people gather along the southern rim of the canyon, the quieter northern rim is just as spectacular.

"I hope [young photographers] can [visit] these places and give them fresh interpretations. There is no reason why young photographers today shouldn't have the same opportunities. They may have to go out on their own and find new and different places to create original images."

On the northern side of the Grand Canyon, visitor Chad Rosso had just come from Horseshoe Bend. He said that he decided to visit it because of the "Instagram blow up." But he said that the northern rim of the Grand Canyon was a "completely different experience."

"This is...solitude," he said, "and that's a zoo."

Zion National Park is only 15 miles in diameter but welcomes 4.5 million visitors a year with lines that are hundreds of people long for hours throughout the day. The main attraction at Zion: a river hike known as the "Narrows."

"Back in 2012, we had, really, no lines," Aly Baltrus, chief of interpretation and visitor services at the park, told "Nightline." "If you had told me at that time that I would be in charge of lines at shuttles, I would have laughed because there was none. We started seeing more crowding in about 2013, and then it just kept going up from there."

While some parks have struggled to catch up to the sudden demands of tourists, at The Wave, a formation run by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on the Utah-Arizona border, protections have been in place since the 1980s. Every year, over 150,000 people apply to a lottery to visit the unique formation. Only about 10,000 are selected, which comes out to about 20 people per day. But recently, the BLM has begun to consider increasing the number of permits to 96 people a day, which is a 450% increase.

"What we're doing with The Wave, really, is an environmental assessment that helps us look at where the balance point is," said Mike Herder, district manager for the Arizona Strip District, BLM. "Can we, in fact, increase the number [of people] without tipping that balance where solitude is lost and it just becomes a line of people."

But Taylor McKinnon from the Center for Biological Diversity believes the land is already endangered at its current levels of use. Calling The Wave "one of the most visually interesting geologic formations that there is," he said that the "very fine, delicate sandstone structure" is already seeing "impacts that BLM never anticipated."

McKinnon said that the soil crust in the desert around the wave is "actually alive." It absorbs and holds water when it rains, "and it's very sensitive to people and being stepped on."

"Nightline" entered the lottery just like everyone else and was lucky enough to be among the 10 selected in person to visit, embarking on the hike before sunrise with guide Corey Unsworth, owner of the Kanab Tour Company. Unsworth said that there is a delicate balance between preserving nature and basking in all its glory — even if that means fewer tourists and therefore smaller profits for his company.

"The reason I do this is because I love it," Unsworth, who has guided tours for five years, told "Nightline." "This is one of those spots you don't yet have that overcrowding sensation so it's nice that we still have a few places around that we can still have a unique experience on our own."

