

Hiking The Wave is About to Get a Lot Easier—and Conservationists Say it's in Danger

Fewer than 4 percent of people who apply for a permit to hike The Wave in Utah get one. A new rule change from the Bureau of Land Management would triple that number—but environmental groups warn it could come at the expense of the scenery itself.

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In an average year, some 200,000 people apply for a permit to hike The Wave, a TK other adjective besides photogenic swell of banded Navajo sandstone in Arizona's [Vermillion Cliffs National Monument](#). Very few, less than 4 percent, get one. That could change under a new Trump administration plan to expand the permit system—but conservation groups say that the increase in visitors could spell disaster for the very rock formations that visitors come to see.

In a press release, the [Bureau of Land Management](#) announced that it plans to more than triple the number of permits it issues for The Wave, increasing it from 20 to 64 individuals, and/or 16 groups, per day. The rule change is due to take effect on February 1.

"The stunning beauty of The Wave is part of every American's public lands heritage, and we're honored to protect and manage it for generations to come," said Deputy Secretary of the Interior Kate McGregor.

The agency said the decision follows two orders by former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke which directed the department to expand recreational opportunities on public land. In the release, BLM Arizona state director Ray Suazo said that the agency had "conducted robust environmental analysis" before announcing the plan.

Some conservation groups, however, aren't so sure. Taylor McKinnon, a senior public lands campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity and an Arizona resident, said The Wave is in danger of being "loved to death."

"The thing that makes The Wave particularly special is the Navajo sandstone, which, through the erosion process, reveals these beautiful and intricate fins with striations from the bedded sandstone. Those are scenic, but also very fragile, and the primary cause of destruction to those is foot traffic from people," he said. "So there's an inherent problem with overuse there, resulting in destruction of the very thing that people are attracted to this place to see and experience."

According to McKinnon, even at current levels visitors are having a negative impact on The Wave; triple the number of permits, he says, and you triple the damage. Beyond erosion to the sandstone, he points to visitors trampling biological soil crust, which fixes nitrogen in the soil and allows desert plants to survive, as a significant impact hikers have in the area.

If the Trump administration or the incoming Biden administration don't revoke the permit expansion, the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) may challenge the decision in court.

"This is an example of a highly sought-after part of our public lands whose preservation for the use and enjoyment of future generations requires sharing," McKinnon said. "That sharing means a very limited number of people being allowed to go there and appreciate it."