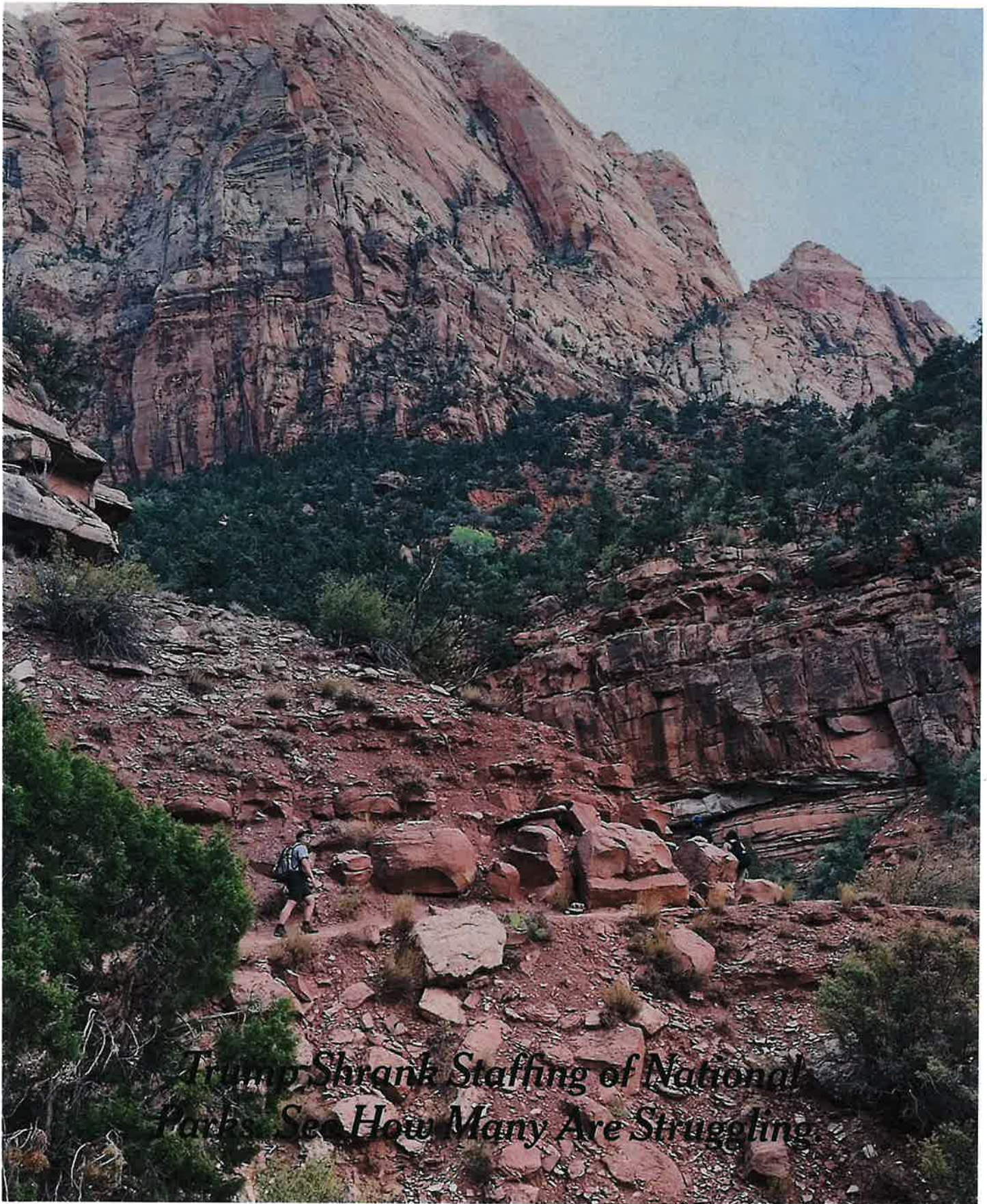




Amid deep cuts, more than 90 parks have reported problems like lost revenue and cuts to

emergency services. One expert called this “a dangerous path.”

By Eileen Sullivan Photographs and Video by Erin Schaff Graphics by Ani Matevosian

Eileen Sullivan, who covers changes to the federal work force in the Trump administration, interviewed dozens of current and former parks employees and advocates. Erin Schaff spent six days photographing Zion National Park. Ani Matevosian mapped the parks that have reported issues.

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National parks across the United States have welcomed millions of visitors this summer to enjoy their fragile beauty, wildlife and ecosystems. But at least one-fifth of the country’s 433 parks have been significantly strained and understaffed because of steep cuts mandated by the Trump administration, according to internal government data obtained by The New York Times.

Staffing at the National Park Service had been steadily shrinking in the past decade because of tightened budgets. But it has lost 24 percent of its permanent employees since President Trump took office, according to data compiled by the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association. Among those who left: more than 1,800 park workers who accepted the administration’s resignation initiatives, devised to quickly reduce the size of government.

Despite the reduced staffing, the Trump administration has directed all national parks to remain open. In July alone, more than 41 million people visited a park, down slightly from last year.

More than 90 national parks reported problems between April and the end of July stemming from departures, cuts and a hiring freeze, according to internal Interior Department data. Routine tasks like cleaning and stocking the bathrooms have gone undone. Fewer rangers have given tours and lectures. Visitor centers have reduced hours. And parks have lost millions of dollars because they are unable to staff entrances and collect visitor fees.

“Budget cuts and staff reductions have set our national parks on an unsustainable and dangerous path,” said Phil Francis, a 40-year veteran of the park service and the chair of the Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks, an advocacy group of current and former national park employees. “Some of the impacts of the staff cuts are visible to the public, but many are not yet. And all of this is only going to get worse.”



Visitors at Zion National Park in Utah this month.

Mr. Trump has yet to nominate someone to run the National Park Service, an agency that is part of the Interior Department.

A spokeswoman for the Interior Department, Aubrie Spady, called the findings by The Times “erroneous,” but declined to address any specifics. “Staffing levels and operations at our national parks this summer are on par with previous years,” Ms. Spady said in a statement. She did not respond to a request for information about the number of employees working in the parks this summer or last summer.

The department’s secretary, Doug Burgum, has also defended the agency’s staffing.

“We believe we have enough people to support all the programs we had last year this year,” Mr. Burgum told House members on June 12.

But lawmakers from both parties are skeptical and said the administration is endangering the country’s “best idea,” as the writer Wallace Stegner once described the national parks.

“If the park service was overstaffed or is overstaffed, and if there’s waste, show it to us,”

Senator Angus King, independent of Maine, said in a recent interview. “Show us the data. Show us the numbers of people, where they are, which positions you feel are unnecessary or shouldn’t be funded.”

Entrance fees are going uncollected

The staffing shortage has meant that there are fewer people available to collect fees at the parks that charge for admission — allowing visitors to enter without paying.

About 80 percent of the fees collected at parks go toward improving the visitor experience, such as maintaining buildings and trails and protecting natural resources. The other 20 percent is divided among parks that do not charge entrance fees or collect little revenue.

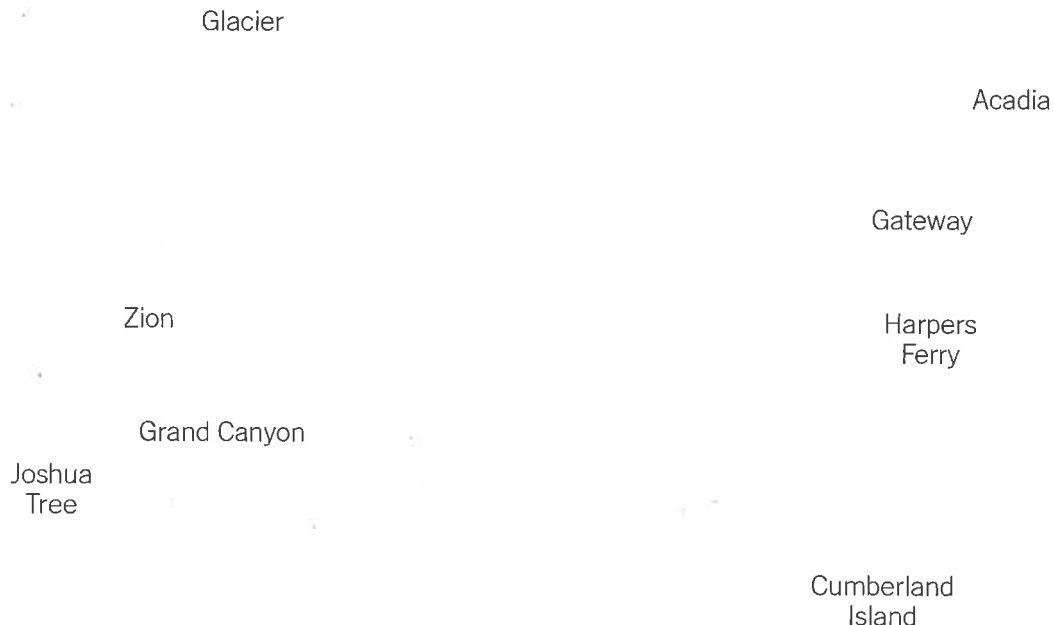
At **Zion National Park in Utah**, the partial staffing at fee entrance stations is projected to add up to \$2 million in lost revenue this year, according to park figures as of late July.

People were “flocking into the park without paying — it was criminal,” said Julie Maner of New York, a longtime park-goer who now owns a nearby condo where she lives several months of the year. “They’re losing a heck of a lot more money than whatever they’re saving.”

An unmanned entrance to a campground at the park.

The lost fees motivated Ms. Maner and her wife to volunteer at one of the park's entrances twice a week. If the fee booths are not staffed, she said they direct visitors to pay through a QR code nearby.

9 parks reported cuts to fee collection



This map does not include U.S. territories, but San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico also reported issues with collecting fees. • The New York Times

In **Grand Canyon National Park** in Arizona, one entrance lost staffing for three hours Wednesdays through Sundays. **Glacier National Park** in Montana is now relying on the honor system, asking visitors to pay using a QR code.

Joshua Tree National Park in the California desert said its ability to put in new toilets and repair potholes will be hampered because of uncollected fees.

The fee stations can serve as the first point of contact between visitors and staff. At a time when parks are short-staffed, this might be the only time a visitor interacts with a ranger,

noted Jeff Mow, a former Glacier superintendent. "Information about bears, how to store food," he said. "Lots of safety information is given to people when they go through the fee booths."

Recently, the Interior Department downgraded the background check requirements necessary to fill those positions to widen the pool of people who would be eligible, according to an Aug. 11 internal memo obtained by The Times.

Educational programs are disappearing

National Parks are known for rangers who have unparalleled knowledge about a park and the area around it. But the staffing challenges have meant fewer ranger programs and, in some cases, the loss of educational offerings.

Fort Scott National Historic Site in Kansas had to cancel two annual programs, Sweep through History and Life on the Frontier, that drew more than 1,200 students a year. And a popular annual Civil War encampment event drew a fraction of the normal crowd this year; the main attraction — cannon fire demonstrations — was scrapped because the black powder specialist was a casualty of the administration's squeeze on the work force.

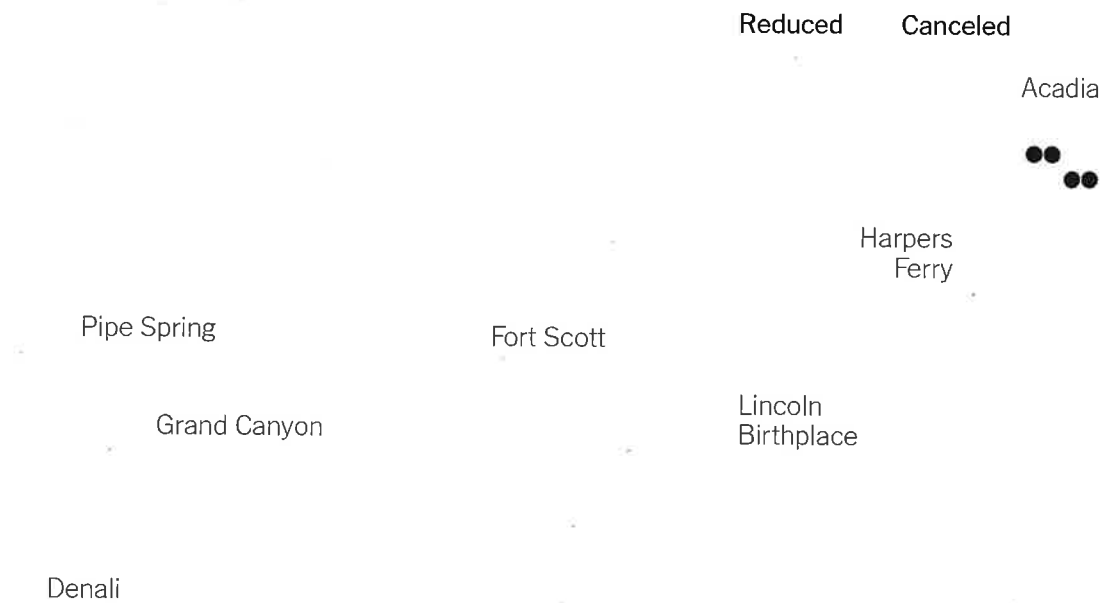
The park now only hosts smaller groups of students instead of entire classes, said Matthew Wells, a town commissioner and member of a nonprofit organization that supports the park.

"For some children, hands-on history makes a massive impact," Mr. Wells said. During the Civil War, the town was a significant supply depot for the Union forces and home to the state's first Black infantry, which was also one of the first to fight the Confederates.

In Alaska, **Denali National Park** had to cancel overnight camps this summer for students from first through eighth grades because the Trump administration fired the education program manager in February as part of its mass terminations of probationary employees, said Jodi Rodwell, executive director of the nonprofit organization, the Denali Education Center, which runs the camps. The education program manager was eventually reinstated, as were some other probationary employees. But by then it was too late to hire other necessary staff, Ms. Rodwell said.

"There were disappointed kids, for sure," Ms. Rodwell said.

16 parks reported cuts to education programs



The New York Times

On the other side of the country, at **Acadia National Park** in Maine, the park had to cancel an education program called the Youth Conservation Corps, for lack of someone to run it, said Eric Stiles, the president and chief executive of the nonprofit organization, the Friends of Acadia.

Because many of the national parks are in rural areas, cancellations like these are especially hard on students without other opportunities nearby, said James Fester, a Minnesota-based educator and author of a book about national parks and education.

There are no longer ranger-guided tours for school groups at **Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Park** in Hodgenville, Ky., which the town's mayor, James B. Phelps Jr., described as "a vital education opportunity."

And the **Pipe Spring National Monument** in Arizona, which covers the history of Indigenous people and Mormon settlers who lived in the region, had to scrap off-site learning programs. It can't host as many field trips either, operating with half of its permanent staff.

"A lot of times these programs leave with the staff," said Mr. Fester, who said he is concerned that the education cuts will be permanent.

Trail and campground maintenance is getting delayed

The mandate to keep the parks open coupled with insufficient staff has forced employees to take on multiple roles, leaving gaps in service, former employees and advocates said.

David Vela, a longtime veteran of the parks service and a former acting director, said for every stopgap, there are two or three other jobs that are not being done, describing it as a “ripple effect.”

Some vacancies at parks predate the Trump administration, but the hiring freeze prevents parks from filling them. In addition, parks typically hire about 8,000 seasonal employees each year, a process that starts in the winter. But as they contended with the push to reduce permanent staff, the parks hired a little more than half of the workers they typically bring on during the busy summer season, conservation association said.

30 parks reported cuts to park maintenance

Lassen

Indiana
Dunes

Zion

Nicodemus

Harpers
Ferry

Grand Canyon


National
Mall and
Memorial
Parks

Cane River
Creole

The New York Times

At the Grand Canyon, staffing issues have led to less maintenance on trails and at campgrounds, including pest management. There is no one to monitor zoonotic diseases like the plague, rabies and bedbugs, the report said. That is troubling for the Grand Canyon, where squirrels in the park carry fleas linked to plague and are known to bite people.

Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, located in part in Mr. Burgum’s home state of North Dakota, reported that it will soon be down to a single person on staff, and

warned “potential total closure without adequate staffing.”

At **Harpers Ferry National Historic Park** in West Virginia, the park can’t bring on willing volunteers because it can’t hire someone to manage them, the report said.

“Without this position, the park will lose the opportunity to have hundreds of volunteers provide useful services and work projects,” such as removing invasive plant species and ground maintenance, the report said.

Lassen Volcanic National Park, in the mountains of Northern California, was not able to hire custodians either, leaving the maintenance staff to handle custodial, trash, water, electrical, plumbing and carpentry needs “in a very inefficient way.”

Natalie Britt, the chief executive officer of Zion’s nonprofit partner, Zion National Park Forever, said the departure of the park’s engineer who tested water quality has left a maintenance staff member to collect water samples and drive them more than an hour away to a testing facility.

“That is the epitome of inefficiency,” Ms. Britt said, leaving 10 fewer hours of maintenance work done a week. Staffing at the park is down 25 percent, she said.

In some parks, administrative staff — the people who do budgets, payroll and human resources — are also detailed to do the same work for another park that is short-staffed, one senior parks official said, speaking on condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation.

This type of arrangement is untenable, the person said.

Emergency services are becoming more limited

Voyageurs National Park in northern Minnesota is down four out of seven law enforcement rangers and had to reduce emergency services this summer to four days a week instead of seven. On days when there are emergency services in the park, the report said visitors can expect responses to take hours, Voyageurs reported in late July.

“Staffing is definitely an ongoing challenge for us, but we’ve never experienced anything like this level of uncertainty before — not to mention the drain of morale and expertise,” said Christina Hausman Rhode, executive director of Voyageurs Conservancy. She said the park is down 11 positions, including a permanent superintendent and lead wildlife biologist.

At Zion, the park’s search and rescue team is about 10 percent smaller than it was a year ago, said Ms. Britt, who runs the park’s nonprofit partner. The park, home to the popular but risky Angels Landing hike, reported that it has less capacity for responses to visitor emergencies, such as medical services and fires. The park had more than 500 emergency

responses in 2024.

8 parks reported cuts to emergency response programs



Joshua Tree reported that it was not able to do as much of what it called “preventative search and rescue” because one of the rangers who does that task has been reassigned to collect fees and backfill other vacancies.

This type of work includes having a ranger stationed at trail heads to make sure hikers have enough water on a hot and dry day, said Mr. Mow, the former Glacier superintendent.

The park's search and rescue team is about 10 percent smaller than it was a year ago.

"Intercepting unprepared visitors is the best way to reduce search and rescue incidents," the park noted in its report.

The National Park Service has been facing criticism for its lifeguard shortage, which the administration says is a nationwide problem. Park leaders at Assateague Island, the Gateway Beaches and Fire Island reported hiring fewer seasonal lifeguards this year.

Shortages are creating uncertainty

Morale among park staff is at an all-time low, many employees said.

The 90 parks that reported problems to the Interior Department related to staffing shortages is likely an undercount, as several dozen were not listed as providing any information and advocates said others that reported no problems actually have critical vacancies.

Even as administration officials acknowledge the bipartisan popularity of national parks, it wants to cut about \$1.2 billion next year from the National Park Service — more than one-third of its 2025 budget.

Morale among park staff is at an all-time low, many employees said.

Mr. Vela, the former acting parks director, said he is struggling to reconcile the administration's commitment to saving taxpayer money with the sharp cuts it is making at the park service.

In 2023, the agency reported that visitor spending in communities near parks contributed \$55.6 billion to the economy nationwide and supported more than 414,000 jobs.

And the funding for the parks service typically represents a fraction of a percent of the total federal budget, Mr. Vela said.

"It is a huge return on investment," he said. "Here you have a situation where you're bringing in revenue and you're leaving money at the door."

Eileen Sullivan is a Times reporter covering the changes to the federal work force under the Trump administration.