Camping’s rise in popularity on America’s public lands

Tyler McIntosh, October 2021
Introduction

Over recent years, visitors on national public lands around the country have noticed that things are getting crowded. And it’s true: the popularity of outdoor recreation and visitation on public lands has skyrocketed over the past decade. But the popularity of camping on national public lands has grown even more quickly. New analysis of public lands camping data reveals that summer use of reservable national public lands camping facilities has increased at least as rapidly as overall public lands visitation, with an estimated 39% increase in peak season reservable campsite occupancy in the lower 48 between 2014 and 2020. In comparison, from 2013 to 2019, national park visitation grew 20%, from roughly 273 million to 327 million guests; similarly, visits to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) sites, such as national monuments and national conservation areas, rose by 20% from 2009 to 2019. Although more users of public lands is a good thing, the increase in visitation has led to serious overcrowding on some public lands, straining infrastructure such as campgrounds during the peak summer season.

While outdoor recreation has gotten progressively more popular for years, the COVID-19 pandemic has driven an even more rapid rise, reflected by a large bump in reservable campsite occupancy between 2019 and 2020. The Outdoor Industry Association found that 7.1 million more Americans participated in outdoor recreation in 2020 than in 2019. Growth in national park visitation was particularly well-documented during the summer of 2021 as numerous national parks smashed records, bringing attention to the incredible popularity of national parks. However, our research also shows that reservable campsites in protected areas—even excluding national parks and their immediate surroundings—are more occupied during the peak season than other public lands, demonstrating the popularity of all protected lands, not just national parks.

The explosion of interest in the immersive experience of camping on public lands shows how much these lands are loved by the American people. However, there is a desperate need to protect the treasured areas that our communities depend on and ensure that they remain intact, especially during an ongoing pandemic and in the face of the accelerating climate and nature crises. Recent trends in protected area and national park usage further demonstrate the need to expand these popular designations in order to distribute campers across a larger area and drive visitation across different seasons. At the same time, increased funding and recreation management planning is needed to ensure the integrity of popular locations for camping.

Explore The Camping Crunch to learn more about trends in regions and states across the country, and check out the most—and least—occupied reservable campgrounds on our beloved national public lands. While each of us can help disperse The Camping Crunch, only action to protect these landscapes and properly manage them can help ensure that future generations enjoy the same high-quality experience of camping on national public lands.

Data for The Camping Crunch was filtered from 24 million reservation orders made on the website Recreation.gov, reservations made in the field or via call center, and additional data acquired from Recreation Information Database (RIDB) staff.
The Rise of Camping

In 2014, an estimated 39% of reservable lower 48 public lands campsites were filled during the summer months, which increased to an estimated 54% by 2020—an estimated increase of 39%. However, summer weekdays saw a higher estimated growth in occupancy than summer weekends due to starting much lower, and in 2020 had estimated occupancy rates higher than 2014 summer weekends. Summer weekends still had a higher percentage of campsites filled (up to an estimated 60% in 2020). [Figure 1].

The increasing popularity of camping during summer weekdays—during the work week for many—points to the incredible popularity of national public lands. It suggests that peak-season users may be seeking to avoid crowded campgrounds during the weekend more than they have in the past, pointing to a potential decrease in visitor satisfaction as campgrounds and surrounding public lands become more crowded. This finding backs up concerns that visitor experiences on public lands may be diminished as users at popular destinations face lengthy waits at entrance stations, vehicle parking shortages, and congestion on trails.

Overall estimated summer reservable campsite occupancy increased more in the Western United States between 2014-2020 than anywhere else in the country, giving the region the highest occupancy rates, but the trend of increasingly full campgrounds was consistent [Figure 2].

It is obvious that camping on public lands is booming in popularity—the question, then, is what that means for the future of our public lands.
**Estimated Increases in Summer Campsite Occupancy Across Regions**

![Graph showing estimated increases in summer campsite occupancy across regions.](image)

47% increase in estimated peak season reservable campsite occupancy in the West

**More than 95%**

of reservable campsites on some public lands were filled on peak season weekends of 2019 and 2020

**Occupancy of Reservable Public Lands Campsites**

![Map showing occupancy of reservable public lands campsites.](image)

Figure 2

Figure 3: Visit online to view interactive version of map
A Love of National Parks and Protected Areas

National parks have always been the crown jewels of the American public lands system, drawing visitors from around the world. The popularity of park campgrounds is apparent: National Park Service (NPS) campgrounds have consistently had the highest estimated peak season occupancy among land management agencies since 2014, with some campgrounds reaching near 100% occupancy. But it’s not only campgrounds inside national parks that feel the crunch. Campgrounds outside yet near the boundaries of national parks are nearly as popular as those inside [Figure 4]. However, such campgrounds managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the US Forest Service (USFS) may not receive the same amount of maintenance funding or be as prepared to manage the influx of visitors.

Additionally, national park campgrounds are, in comparison to other public lands, more consistently popular even during the off-season [Figure 4]. In fact, in 2019 and 2020, overall off-season national park campground occupancy was higher than summer occupancy in campgrounds further than 10 kilometers from national parks. This suggests that the creation of more national parks could help distribute public land camping loads across more of the year. Previous research has also found that designating areas as national parks helps to redistribute visitation: one study found that eight national monuments that were re-designated as national parks saw their attendance increase by an average of 21% within five years.

While national parks and their campgrounds are as crowded as ever, their growth in peak season occupancy has been relatively low because they have always been so popular. On the other hand, estimated peak season occupancy at campgrounds in all agencies besides the National Park Service has grown rapidly since 2014 [Figure 5]. Although NPS campgrounds have had the highest estimated summer occupancy since 2014 and serve a high number of visitors, reservable campsites managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers serve significantly more visitors each year [Figure 5]. The growth in campsite occupancy outside of national parks shows that national public lands have entered into the public consciousness in a new way. Just re-designating protected lands as national parks won’t be enough.

It's not just national parks that users are drawn to. Estimated peak season occupancy in and near protected areas (such as in national monuments, wildlife refuges, or wilderness areas), but excluding national parks and their immediate surroundings, are still reliably more popular than other public lands camping areas [Figure 6].
Campgrounds in Non-NPS Agencies Are Getting More Popular

**Figure 5**

Protected Areas Outside of National Parks Are Reliably Popular

**Figure 6**
So, What Next?

In the near future, more and more of the United States will be developed—about a football field worth of natural area in the country is lost to development every 30 seconds. Rapid development makes our protected areas even more important, to both ecosystems and recreationalists. Ensuring their protection for future generations will be essential. And the solution is popular: polling in 2020 found that 84% of Westerners support creating new protected areas such as national parks, monuments, wildlife refuges, and tribal protected areas.

As the popularity of camping on public lands and protected areas increases, public land managers need to anticipate problems and identify them before reaching a crisis. The country needs to think about how protection of public lands impacts future users and recreation before lands have been negatively impacted by mining, drilling, logging, and development, just like we need to think about how campground management and funding impacts the environment before campgrounds continue to reach higher occupancies and their surroundings are trashed.

Some argue that the answer is to fund land management systems to protect the integrity of our lands (a step towards which was made by passage of the Great American Outdoors Act), while others argue that we need to designate more popular lands and protect more areas in perpetuity to distribute use on a strained system. America needs to be doing both, and we need to be doing it now.

Trends Across the West

Across the West, peak season campsite occupancy rates have risen by an estimated 47% since 2014, the most of any region in the United States. The increasing number of campsites filled demonstrates the popularity of public lands in the West, although some states are more popular than others. Indeed, 31% of Westerners say that one of the top five issues that limit how often they visit national public lands is that those lands are too crowded. Meanwhile, a massive 84% of Westerners support creating new protected areas.

Montana and Colorado consistently have the highest estimated summer campsite occupancy rates, although Oregon and Washington are beginning to catch up. Meanwhile, Wyoming and Utah saw the largest increases in comparison to their estimated 2014 occupation rates. In Wyoming, this can partially be explained by the fact that it is the Western state with the highest rate of out-of-state reservations. California has dropped in occupancy rate ranking since 2014, not because it has gotten less cramped, but rather because it saw a lower growth rate than some other states. Arizona, which at one point had the highest estimated occupancy rate in the West, is one of the few states in the country that has seen a drop in estimated occupancy since 2014. While Nevada has relatively low estimated occupancy rates, it is an exception in that comparison to additional datasets for 2020 shows a dramatic under-estimation of reservable campsite utilization during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely resulting from a high percentage of campsite closures.

Learn About Your State

To learn about national public lands camping trends in your state, visit the interactive version of The Camping Crunch at WesternPriorities.org/The-Camping-Crunch, where you will find state-specific information, interactive maps, and lists of the most—and least—occupied reservable campgrounds in 2019 and 2020.
What's Behind the Findings

Data for The Camping Crunch was obtained from the Recreation Information Database (RIDB). These data represent reservation orders made on the well-known website Recreation.gov, in addition to reservations made in the field or via call center. Recreation.gov is the primary online system for users to make, change, and cancel reservations at federal campgrounds, but does not contain information on first-come-first-serve campsites. Dataset entries include reservations made for campgrounds, hiking permits, and other reservations on public lands. For this analysis, nearly 24 million order entries were analyzed, over 16 million of which were distinct orders at camping facilities and locations. Additional utilization data for 2019 and 2020 were also obtained and analyzed, representing the best data available at this time. This utilization data was used to assess accuracy of long-term estimates, as well as for presenting accurate information at a facility-scale on interactive maps. There is, of course, the possibility of incomplete information for some facilities, in addition to user or data manager error.

Alaska and Hawaii were excluded from the analysis in order to focus on trends on public lands in the lower 48. The data analyzed only represents reservations made for federal public land campsites, and only for campsites that are reservable. However, this subset of the full story still represents the vast majority of the camping that happens in these facilities (not-inclusive of dispersed camping locations). In 2019 and 2020, reservable campsites made up 85% and 88% of all national public lands campsites respectively. This percentage is even higher in the summers of 2019 and 2020, with 97% and 93% respectively of all campsites in the system reservable. This suggests that the data analyzed presents a robust estimation of camping trends across all established public lands facilities. It is worth noting that that not every campground on public lands is represented, as some areas manage reservations through separate systems (e.g. in Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks), while other campgrounds (not represented spatially) do not have geographic locations, or have incorrect locations, in the RIDB system.

Certain data caveats and limitations make long-term reported numbers general estimates rather than exact calculations. Importantly, cancellations are unaccounted for in the long-term dataset, as are campsite closures (such as during the off-season or when switched to a first-come-first-serve basis). In order to assess estimate accuracy, the best utilization data available (including cancellations and closures) from 2019 and 2020 were compared to estimates acquired from the long-term dataset. Analysis demonstrates that overarching reported estimates are relatively robust (within 20% of actual utilization) for all summer temporal subsets, but not for full-year analysis (likely due to extensive site closures during the off-season). Therefore, long-term data results are only displayed for high-season subsets, defined as the most popular camping months of June, July, and August.

Analysis also reveals that 2019 (a far more normal year than 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic changing both user behavior and government agency systems) estimates are 10-15% over-estimates, suggesting that the long-term dataset slightly over-estimates occupancy rates. However, 2020 estimations are shown to be reliably under-estimates. The likely overall outcome of this phenomenon is that long-term occupancy changes were actually GREATER than demonstrated by the long-term estimated dataset, making overall percent difference calculations under-estimates.

Spatial analysis was performed using datasets from the Protected Area Database of the United States (PADUS), and “protected areas” were defined as PADUS categories 1 and 2.

For a more detailed description of report methodology and data, as well as analysis scripts, please view the Detailed Methodology Document.

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