

National Parks Are Charting the Future of Campgrounds



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In mid-June I had the privilege of co-moderating a panel, “National Park Campgrounds of Tomorrow,” at Wyoming’s **Jackson Lake Lodge** as part of the month-long Great Outdoors Western Campout. The setting couldn’t have been more spectacular, as the event was nestled inside one of America’s most beautiful public lands, **Grand Teton National Park**, which provided the perfect backdrop for a half day of thought-provoking discussions about America’s cherished parklands.

Several days before the meeting, the host and organizer, **Derrick Crandall** of the **American Recreation Coalition (ARC)**, promised me an action-packed morning of provocative and challenging dialogue — and he delivered.

From the onset, I quickly realized that the group of some 30 leaders from the outdoor recreation community was truly passionate, wonderfully committed and absolutely articulate about how to handle the myriad of issues affecting federal and state lands. Among the folks in the room were public-sector representatives from state governments and the national park, national forest and state park systems, as well as several private-sector executives, including those from the aligned concessionaire businesses, along with well-known representatives from the RV industry, notably **Bob Wheeler** of **Airstream**, **Pat Hittmeier** of **Kampgrounds of America Inc.** and others, including yours truly, who represented **RVBusiness** and **Woodall’s Campground Management**.

The meeting started with an overview from the governor of Missouri, **Jay Nixon**, and the state’s attorney general, **Bill Bryan**. The two went into specific and illustrative details about how they have been able to increase the user experience and, hence, the usage at their state’s park system — all of which translated into more dollars inside the park system and through the rather vast tourism money generated in the ancillary communities. The analogies to the federal land system were clear.

For instance, they implemented simple- and common-sense concepts into their programs, such as encouraging pet-friendly camps throughout their system. “If you don’t let people bring their pets,” Nixon told the group, “then you won’t get people to go into the outdoors.” They also developed several programs specifically aimed at youth in their state, including the “Think Outside” program to allow teens to accomplish preservation and enhancement programs in the state parks. The result? Today, campers in Missouri are on the increase — and one in four of them are under the age of 18.

Nixon also spoke emphatically about a common topic held throughout the rest of the day: the need to make the park systems “technology friendly” for today’s campers. “Today’s park user needs to

stay connected, and it doesn’t have to hurt the experience for those campers who are there to get away from modern conveniences,” he emphasized to the group. Along those lines, later in the session, **Cody Mruk** of **NIC** showed a brief video explaining his company’s new app, **Your Pass Now**, which allows park users to easily purchase passes and other park-related items on their mobile devices.

The talk by Nixon and Bryan was followed up by an equally informative presentation by Hittmeier, president and CEO of **KOA**, who gave an overview of his firm’s recently released *North American Camping Report*. Among the findings were that new campers were driven by the all-important Millennial demographic segment, and some 40% of new campers are now non-Caucasian.

Camping with children was also an important topic, with **KOA**’s findings that the rate of campers with their young ones in tow is now 50%. And pointing to a trend seen in the public as well as private parks, more campers want to camp with their friends and families in groups — which points to the need to design parks accordingly.

As far as looking to the year ahead, Hittmeier reported that 31% of campers plan to camp more in 2016 (a number bolstered by the optimism and youthful exuberance of Millennials, in which the number is 58%), and 52% plan to visit national parks. Further — a point that the RV industry knows very well — 40% of campers say moderate gas prices will allow them to camp more often.

The next presentation was delivered by Wheeler, who gave an overview of another recently released report, “**RVIA’s Case for Federal Campground Modernization**.” He began his remarks by noting what I believe some, but not all, in the RV industry already realize: “The camping experience is extremely

important to selling RVs.”

Wheeler’s report touched on some key issues affecting both federal and state lands. Of particular significance is the rising amount of deferred-maintenance costs in the federal land system, which by some accounts is as high as \$12 billion. Since more than 90% of all federal land-related revenue leaves the system and goes into the general fund administered by Congress, discussion naturally turned on how to generate more money that could stay in the park.

Suggestions there ranged from increased charges for high-occupancy days (applying yield-management principles to the parks), to allowing discreet forms of sponsorship on park products, to separate charges for individual aspects of the park such as add-on costs for tapping into a Wi-Fi system.

He also touched upon the need to modernize certain park features, particularly those directly affecting RV usage such as wider and larger RV sites and 50-amp electrical service. He, as other speakers advocated throughout the day, also spoke for the need to bring in technology to the camping experience. “It is critical to meet people’s expectations,” Wheeler told the group.

The remaining portion of the session turned to the roundtable discussion, which was equally lively, spirited and full of solid ideas. As co-moderator of the event along with **Vicki Mates**, the acting superintendent of **Grand Teton National Park**, we started off that part of the meeting by asking the threshold question: “If you were advising the next president of the United States, what would you tell him or her about how best to meet the demands of today’s public when it comes to RVing and camping on federal lands?”

As with most good brainstorming sessions, the dialogue moved all across

the board. However, three key topics eventually emerged as critical to the creation of an even better experience for today’s RVer and camper:

- The importance of technology throughout the park while balancing the needs of those who come to the federal lands to “get away from it all;”
- The need to find additional sources of funding that will stay in the park to deal with the huge — and growing — deferred-maintenance issues;
- Tackling the thorny problem of transportation within the parks so that users aren’t constantly dealing with vehicle overkill as they seek to enjoy nature.

Other topics related more to internal park systems, such as how to create an environment in which the various agencies could adopt private sector-like processes, particularly as it came to communication between the different entities.

As with most issues of this sort, the answers aren’t clear-cut or easy. But I think everyone in the room came away with the belief that progress can be made and solutions arrived at by putting aside the politics of the day and working toward a common goal: preserving the majesty of most pristine pieces of land this country has to offer. The people in the room and the ideas discussed gave me hope that this goal can be accomplished.

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