

# Crater Lake bracing for bustling season as attendance soars

By Stephen Hamway  
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — While it's currently buried under nearly 12 feet of snow, Oregon's only national park is bracing for more crowds this summer after consecutive years of record-breaking attendance.

"It is getting to the point where, during some of our peak periods, we're having issues," said Craig Ackerman, superintendent for the 184,000-acre Crater Lake National Park.

The park drew approximately 756,000 visitors in 2016, a 23 percent increase over the then-record numbers from the year before. The increase was partially due to the centennial celebration of the national park system, which brought more visitors to parks nationwide in 2016, but that doesn't explain the larger growth trend.

All told, visits to Crater Lake have increased by more than 78 percent over the past five years, thanks to a recovering economy and increased marketing from Oregon tourism agencies.

The increase has had a direct impact on the park experience and tourism spending in neighboring communities, such as Bend, which is

about two hours to the northeast. However, Ackerman said, the increase in visitors has also put some strain on Crater Lake staff: There are longer lines — a mundane, daily issue — but there have been more serious impacts in the form of increased search and rescue missions.

"The park's getting a lot of exposure, and it's going through some growing pains," said Jim Chadderdon, executive director at Discover Klamath Visitor & Convention Bureau.

According to a 2016 report on how spending effects national parks, visits to Crater Lake generated \$71 million in economic output in the form of jobs and consumer spending in 2015. That total was split roughly equally among Klamath County, Central Oregon, the Rogue Valley and the Willamette Valley, according to Chadderdon.

"For Klamath County, Crater Lake's a pretty big deal," he said.

While Crater Lake and other national parks have limited resources to market themselves, Ackerman said the park works with a variety of local and statewide marketing agencies to reach a wider audience.

In 2015, Travel Oregon,

which handles tourism-promotion throughout the state, and Discover Klamath helped develop "Ride the Rim," a multi-day event in September where cyclists and runners can trek across 25 miles of the lake's rim. The event, which Chadderdon said grew out of days when the park was closed to vehicles, attracted nearly 5,000 people last September.

Oregon's growing profile as an international tourism destination helps as well. Last February, Crater Lake joined Wuyishan National Scenic Area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in China that receives 10.5 million visitors per year. Allison Keeney, global communications manager for Travel Oregon, said the partnership came together in part because Oregon has become a destination for Chinese tourists. In 2014, 62,000 Chinese tourists contributed \$48 million to the Oregon economy, according to numbers provided by Travel Oregon.

"China is our largest overseas market," Keeney said.

Ackerman added that Crater Lake is nearing an agreement with Triglav National Park in Slovenia.

"They have a number of issues that are identical to ours," he said of the Slovenian

park.

While he said he didn't expect as many visitors in 2017 as Crater Lake received in 2016, Ackerman acknowledged that overuse is an ongoing concern. Crater Lake saw around the same number of visitors last year as Canyonlands National Park in southern Utah, which is approximately twice as large.

More visitors in a smaller space can cause problems. Sean Denniston, management assistant for the national park, said Crater Lake's rangers reported a record-high 19 search and rescue calls in 2016, including two serious injuries. Ackerman added that long lines at the park's two entrances have been a challenge at Crater Lake as well, with visitors waiting more than an hour during busy summer days.

"At some point, we will reach a capacity where we can literally serve no more people," Ackerman said.

Ackerman cited Arches

National Park in southern Utah as an extreme example of this. The 76,000-acre park received more than 1.5 million visitors in 2016. Kate Cannon, superintendent at Arches, said the highway outside the park has become so congested that Utah Highway Patrol has had to close the road. She added that the park's relative shortage of parking spaces has forced cars to park on the side of the road, hurting nearby plant life.

While Crater Lake doesn't have problems on the same scale, Ackerman said the park is looking at ways to disperse visitors throughout the park and the season. The vast majority of Crater Lake's visitors come during the heart of the summer and congregate near the lake itself, Ackerman said. As a result, the park is looking to add attractions later in the summer, and in other parts of the park. In recent years, the park added new trails by the Pinnacles, miles from the lake itself.

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