

America's Outdoor Playgrounds Desperately Crowded This Year

Editors Note: On paper, the United States has plenty of recreational land. But the nation's parks are becoming as crowded as Times Square. In the following dispatch, the head of a new government agency designed to solve the problem says the trouble is that most of the land is where the people are not. He explains how his agency hopes to overcome this "people pressure" on the parks.

By LOUIS CASPERS
United Press International
WASHINGTON (UPI) — Amer-

ica's outdoor playgrounds are desperately overcrowded this summer. The situation will get progressively worse in the years ahead unless the nation moves swiftly to provide more parks, picnic grounds and swimming holes for a growing population with a growing amount of leisure time. So says Dr. Edward C. Crafts, director of the U. S. government's new Bureau of Outdoor Recreation.

Crafts' bureau was established in the Interior Department for the express purpose of promoting more and better facilities for Americans, who now live mostly in cities. "are becoming more crowded every year in their pursuit of a patch of nature in which to picnic, swim, take a walk or just look at the scenery. During the 1950's, while the U. S. population grew 15 per cent, visits to national parks rose 86 per cent. Increased mobility because of better cars and highways, and the additional leisure time provided by a shorter average work week, have contributed to the mounting demand for outdoor recreation facilities.

Parks Crowded
The result, said Crafts, is that "some of our more popular parks now look like Times Square at the peak of the tourist season." Moreover, projections of present trends show that the "people pressure" on recreation facilities is likely to triple by the end of this century.

On paper it looks as though America should have abundant space for outdoor recreation. More than 250 million acres are publicly designated for that purpose, including 25 million acres of national parks, 6 million acres of state parks, and 180 million acres of national forests.

But, Crafts pointed out, "most of this land is where the people are not." Specifically, 72 per cent of the public recreational acreage is in Western states, where 15 per cent of the population lives. The northeastern states, with 15 per cent of the people, have only 2 per cent of the parklands.

Providing more outdoor recreation opportunities within easy reach of major population centers in the east is a major goal of the new bureau.

It will not build or operate any facilities itself. Its main jobs are (1) to coordinate the activities of the 20 or more federal agencies which are already involved directly or incidentally in the management of lands which can be used for outdoor recreation; and (2) to stimulate greater efforts by state and local governments, and private enterprise, to meet the rising demand for open-air playgrounds.

Legislation Eyed
Several pieces of legislation now pending in Congress are needed for further this program, Crafts said.

He expressed hope that Congress will complete action soon on a bill authorizing his bureau to distribute \$50 million in matching grants to encourage states to develop plans for outdoor recreation programs. A few states, such as New York, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, California, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Michigan, already are moving ahead in this area. But many are dragging their feet.

Crafts said private enterprise also can and should play a big part in providing outdoor recreation facilities. His bureau plans to stimulate such action by pointing out that such undertakings have proved highly profitable.

"There is a great opportunity here for some of the nation's rural depressed areas," he said. "Development of their natural scenic assets could give a tremendous economic boost to many areas, northern Minnesota and West Virginia, for example."

Another bill before Congress would set up a land acquisition fund to be financed by proceeds from admission fees at federal recreation areas, motorboat gasoline taxes and other charges. This money would be used to buy new lands for national parks and seashores.

Expenditures for new recreation facilities are not frivolous, Crafts said, but an overdue national investment in assuring all Americans "permanent access to their outdoor heritage."

The opportunity to spend a few hours or days among the beauties of nature, he said, "is essential to the cultural, physical, moral and spiritual well-being of the American people."

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