

Life *in the* Valley

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PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

Smith Rock State Park has gone from a place known mostly for rock climbing to a bonafide tourist destination.

As Smith Rock crowds skyrocket, a new plan will shape park's future

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STATESMAN JOURNAL

Smith Rock State Park has seen dramatic changes during the past five years.

The 652-acre park north of Bend has gone from a place known mostly for rock climbing to a bonafide tourist destination on par with Multnomah Falls and the Oregon Coast.

A sharp increase in visitors, which have almost doubled since 2010, has stretched the park to capacity.

How to deal with those crowds is the focus of an update to the park's master plan, a document that will guide decisions into the future. Last updated in 1991, the process of crafting the master plan is beginning with a series of public meetings and online surveys.

"This first round of meetings is all about listening to the public — finding out what people like, what they want to keep the same, and what problems we need to look at fixing," park manager Scott Brown said. "It's a long and slow process, but an important one."

A public meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 24, at REI in Portland. The public can also take an online survey (smithrockparkplan.com/survey), email comments (julia.cogger@oregon.gov) or call 503-986-0663 to make their voice part of the process.

By Brown's admission, the biggest issue by far is crowding.

From 2002 to 2012, the number of day-use visits to Smith Rock averaged 442,000 people per year. This past year, that number skyrocketed to 745,000. The number of people camping at Smith Rock has also exploded, from 11,036 camper nights in 2010 to 21,900 in 2016.

"Our facilities just haven't been able to keep up," Brown said. "On busy weekends, we have parking overflowing into our neighbors' yards, extremely long lines at restrooms and an overflowing septic system, and a lot of issues with our first-come, first-served campground."

While the problems are not unique — Oregon has seen massive growth in the number of people recreating in the state's outdoors — Smith Rock is an extreme case, Brown said.

A number of possible solutions have been pitched, Brown said.

Smith Rock could embrace the crowds by expanding its parking lot — the current lot has 375 spaces for what's often over 1,000 vehicles. Or, it could go the opposite direction, and institute a limited entry permit system



The trails at Smith Rock State Park often become crowded on the weekends.

that would cap the number of people allowed to visit — an unprecedented move for the state parks system.

"Everything is on the table right now," Brown said.

A few pilot projects have already been attempted or are in the works at Smith Rock, said Ben Hedstrom, park planner for OPRD.

"We installed a temporary parking lot at the end of summer, and we're looking at moving some campsites to a reservation system," Hedstrom said. "It's small things we're trying now to improve the situation."

The reason for the increase in visitation is multifaceted. The growth of Central Oregon's population combined with the "Seven Wonders of Oregon" marketing campaign raised the profile of Smith Rock beyond the rock climbing community.

The largest increase in visitors, Brown said, has been hiking, trail running and nature viewing.

"It's been a blessing in that we've seen more diverse groups of people coming out — more families — and that's a very good thing," Brown said in a 2015 interview. "The downside is that we've just been struggling to keep up."

The process of updating the master plan will take about a year and a half, Hedstrom said. There will be a second and third round of public meetings in early summer and likely next December.

Once the plan is finalized, smaller changes will likely go into effect right away, while larger changes will be phased over the long term, Hedstrom said.

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for eight years. He is the author of the book "Hiking Southern Oregon" and can be reached at zurness@statesmanjournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at @ZachsORoutdoors.

Smith Rock State Park visits

2002 to 2012 (average): 442,000 people per year

2013: 545,668

2014: 635,908

2015: 746,384

2016: 744,380

Meeting on Smith Rock future

What: A meeting to provide input on the future management of Smith Rock State Park.

When: 6 to 8 p.m.

Where: REI Portland, Community Room, 1405 NW Johnson, Portland, OR, 97209. Parking is available in the REI Parking Garage.