

Desert Sun.



Joshua Tree National Park boss juggles traffic, toilet paper and coyotes — all in a day's work

The desert park is one of the nation's fastest growing, with mile-long traffic some days. Entrance expansion is planned, but more funds are needed.

Janet Wilson Palm Springs Desert Sun

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Joshua Tree National Park Superintendent David Smith throws on a bright yellow emergency vest and strides briskly into action. It's not a threatened desert

tortoise or a fallen hiker that requires his attention. It's traffic.

"Go ahead and enter, go ahead and enter," he shouts, quickly waving dozens of cars past the West Visitors' entrance kiosk to break up a thick knot of idling vehicles. "We'll just keep you going. Have a great day!"

On a windswept, sparkling Monday in late January, the stark beauty and logistical challenges at one of America's busiest national parks are on equal display.

Attendance here has more than doubled in just seven years, from 1.3 million in 2014 to nearly 3.1 million last year. About 130 miles east of Los Angeles, the 800,000-acre park stretches across two major deserts of the American southwest, with room for bighorn sheep, barrel cactus and COVID-safe outdoor fashion shoots.



Joshua Tree National Park Superintendent David Smith, left, talks Jan. 24, 2022, with climbing guide Jessy Ware about the future of the iconic site, where the stark beauty and logistical challenges at one of America's busiest national parks are on equal display.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Great Smoky Mountains National Park had 14.1 million visitors last year, and Golden Gate National Recreation Area led the pack in California with 13.7 million, but the rate of visitor growth at Joshua Tree has been among the fastest and largest in the system, Smith said.

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“Flooding the gate,” as Smith calls the practice of waving cars in for free, has become common practice.

It means losing out on revenue from entrance fees that are badly needed for \$60 million worth of deferred maintenance and infrastructure projects. But it can ease backups that often extend back into the village of Joshua Tree, trapping local residents in their driveways or on clogged streets.



Superintendent David Smith helps direct incoming traffic into Joshua Tree National Park's west

entrance Jan. 24, 2022. "Go ahead and enter," he shouts, quickly waving dozens of cars past the West Visitors' entrance kiosk to break up a thick knot of idling vehicles.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

"Yesterday ... we had a mile-long line emanating out of the west entrance," Smith said.

While winter and spring are the most popular times to visit the park, Smith said there's been a surge in visitors even in July, when temperatures hit triple digits, "which blows my mind," he said.

Smith, 53, is literally the gatekeeper here. An affable, seemingly unflappable park service veteran who has been at the helm of this California desert park for eight years through its unprecedented growth, Smith earned his doctorate in forestry at UC Berkeley, where coursework included one brief mention of Joshua trees as a wartime source of paper fiber.



Joshua Tree National Park adapts to a growing number of visitors

Joshua Tree National Park Superintendent David Smith talks about dealing with an increasing number of visitors.

JAY CALDERON, PALM SPRINGS DESERT SUN

He'd camped at the park's Jumbled Rocks as a San Diego boy, though, and was smitten on a climbing trip in high school. He met his husband in college, and on a four-month camping trip across the country, "we discovered park rangers were the happiest people," he said. They both joined up, and have worked at 10 locations between them.

Smith's early park service included time as a seasonal volunteer in a castoff FEMA trailer that to this day is the defining feature of Joshua Tree's south entrance. But he's got plans

for that gateway to the park and a lot more — if he can find the funds.

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You know, I spent the week after Christmas restocking toilet paper. I will say we really do struggle with some of our operations. Because we want to serve the American people the best we can.

Joshua Tree National Park Superintendent David Smith

On a day-to-day basis, Smith's job entails everything from overseeing construction crews to working with local tribes and rock climbers to protect sacred sites to pitching in on maintaining 94 toilets at 520 far-flung campsites when necessary.

“You know, I spent the week after Christmas restocking toilet paper,” he said. “I will say we really do struggle with some of our operations. Because we want to serve the American people the best we can.”

Smith's overriding mission — often repeated like a mantra in the course of a busy weekday — is taken straight from the 1916 act of Congress that created national parks: to provide for Americans' enjoyment of their public lands “in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

In other words, give the people what they want now, while ensuring the scenery, wildlife and wide-open spaces will still be here for centuries to come. Climate change, drought, wildfires and species loss are all concerns, Smith says, along with the fumes from backed-up cars and rock climbers "loving the land to death."



Legend has it that Mormon immigrants who'd made it across the mighty Colorado River in the mid-1800s named the iconic Joshua trees after the biblical figure Joshua, seeing the trees' limbs as outstretched in supplication, guiding them westward.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Joshua Tree is not alone in enjoying and enduring explosive visitor growth. Last month, the National Park Service released visitation figures showing a whopping 297 million visitors saw a federally protected national park, monument, seashore or scenic parkway in 2021. While overall numbers are still slightly below pre-pandemic levels, visitation soared to new records at Joshua Tree and 25 other popular destinations.

Meanwhile, staff shortages grew at alarming rates at many sites in the past decade, according to the National Parks Conservation Association. At Denali National Park in Alaska, between 2011 and 2019, visitation increased by 59%, but staffing levels dropped by 11%. At the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, between 2011 and 2019, visitation increased by 11%, but staffing levels dropped by 27%.

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It's terrible, all the crowds, and it's kind of wonderful in a way.

Retired U.S. Interior Solicitor General John Leshy

At Joshua Tree, four staffers out of 138 quit rather than get federally mandated COVID-19 vaccines. But visitors keep on coming, circling full parking lots for empty spaces even on a Monday.

“It’s terrible, all the crowds, and it’s kind of wonderful in a way,” said John Leshy, a retired U.S. Interior Solicitor General who recently published “Our Common Ground,” a history of American public lands. He said while the throngs can damage habitat and blot out the very escape many visitors seek, busier parks are becoming more expert in crowd and traffic dispersion.

He cited Bryce Canyon National Park’s visitor shuttles as a good example. In addition, after years of being starved of funds by Congress and several presidents, the National Park Service won critical funds in federal legislation last year. More than \$6.5 billion was allocated over five years to priority projects in the agency's nearly \$12 billion backlog of needed repair work.



People wait in line Jan. 24, 2022, to get into Joshua Tree National Park's west entrance. While winter and spring are the most popular times to visit the park, there's been a surge in visitors even in July, when temperatures hit triple digits.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

The service's total 2022 budget is \$3.1 billion, with 86% for operating costs. While Joshua Tree's annual operating budget is about \$6.5 million, it has \$60 million worth of maintenance backlog projects, Smith said.

This year, nine national park sites have announced a reservation will be required to see iconic sights. Want to drive Cadillac Summit Road in Acadia National Park in Maine, or explore Arches National Park in Utah? You'll need a reservation for timed entries during busy months. Yosemite National Park and Muir Woods National Monument in California will also again require reservations.



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You know, life is hard. And being in a place like Joshua Tree is a good reflection of what life is like. And yet things are able to thrive in a really harsh environment. ... Life holds on and it thrives here. It for me is a good example of what I want out of life.

Joshua Tree National Park Superintendent David Smith

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At Joshua Tree, Smith is keeping a close eye on what other parks are doing, but for now is holding off on an entry reservation system. Reservations were instituted for two popular campgrounds years ago. While there were issues at first, they've largely been ironed out.

It's no mystery to him why people fall in love with the park's harsh, heat-blasted landscapes.

"You know, life is hard," he said. "And being in a place like Joshua Tree is a good reflection of what life is like. And yet things are able to thrive in a really harsh environment. So a place where it can be, at the lowest depths of this park, 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and places where we can have two feet of snow at the higher elevations, life holds on and it thrives here. It for me is a good example of what I want out of life."

"So I think a lot of Americans and people from around the globe come here and they're like, 'Wow, how is it possible that you can have all this beauty and all this light in such an austere location?'"

His French relatives are amazed when they visit, he said, as are Germans, Japanese, Chinese and other international visitors. "They come here for the peace. And just to see the beauty of the desert."

The new normal

On a typical "new normal" day in the park, as Smith ferries a reporter and photographer around, he quietly tracks via the emergency radio on his hip the progress of state troopers and his law enforcement crew as they try to locate a visitor possibly stranded on Pinto Mountain.

There are two movie shoots underway at permitted locations, and dozens of rock climbers are clambering up and over and down Jumbo Rocks and Wonderland of Rocks. Tourists from Japan, Alaska, Florida, Arizona and elsewhere fill the parking lots and campgrounds.

But for long stretches, not another soul is visible, except for an antelope squirrel that pokes its head up as Smith drives by. Ancient rock formations lurch skyward and at higher elevations, healthy stands of Joshua Trees — the iconic, gangly-armed plants for which the park is named — dot rolling hills.

Legend has it that Mormon immigrants who'd made it across the mighty Colorado River in the mid-1800s named the trees after the biblical figure Joshua, seeing the trees' limbs as outstretched in supplication, guiding them westward.

Up to 40% of visitors make a day trip from the nearby Palm Springs area. Nearly 20% are rock climbers, including many fresh out of city climbing walls with little outdoors experience.



A long line of cars waits to get into Joshua Tree National Park on Jan. 14, 2022. Up to 40% of visitors make a day trip from the nearby Palm Springs area.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Over the past decade, L.A.-area hipsters eager for the perfect Instagram shot have flooded the park and nearby communities such as Yucca Valley and Twentynine Palms, strung along Route 62.

Smith welcomes them all.

"Our parents were doing it back in the '60s and '70s. Jesus was doing it, you know, 2,000 years ago. People have been coming out to the desert since the beginning of time, for whatever reason. So as to our good friends from L.A., they're doing what people want to do."



A coyote prowls the grounds just outside of Joshua Tree National Park's west entrance Jan. 14, 2022.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Daybreak with coyotes

Smith tells his busy staff it's important to get out in the park and enjoy it, and he practices what he preaches. He begins most days with a 5 a.m. run up a favorite trail. A pack of coyotes typically greets him with their trademark yipping howls or side-angled trot.

"It's great to see how campers are doing and also if there were any problems in that section of the park from the night before," he said.

He enjoys the sunrise, and by 6:30 a.m. he's taking his daughter to school, then heads to his modest office near the Twentynine Palms entrance. This morning, he joins an hourlong call about possibly installing a regulation-sized bike lane along a popular park roadway. He scribbles notes and attaches Post-Its to a big wall calendar, tracking fatalities, injuries, park management plans and construction milestones.

As he shuttles across the park's vast open spaces, he pops his crisp "Smoky" hat on and off repeatedly, seeming to draw fresh energy from visitors' enthusiasm as he goes.



Kayla and Joshua Ottwell have their photo taken Jan. 24, 2022, with their twin daughters Selah and Serah by their daughter Katherine at the Twin Tanks trail marker sign at Joshua Tree National Park. "It's a positive that people are visiting our parks in record numbers," he said.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Joshua and Kayla Ottwell of San Diego are on their first visit to the park. They're lucky to find a spot at the White Tank campground parking lot on a Monday. They're holding their twin 3-month-old girls and are headed to Twin Tanks. Heeding advice on the park's website, they chose to come early in the week.

"Here's some good advice: 'don't die today!'" says Joshua Ottwell, reading the instructions about exposure, heat and adequate supplies.

"You've got lots of water, right?" Smith says cheerfully as he bends down to ask their 10-year-old daughter, Katherine, about her new sisters. When she hesitates, he tells her his son hated how his daughter cried when she was a baby, and she perks up.

After a long but fruitful day, Smith will try to be home for dinner with his husband and two kids by 6 p.m., often lugging his laptop to finish personal replies to visitors who have emailed him.

Ambitious plans for new facilities

A large project on the drawing boards is building a new west entrance half a mile inside the park, and erecting four kiosks for visitors to buy entrance passes. Construction is expected to begin this fall. It can't happen fast enough for immediate neighbors.

"I try not to get discouraged if we find people camping in our driveway," said Donette Swain, who has lived here for decades. "And my daughter's had to move people out of the way to get into her driveway. Oh my god, it's been grim sometimes."

She described a recent visit to her daughter's home where a group of people parked out front and began walking around the yard. "She's like, 'This is my house and they're like, 'well, we'll leave in a minute.' Finally, the woman said, 'Well if you didn't want us to be here, you should've put a fence around it.'"

Smith knows what the neighbors endure, and pushed to get the project funded by park headquarters officials in Washington, D.C.



Visitors look around and use the facilities Jan. 24, 2022, at the Intersection Rock parking lot in Joshua Tree National Park. A large project on the drawing boards is building a new west entrance half a mile inside the park, and erecting four kiosks for visitors to buy entrance passes.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

It's one of several initiatives underway in the area. The Project Phoenix complex, funded by a combination of federal, state and local sources, is due to open in May in downtown Twentynine Palms to serve as a hub for both the community and out-of-town visitors. The development includes a large community center with a gymnasium, and a new Joshua Tree

National Park Cultural and Visitor Center, where Native American artifacts and artwork long stored in park archives can be prominently displayed. It will also have an outdoor plaza with a stage and a three-block-long Paseo serving businesses along Route 62. Information areas will highlight other outdoor recreation areas that visitors can explore when the national park is busy.

Another \$10 million is needed to upgrade a former private campground known as Jellystone Park that is now part of Joshua Tree, Smith said. When it does rain, many of its sites are so poorly designed that they flood.

And he is aiming for a new mid-century modern style visitors' center to replace that old FEMA trailer at the southern Cottonwood entrance. Smith noted that a million visitors a year, many of them in RVs, now use that portal. Decent restrooms, ample visitors' information and other necessities are all planned if funds can be obtained.

A research center where students and professors can stay and work has already been opened at the park's edge thanks to a 2017 bequest from Susan Luckie Reilly, who left her home and \$300,000 to the park when she died at age 101.



David Smith is aiming for a new mid-century modern style visitors' center to replace that old FEMA trailer at the southern Cottonwood entrance.

JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

At White Tank, Smith points out where they'll likely expand the parking lot by 100 feet, cutting into raw land. No decision is made lightly in a national park, but the area is already heavily trampled with footprints of visitors who took a shortcut to the trailhead.

Elsewhere, pesticides are also used in limited quantities to clear flammable, nonnative grasses. The cheat grass and red brome, brought in on the hooves of cattle decades ago, now thrive on smoggy air filled with nitrogen that drifts to this corner of the park from greater Los Angeles. Joshua trees are already dying at lower elevations as temperatures creep ever higher due to climate change. Recent wildfires have exacerbated their woes, as the trees are not adapted to survive blazes the way chaparral species are.

As part of a widely discussed [rock climbing management plan](#), officials are also weighing allowing power drills into designated wilderness areas for faster, less damaging removal of rusted climbing bolts. Sometimes, 21st-century measures are needed to maintain future enjoyment of ancient open spaces.

Like many national parks, Joshua Tree has nonprofit fundraising, search and rescue and other community-led volunteer efforts. The Joshua Tree National Park Association and Friends of Joshua Tree National Park both play important roles, said Smith, with the latter advocating for rock climbers. The park also has volunteer camp hosts who spend months in a single campground, orienting new visitors, making sure quiet hours really are quiet and otherwise keeping park life flowing smoothly.

"They tell people it's time to put away the bongo drums and go to sleep ... so we don't have to call out law enforcement," said Smith. "They're saints."

Those familiar with his work had kind words for Smith, too.

"He's got an incredible amount of responsibility," said Daniel Brenner, who moved in 2017 to a quiet Joshua Tree side street that backs up to the national park. "As you know, the park attendance numbers continue to increase."

Brenner, who is volunteer liaison between park staff and the Monument Manor Neighborhood Association, said of Smith: "The guy's super proactive, and he's got a great team that works with him. And he does listen to our concerns. He's there to help us, so I always sing his praises."

Brenner added, "He is a talker. But he also executes."

Asked if he ever feels overwhelmed, Smith thought for a minute, then said: "Not really. I've got really good people on staff, and we work as hard as we can. Luckily at the end of the day, I sleep really well."

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