

Destination

How Do 55 National


U.S. and Canadian national parks today face modern pressures inside and outside their borders—pollution, budget cuts, development, soaring visitation, ecological decline. TRAVELER's expert panelists grade the condition of park destinations, including the gateway towns you visit on the way in and out. Some parks do better than others. One country does better than the other.

By Jonathan B. Tourtellot



Scorecard

Park Regions Rate? Read On.

A white four-wheeler is shown driving off a large, reddish-brown rock ledge. A large crowd of people is gathered around the vehicle, watching the stunt. The background features a desert landscape with more rock formations and mountains in the distance under a clear blue sky.

Fragile desert surfaces near Utah's Arches and Canyonlands National Parks take a pounding from high-intensity activities such as this four-wheeler contest. The area missed getting a high score due to off-road abuses in the desert and off-putting development in Moab, the gateway town. Heating up in a cool climate (left), a visitor soaks in a hot spring in top-scoring Gwaii Haanas National Park, British Columbia.

The List

Park scores on the Stewardship Index range from a near-pristine 88 in British Columbia to a near-death 34 in Florida.

IF YOU VISIT A NATIONAL PARK, you'll often spend plenty of time just outside the park, too—eating, sleeping, parking, shopping, sightseeing—in the town or region that geographers call the gateway. A park and its gateway are really a single destination, with similar history, scenery, and climate. The way park and gateway interact can make all the difference in the quality of your trip and in the sustainability of the destination. • Using the same Stewardship Index pioneered in last year's global Destination Scorecard (March 2004), TRAVELER and National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations surveyed some 300 experts in sustainable tourism, destination quality, and park management. We asked them to evaluate 55 North American park destinations, chosen in part for the importance of their gateways (see survey details page 86). • The scores that follow, listed by rank and based on a 1-to-100 scale, reflect the experts' opinions. No destination rated 90 or above ("unspoiled and likely to remain so"), but one came close. Top-scoring destinations face relatively few threats or, significantly, are learning to handle them. While no place fell into the "catastrophic" under-20 range, troubles go deep for the bottom scorers, with wounds that may verge on permanent. Even so, every destination, even last-place Everglades/Big Cypress, still retains much of what made it park-worthy. • We hope this index will spark discussion and debate. Each park destination below includes sample panelist comments that reflect the opinions behind the score. To ensure integrity, panelists commented anonymously. For more comments and a list of panelists, see www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

On Top

These 16 parks are virtually pristine and usually on good terms with local people.

(1) Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site

BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA (Score: 88) Gwaii Haanas might seem to rate its excellent 88 due simply to light traffic: Fewer than 3,000 visitors a year make it to the park in the soggy, remote Queen Charlotte Islands. But there's more: a unique partnership between Parks Canada and the native Haida people. "High cultural integrity," says one panelist. "Haida are very involved in park management. Residents display a real stewardship ethic." Authenticity, too: "Archaeological and historic artifacts are left to their natural processes as per Haida tradition, which surprises visitors who expect 'preservation.'" "Beautiful and intact. A great model for other regions."

(2) Apostle Islands National Lakeshore
WISCONSIN (Score: 78) Light tourism traffic and long Lake Superior winters help keep the Apostles healthy. "In good shape ecologically. Not over visited." "No man-made lights visible. Bayfield is a most delightful gateway community, providing authentic Great Lakes atmosphere."

Cape Breton Highlands National Park
NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA (Score: 78) Cape Breton Island retains its charm despite

changing demographics. "Spectacular coastline, villages seem authentic, and the area is fairly unspoiled." "Tourism is built on the Celtic and French heritage of the island." "The park's Audubon-certified golf course is a model for collaborative action between conservation and recreation."

Gros Morne National Park


NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA (Score: 78) The geological, scenic landscape of Gros Morne receives praise, despite grazing problems with nonnative moose. "I've never felt more welcome anywhere in North America." "A model of the collaborative actions of local communities and park management."

(3) Great Basin National Park

NEVADA (Score: 77) Wheeler Peak rises from the remote east Nevada desert here, a region uncrowded, unspoiled, and able to mitigate such threats as grazing and advancing



A backcountry visitor surveys highly ranked Yoho National Park, British Columbia. "Great for hiking and wildlife viewing," says a panelist who used to work there. Still, he adds, Yoho and Kootenay need buffer zones to protect wildlife.



“The Apostles
are one of my
favorite places
on Earth, in
the summer.
You can still
have an island
almost to
yourself for
short periods
of time.”

—Ronald Hiebert, Ph.D.,
plant ecologist, Northern
Arizona University

A kayaker plies Superior waters in northern Wisconsin's Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, tied for second place at a score of 78. Points out one reviewer, "The Apostle Islands are limited to small watercraft travel, keeping them pristine."

“The grand hotel stands over Waterton like the prince of the forest, and I think it adds to the dramatic scenery.”

—Brenda Barrett,
Heritage Area Coordinator,
U.S. National Park Service

Human and natural aesthetics ally where the Prince of Wales Hotel overlooks Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta. “An incredibly beautiful park”—words echoed by other panelists—“with relatively good tourism infrastructure in keeping with the park surroundings.”

development. "Tourism is sustainable." "Camping at 10,000 feet is fantastic; the bristlecone pine forests are worth the hike."

Kootenay/Yoho National Parks

BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA (Score: 77) On B.C.'s side of the Rockies, "development and transportation corridor problems are not as intense" as in neighboring Banff (55). The mountains dominate Yoho, the forests Kootenay. As for gateways, "Invermere or Golden support a pleasant stay in the area."

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve

ALASKA (Score: 77) "One of the magnificent mountain wilderness parks in the world!" "The Kennicott mine and town are an amazing national historic treasure and deserve preservation." Other panelists agree, but raise new issues: Bus tours from cruise boats overlook native Ahtna peoples, and "recreational ATV riding is permitted on 13 trails; it's a mud-boggin' mess."

(4) Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

HAWAII (Score: 75) The Big Island boasts the survey's highest-scoring subtropical park. "Given its location on an island where tourism reigns supreme, the park's unspoiled quality is remarkable." Invasive species and coastal development threats are the only concerns. "Gateway area is fine."

(5) Chaco Culture National Historical Park

NEW MEXICO (Score: 72) The long, unpaved access road pleased panelists by keeping this archaeologically rich site untrampled. "Its remote location means Chaco Canyon remains a relatively genuine experience. It is still possible to envision the Anasazi life and find quiet moments of solitude." Caveat: "Nearby town is incredibly littered."

Crater Lake National Park

OREGON (Score: 72) "A hidden gem. Surrounding region appropriately developed." In summer, crowds do swamp the lodge site on the old volcano's rim, but otherwise,



A cruise ship bulks over Skagway, Alaska. In such Inside Passage ports, megaships heading for Glacier Bay National Park boost the economy, but not sense of place. The park now limits them.

"Oregonians have pride in the stern stand to protect and preserve the lodge and prevent development on the rim."

Point Reyes National Seashore

CALIFORNIA (Score: 72) "An hour's drive from San Francisco takes you back in time to farming, fishing, and lighthouse life." This accessible park draws praise despite weekend crowds: "high biodiversity," "splendid exhibits," "beautiful natural vistas," and tasteful, restrained gateway towns "except recent development east of Tomales Bay."

Waterton Lakes National Park

ALBERTA, CANADA (Score: 72) Bordering Montana's Glacier National Park, Waterton rates high for nature and management. "A nice mix of front-country and backcountry opportunities. Visitor services are in harmony with the character of the park." Nearby lands, though, are threatened by subdivisions, logging, mining, and drilling.

(6) Denali National Park & Preserve

ALASKA (Score: 71) You take a shuttle bus to enter this huge, "awesome expanse of unbridled nature" centered on Mount McKinley (Denali), highest peak on the continent. "Denali does it right: forces people out of their cars to see the park and view wildlife in its natural setting." Panelists praise the natural attractions, not the human ones. The visitor center "resembles Grand Central Station." Gateway towns are "sprawling, unplanned, unattractive, and unsafe."

Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve

ALASKA (Score: 71) This "unspoiled paradise" has now limited cruise ships. Park land "is ecologically intact since most use is water-based." But "the native Tlingit story of 9,000 years of adaptation is not being told."

» Why Canada?

OF THESE 55 PARKS, only ten are Canadian, but eight of them score above average. Sixty percent make it into the top quarter of the scoring range, versus a paltry 22 percent for the U.S. What's going on?

Obviously it helps to be northern. Parks with short seasons suffer less tourist trampling. All four surveyed Alaska parks did well, too. But there's more to it. By law, Parks Canada must first protect the environment, whereas Congress demands the U.S. National Park Service protect nature while also promoting outdoor recreation, dual mandates that can conflict when too many park-lovers show up.

Last, says one U.S. panelist, "Canadians in general take their government's role in preserving parks more seriously." In short, they'll spend more money. "U.S. parks are now forced to be more self-sufficient," agrees a U.S. recreation ecologist, "whereas Canada has maintained better funding." Apparently, you get what you pay for. —J.B.T.



"Vast, wide-open vistas" invite an adventurer into Jasper National Park, Alberta, described as "ecologically sound" and "greatest" of the Canadian Rocky Mountain parks.

Jasper National Park

ALBERTA, CANADA (Score: 71) “Wide-open vistas, with sweeping landscapes” characterize the biggest of the Canadian Rockies parks—“a gorgeous treasure.” “The town is authentic, tourist-tack at a minimum.” Panelists differ on the park’s ecological health. Several criticize Alberta’s forestry, drilling, and mining activities next door.

(7) Kenai Fjords National Park

ALASKA (Score: 70) Visit by water: “an incredible place to see marine wildlife and seabirds.” The gateway town, Seward, “has embraced the park.” But: “Cruise traffic needs to be checked.”

Still Doing OK

These 23 parks cope with a few challenges, some of them in gateway areas.

(8) Big Bend National Park

TEXAS (Score: 69) Far from almost everywhere, Big Bend suffers from both U.S. and Mexican air pollution as well as sharply lower levels in the Rio Grande. Otherwise, a winner: “Not overused by hordes of visitors. The most natural park I’ve visited.” “Authentic, unspoiled.” “The gateways of Terlingua and Lajitas tend toward a Western movie set, but not excessively.”

Olympic National Park

WASHINGTON (Score: 69) Soggy but wonderful, a “beautiful park with a less than beautiful gateway.” Panelists like the park but disagree about nearby logging. “Gateway towns are laid-back; Forks once claimed to be the ‘Logging Capital of the World.’”

Theodore Roosevelt National Park

NORTH DAKOTA (Score: 69) “If you like big skies, prairie, wildlife, and a feel for the Old

West, this site is worth the drive.” Medora, the gateway town, is not conducive to a “contemplative visit,” but “its Pitchfork Fonderue and Medora Musical is an experience.”

(9) Fundy National Park

NEW BRUNSWICK, CANADA (Score: 68) This “beautiful little park” on the tide-famous Bay of Fundy earns praise for aesthetics, few crowds, and “a strong program of ecological restoration to bring back American martens and peregrine falcons” despite disruptive logging on the border.

Redwood National and State Parks

CALIFORNIA (Score: 68) “Sleepy, foggy fishing villages, bays, and coves; remote, unspoiled, charming, and attractive.” “The magnificence of the redwoods is unparalleled, but logging and now tourism have created a degraded mosaic of landscapes.”

Zion National Park

UTAH (Score: 68) “The lodge is beautiful and the canyon spectacular.” Most panelists concurred but split on Zion’s gateway region, precluding a top score. The park’s relationship with the adjacent town of Springdale received much praise—“outstanding example of a gateway that tries to be part of the park experience”—as did the free propane shuttle buses into the park. But a minority disagreed. One called Springdale “horrible.” Combine that with the bus ride and the experience can “feel more like Disneyland than a national park.”

(10) Death Valley National Park

CALIFORNIA (Score: 67) “One of the most dramatic places in America.” Reviewers deemed the ecology sound but at risk from soaring Las Vegas-based visitation, off-road vehicles, and bright lighting near the park. “Preserving the night sky should be a priority. Looking at the stars on a clear desert night is worth the trek to Death Valley.”

(11) Antietam National Battlefield

MARYLAND (Score: 66) “An overlooked treasure!” The park gets high marks for historical interpretation, management, and sense of place. Its main problem? “Suburban encroachment is engulfing it.” Gateways seem to be fighting back, though. “Sharpsburg, Boonsboro, and Shepherdstown are special in their preservation efforts.”

Glacier National Park

MONTANA (Score: 66) Glacier draws praise for scenery, ecological integrity, and its historic open-top red buses. Needed restoration has begun for the Depression-era lodge buildings and the oft-crowded, crumbling Going-to-the-Sun Road. Typically, panelists fret about global warming: “What will Glacier be called when there are no longer any glaciers?” Also, “the area around the park needs sprucing up.”

About the Survey

VALUATING an entire destination—both park and gateway—requires weighing such subtle issues as aesthetics and cultural integrity, as well as balancing good points against bad.

Since simple numerical measures cannot do justice to the task, we turned to informed human judgment: a panel of some 300 well-traveled experts in a variety of fields—ecology, sustainable tourism, geography, park management and planning, travel writing and photography, historic preservation, indigenous cultures, archaeology.

We asked panelists to evaluate just the places with which they were familiar, using six criteria weighted according to importance: environmental and ecological quality; social and cultural integrity; condition of any historic buildings and archaeological sites; aesthetic appeal; quality of tourism management; and the outlook for the future.

Experts first aired all points of view by filing comments about each park and gateway (anonymously, to ensure objectivity). In a version of a research tool called the Delphi technique, panelists then reviewed the comments and filed their stewardship scores. For a list of panelists and more observations, see www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

The resulting Stewardship Index score, then, is an average of informed judgments about each place as a whole, taking into account its many faces. Like the cards that Olympic judges hold up, our experts’ scores incorporate both measurable accomplishment and the intangibles of style, aesthetics, and culture. And like an athlete, each destination has a chance to improve.

To help, TRAVELER, the Center for Sustainable Destinations, and the Conservation Fund have assembled an online “Community Toolkit” of resources. If you live in a gateway town or visit one often, check it out at www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable.


Simon Williams, Cassandra Cartwright, and many others helped with this study.



Ugly signage hovers over sprawling motel strips in regional gateways like St. George, Utah, in the Zion area. The park’s happier fit with adjacent Springdale keeps its score a high “OK.”

“One of the
greatest jewels
of the Pacific
Northwest...
threatened by
the large
amount of
logging that
occurs on
nearby lands.”

—Ronald Nickerson, Ph.D.
recreation faculty,
Minnesota State University

A photograph of a beach at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and blue. The ocean has white-capped waves breaking onto a dark, pebbly shore. Large, bleached pieces of driftwood are scattered across the beach. In the foreground, three people are sitting on a large log, looking out at the sea. Other people are visible further down the beach. A bird is flying in the sky. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

Driftwood provides a
front-row seat for sun-
set at Rialto Beach in
Olympic National Park,
Washington. Part
coast, part mountain
rain forest, the park
itself gets good marks,
but its surroundings
earn mixed reviews.

(12) Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

COLORADO (Score: 65) Vistas let you “see simultaneously the snowcapped Colorado peaks and hot deserts below” in this uncrowded, out-of-the-way park. “Land, air, and water unspoiled.” Well, maybe not water for long: Panelists sharply criticize federal plans to cede Gunnison River water rights for development use, damaging canyon ecology.

Bryce Canyon National Park

UTAH (Score: 65) Great hiking and geology in the park—“still a magical fairyland”—but several reviewers dislike tacky gateway towns: “junky, overstressed, and unappealing for many miles.” Others cite a park/locals disconnect, with tourism jobs few and jobholders “not very concerned about park environment.”

North Cascades National Park

WASHINGTON (Score: 65) This lightly visited park “needs a better trail network.” Scenery and wildlife look fine, but “the quality of some gateway settlements was disturbing. I have memories of concrete.”

Pacific Rim National Park Reserve

BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA (Score: 65) A “stunning, wild, and beautiful” but fragmented park scattered along the edge of Vancouver Island, Pacific Rim seeks cultural integrity in part by employing staff from local native communities. Challenges include rising visitation and new development, plus clear-cut logging areas nearby.



Solitude reigns on Cumberland Island National Seashore, Georgia. Limited access prevents crowding but alienates gateway families.

(13) Acadia National Park

MAINE (Score: 64) Coastal beauty and helpful local groups vie with summer crowding and tacky commerce in the otherwise attractive gateway of Bar Harbor. Adds a local panelist: “The increase in PFAs (People From Away) is eroding social integrity”—lobstermen can’t afford to live on the coast.

Petrified Forest National Park

ARIZONA (Score: 64) In an exemplary effort, locals and the Park Service cooperated to more than double the size of this fairly healthy park. The biggest problem, despite Herculean efforts by park staff, “continues to be theft of petrified wood.”

(14) Joshua Tree National Park

CALIFORNIA (Score: 63) “I found peace at Joshua Tree.” “Truly undiscovered backcountry.” The park’s popularity with rock climbers draws mixed reviews, and panelists criticize smog from L.A., growing weekend crowds, and new houses and plans for a huge landfill next door.

Mesa Verde National Park

COLORADO (Score: 63) Panelists disagree on Mesa Verde’s condition, from “well-managed” and “marvelous interpretive walks” to “serious wildfire problems and damage; archaeological heritage in danger; reduced aesthetic appeal.” The gateway, Cortez, “has a true Western feel.”

Mount Rainier National Park

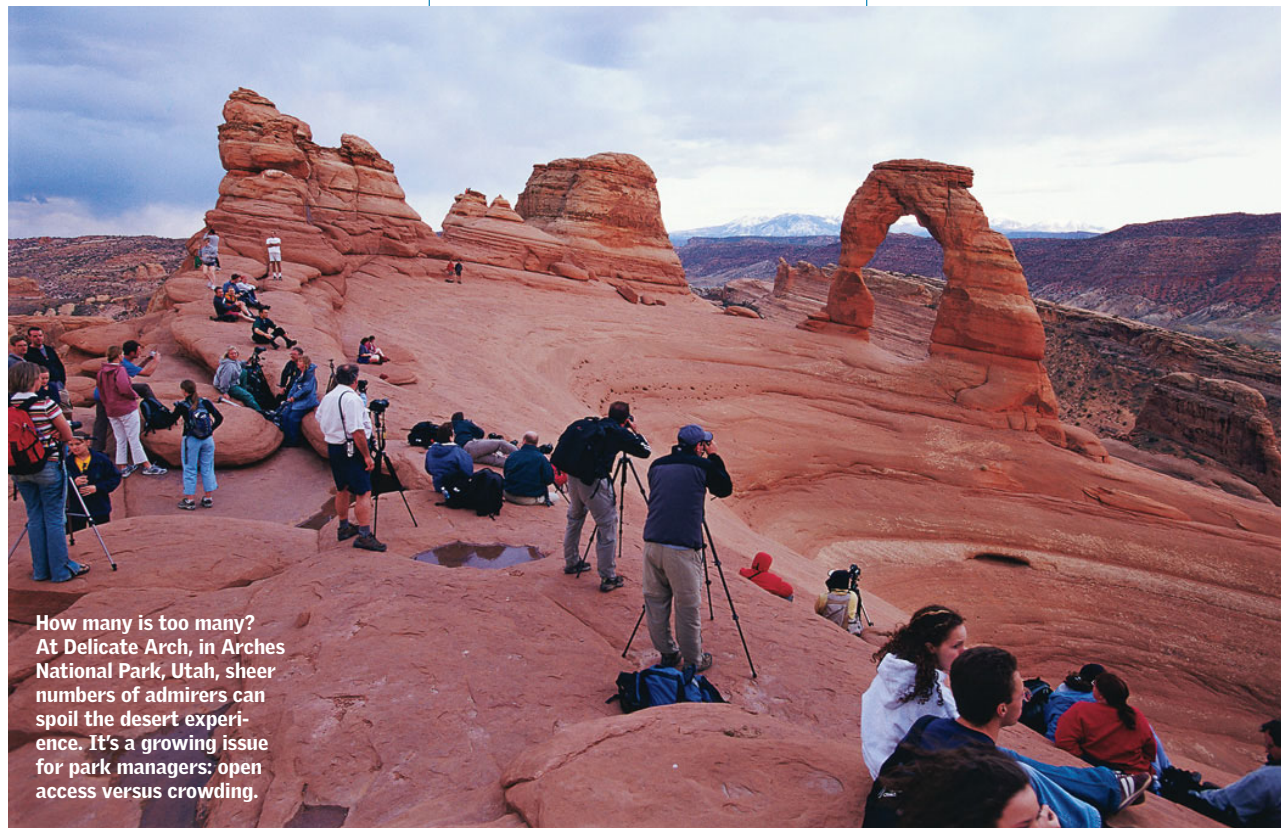
WASHINGTON (Score: 63) This “attractive, well-preserved and stewarded area” has support from local communities. Reviewer praise for the rugged park’s good ecological quality mixed with bitter remarks about traffic jams in both summer and winter.

Tallgrass Prairie National Park

KANSAS (Score: 63) “The interpretation of what the tallgrass prairie once was will stagger the imagination—a great stop for cross-country drivers.” Too small to portray the vastness it represents, the park drew panelist calls for “more of everything.”

(15) Arches & Canyonlands National Parks

UTAH (Score: 62) These “well-managed” desert parks are “among the most beautiful



How many is too many? At Delicate Arch, in Arches National Park, Utah, sheer numbers of admirers can spoil the desert experience. It's a growing issue for park managers: open access versus crowding.

RYAN MUND GEMMAN (UPPER); BOB KRIST (LOWER)

destinations in the world and the most challenged,” with Arches the more crowded by far. The gateway to both parks, Moab, “has gone through a tremendous metamorphosis” from mining town to recreation center, complete with worrisome off-road sports.

Cumberland Island National Seashore
GEORGIA (Score: 62) On this barrier island, “the gloomy ruins of wealth and grandeur couple with incredible beaches.” Debate swirls over whether to maintain the historic but decaying plantation houses. The boat to the park leaves from St. Marys, “still an authentic little fishing town with shrimp boats.”

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks
CALIFORNIA (Score: 62) “Natural resources that rival or surpass Yosemite—magnificent forests, wild rivers, the High Sierra.” Care-taking inside the parks has improved. Gateways, however, get mixed reviews. Crowds and severe smog hurt the score.

(16) Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore
MICHIGAN (Score: 60) The majestic dunes on Lake Michigan are “getting more crowded every summer.” “Environmental quality has improved, but there appears to be no end to the demand for second homes, retirement communities, and vacation estates.” Still, local towns were thought to fit in well and to be supportive of the park.

Facing Trouble

Major problems confront 13 parks; often it's unsuitable gateway development.

(17) Colonial National Historical Park (Yorktown/Jamestown)
VIRGINIA (Score: 59) The two historic sites linked by a parkway are deemed authentic and appealing, but not so the neighborhood. “The surrounding gateway areas are becoming overcommercialized in a way that does not enhance the region's sense of place. Too many chains are degrading the experience.”

(18) Mammoth Cave National Park
KENTUCKY (Score: 58) “Heavily used, well-managed” sums up sentiment on Mammoth, where guided tours thwart widespread visitor damage. “Gateway communities have retained their small-town appeal,” but local culture suffers from “trinketization.” Chemicals in polluted water erode the formations.

(19) Rocky Mountain National Park
COLORADO (Score: 56). “Deep blue glacial lakes and majestic mountain views” in a “totally overstressed” park. “Traffic, condo developments, and noise around the sappy, touristy town of Estes Park lessen appeal.”

Yosemite National Park
CALIFORNIA (Score: 56) Backcountry areas get high marks, but Yosemite Valley reels under enormous popularity: “still breathtaking,



Rated Park Destinations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acadia NP, ME Antietam National Battlefield, MD Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, WI Arches & Canyonlands NPs, UT Banff NP, AB Big Bend NP, TX Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP, CO Bryce Canyon NP, UT Cape Breton Highlands NP, NS Cape Hatteras National Seashore, NC Carlsbad Caverns NP, NM Chaco Culture National Historical Park, NM Colonial National Historical Park, VA Crater Lake NP, OR Cumberland Island Nat. Seashore, GA Death Valley NP, CA Denali NP & Preserve, AK Everglades NP/Big Cypress, FL Fundly NP, NB Gettysburg National Military Park, PA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Glacier Bay NP & Preserve, AK Glacier NP, MT Grand Canyon NP, AZ Great Basin NP, NV Great Smoky Mountains NP, NC, TN Gros Morne NP, NL Gwaii Haanas NP & Haida Heritage Site, BC Hawaii Volcanoes NP, HI Hot Springs NP, AR Jasper NP, AB Joshua Tree NP, CA Kenai Fjords NP, AK Kootenay/Yoho NPs, BC Mammoth Cave NP, KY Mesa Verde NP, CO Mount Rainier NP, WA Mount Rushmore/Badlands NPs, SD North Cascades NP, WA Olympic NP, WA Pacific Rim NP Reserve, BC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Petrified Forest NP, AZ Point Pelee NP, ON Point Reyes National Seashore, CA Redwood National & State Parks, CA Rocky Mountain NP, CO Sequoia & Kings Canyon NPs, CA Shenandoah NP, VA Sleeping Bear Dunes Nat. Lakeshore, MI Tallgrass Prairie NP, KS Theodore Roosevelt NP, ND Watkins Glen NP, NY Wrangell-St. Elias NP & Preserve, AK Yellowstone/Grand Teton NPs, WY Yosemite NP, CA Zion NP, UT
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KEY
 On Top
 Still OK
 Facing Trouble
 The Bottom

but visitor crowds produce an urban feeling.” Corrective park plans bog down in local “political gridlock.” Though tourism is big in the gateway region, the industry grows “without any connection to the park.”

(20) Banff National Park
ALBERTA, CANADA (Score: 55) Canada's oldest, most popular park still retains wonderful beauty and backcountry, but a park-piercing transportation corridor disrupts mammal migrations, facilitates crowding, and spurs gateway growth. Probably no Canadian park is more studied and debated: “Beautiful, ecologically resilient, and facing extreme challenges, which do seem to drive innovative efforts towards sustainability.”

Hot Springs National Park
ARKANSAS (Score: 55) “This urban park preserves the tradition of ‘taking the waters.’ Bathhouse Row is an architectural wonder”—which needs “millions more for renovation.” The town's historic district is compatible, but not sprawl on the fringe.

(21) Mount Rushmore National Memorial/Badlands National Park
SOUTH DAKOTA (Score: 54) “Two different experiences. Badlands is relatively remote and unspoiled; Rushmore is like a shopping mall.” Rushmore can still stir the patriotic blood, but gateways are “cheesy and sprawling” and relations with the Lakota Sioux, who claim part of Badlands, are “edgy.”



Herds of two kinds meet in Yellowstone National Park, where a snowmobile controversy sends a low rating even lower. A quieter mingling of species on the Fairmont Banff Springs golf course (below) belies Banff's ongoing struggle to cope with four million visitors a year.

(22) Carlsbad Caverns National Park

NEW MEXICO (Score: 53) Panelists split on Carlsbad's tourist sections, from "good visitor control and education" to "significant formation damage" and "a case study in placing visitor use above sustainability. Shameful." Above ground, the park draws praise, the gateways criticism—"glitzy tourist attractions unsuited to the landscape."



Grand Canyon National Park

ARIZONA (Score: 53) At this "geological wonder of the world," South Rim throngs dominate the visitor experience. "The chances of finding a peaceful South Rim sunset spot are equal to winning at a Vegas casino." Many panelists also take points off for incoming air pollution, noisy overflights, too many cars generally, the failure to bring in trolleys instead, and disrupted water levels in the Colorado River. The Tusayan gateway is "filling up with fast-food and hotel chains with no sense of place."

Point Pelee National Park

ONTARIO, CANADA (Score: 53) "Heavily impacted by the feet of birders" and ecologically isolated between farmland and Lake Erie,

tiny, stressed Point Pelee's birding fame has made bird habitats regionally popular, as in the lauded gateway town of Leamington.

(23) Gettysburg National Military Park

PENNSYLVANIA (Score: 51) The consensus on notoriously tacky Gettysburg? It's getting better. "Taking down the observation tower and curtailing the most obnoxious elements in the encroaching phalanx of fast-food establishments represents a victory." Park management is improving, and the historic downtown thriving, but so is adjacent sprawl and "a dense corridor of wax museums, T-shirt shops, and chain eateries."

Yellowstone/Grand Teton National Parks

IDAHO, MONTANA, WYOMING (Score: 51) "Yellowstone, our oldest national park, faces some of the most serious threats—water quality, erosion, overuse, wildlife issues. The local community is informed and supportive" except perhaps for the controversial snowmobile proponents, lambasted by many panelists, with a minority mildly dissenting. "Teton is in better shape than Yellowstone, but both are overrun" except for Yellowstone's big backcountry.

(24) Cape Hatteras National Seashore

NORTH CAROLINA (Score: 50) The nation's grandest stretch of barrier island beach is "obscenely overdeveloped" north of the National Seashore. "This place doesn't have the same family feel that it used to have." At the south end, Ocracoke still draws praise.

Rock Bottom

Destructive external pressures and major internal difficulties afflict three parks.

(25) Shenandoah National Park

VIRGINIA (Score: 48) Best of the beset by far, Shenandoah needs a buffer zone to protect its famous vistas from more residential sprawl. Haze, invasive species, and plant diseases add to its troubles. Several panelists agree on the secret to a visit: "Hordes drive along Skyline Drive and see each other's bumpers, but a back dirt road can take you to miles of hiking without a soul in sight." Gateway town centers retain some charm.

(26) Great Smoky Mountains National Park

NORTH CAROLINA, TENNESSEE (Score: 40) Terrible traffic, vista-choking haze, invasive species, and crowded trails number among the problems facing the beloved Great Smokies, a treasure house of biodiversity. Topping all negatives are the "horrible," "appalling," "distasteful" gateways of Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Cherokee: "theme parks, outlets, and billboards." Federal policy hasn't helped, either: "Kicking people off 6,600 tracts of land to create the park has led to huge cultural problems."

(27) Everglades National Park/Big Cypress National Preserve

FLORIDA (Score: 34) "Clearly a paradise in jeopardy," the Everglades is dying of thirst and other maladies. Upstream demand for water by the sugar industry and growing cities has slowed a much-heralded restoration program to a crawl. Promised federal funding has not been forthcoming. The national park is not over-visited, but off-road vehicles have scarred Big Cypress. "A culture of big swamp buggies, high-speed watercraft, and airboats does little to preserve the more fragile areas." Birding is still good, if only a shadow of what it used to be. "Rapid development on all sides has created an unpleasant, unattractive gateway to one of the planet's unique places."



Minor among local off-road excesses, a swamp buggy provides a raised look at any Everglades wildlife it doesn't scare off.

MICHAEL MELFORD (UPPER), RAYMOND GEMMAN (CAN LEFT), PATRICK WARD/GORBIS (LEFT)