The Erosion of the Public Trust: An Exhaustive Analysis of National Park Service Policy Shifts, Fiscal Restructuring, and Operational Integrity (2025–2026)

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Date: January 14, 2026

Executive Summary

The period spanning January 2025 to January 2026 has marked a paradigmatic shift in the management, funding, and cultural philosophy of the United States National Park Service (NPS) and the broader portfolio of federal public lands. Under the second administration of President Donald J. Trump, the Department of the Interior (DOI) has implemented a suite of policies characterized by an aggressive "America First" doctrine applied to conservation management. These changes include a radical restructuring of the fee schedules for international visitors, a symbolic overhaul of the annual "America the Beautiful" pass, the re-designation of fee-free days to emphasize patriotic observance over civil rights milestones, and a significant contraction of the federal workforce.

This report provides a comprehensive forensic analysis of these actions, rooted in a dataset of internal DOI communications, legislative texts, economic impact reports, and legal filings. It validates reports that the administration has altered the fee-free holiday calendar to include peak summer weekends while removing Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth. It confirms the implementation of a dual-tier pricing system that levies a $100 surcharge on nonresidents at high-traffic parks and raises the nonresident annual pass cost to $250.[1] Furthermore, the investigation substantiates claims regarding the controversial redesign of the 2026 resident annual pass, which now features the countenances of President Trump and George Washington, a move that has precipitated federal litigation for potential violations of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA).[3]

Beyond the cosmetic and fiscal adjustments, the operational stability of the NPS appears to be under severe strain. Our analysis of internal DOI data confirms a 24% vacancy rate in the permanent workforce and a failure to meet seasonal hiring targets, resulting in critical service gaps ranging from closed visitor centers to unmanned lifeguard stations.[5] Concurrently, legislative efforts by Senator Mike Lee to dispose of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holdings, though temporarily stalled, signal a lingering intent to privatize the federal estate.[6]

The synthesis of these factors suggests a systematic dismantling of the traditional public lands model. The economic analysis presented herein indicates that while nominal revenues may rise due to surcharge implementation, the long-term economic damage to gateway communities, driven by the alienation of the international travel market and the congestion costs of peak-day free access, may far outweigh federal receipts. The totality of evidence points to an administration prioritizing symbolic dominance and fiscal contraction over the statutory mandate to preserve park resources "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Part I: The Fiscal Restructuring of Access

The fiscal year 2026 has commenced with the most significant alteration to the National Park Service's revenue and access model since the inception of the Fee Demo Program in 1996. The administration has bifurcated the visitor experience based on citizenship and residency, fundamentally altering the egalitarian ethos that has historically governed access to America's "best idea." This restructuring is not merely an adjustment for inflation or maintenance recovery; it represents a philosophical pivot toward treating the National Park System as a "club good" for citizens and a luxury commodity for international visitors.

1.1 The "Patriotic" Fee-Free Schedule

The administration's revision of the NPS fee-free day calendar represents a clear ideological pivot. Historically, fee-free days were utilized as a tool to distribute visitation to off-peak periods and to honor a diverse range of historical contributions to the American narrative. The 2026 schedule, however, eliminates days associated with civil rights and minority history in favor of dates centered on patriotic and military observance.

1.1.1 The Removal of Civil Rights Milestones

Effective January 1, 2026, the Department of the Interior removed Martin Luther King Jr. Day (observed in January) and Juneteenth (June 19) from the list of fee-free days.[8] These holidays were previously utilized to encourage visitation from diverse communities and to honor the struggle for civil rights within the context of American history. Their removal has been interpreted by critics and advocacy groups as a deliberate erasure of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within the federal government, consistent with the administration's broader directives to scrub such content from federal agencies.[10]

The administration has justified these changes as a "modernization" focused on "patriotic fee-free days".[9] The DOI press release explicitly framed the new calendar as reflecting a commitment to "bold, patriotic designs" and "honoring America's landscapes, heritage and outdoor legacy" through a specific nationalist lens.[1] This shift effectively declares that the commemoration of civil rights struggles is no longer considered a priority for subsidized public access to federal lands.

1.1.2 The Inclusion of Peak Season Holidays and Congestion Implications

In place of the removed holidays, the DOI has designated a new slate of fee-free days for 2026 that notably includes the busiest travel weekends of the year. The approved calendar is as follows [1]:

Date	Occasion	Previous Status
February 16	Presidents' Day	Fee-Free
May 25	Memorial Day	**New Addition**
June 14	Flag Day / President Trump’s Birthday	**New Addition**
July 3–5	Independence Day Weekend	**New Addition**
August 25	NPS Birthday	Fee-Free
September 17	Constitution Day	**New Addition**
October 27	Theodore Roosevelt’s Birthday	**New Addition**
November 11	Veterans Day	Fee-Free

The inclusion of Memorial Day and a three-day Independence Day weekend (July 3–5) marks a sharp departure from standard visitor use management principles. These dates historically represent the absolute peak of annual visitation. Waiving fees during these periods contradicts established congestion management strategies, which typically seek to incentivize off-peak travel to spread visitor load and reduce resource impact.

Industry analysis indicates that parks like Yosemite, Zion, and Acadia already face catastrophic congestion on these weekends, often necessitating shuttle reservations and timed entry systems. Removing the price barrier is projected to exacerbate overcrowding, gridlock, and resource degradation.[9] The "Zero-Price Effect," a behavioral economic theory, suggests that free access disproportionately attracts casual visitors who might otherwise be deterred by cost, thereby artificially inflating demand precisely when the supply of park capacity is at its lowest.[12] The result is likely to be a degradation of the visitor experience for all users, characterized by extended wait times and overwhelmed infrastructure.

1.1.3 Residency Restrictions on Free Entry

Crucially, the "fee-free" designation now applies exclusively to U.S. citizens and permanent residents.[10] Beginning in 2026, international visitors are required to pay standard entrance fees, plus applicable surcharges, even on designated free days.

This policy necessitates citizenship checks at entrance stations, introducing a new layer of bureaucratic friction at park gates. Reports from the first weeks of implementation in January 2026 indicate "chaos and frustrating waits," with rangers forced to adjudicate nationality in high-pressure environments.[13] Park staff have reported that the lack of clear signage and the sudden imposition of checks have led to confrontations with confused visitors, many of whom are turning away rather than paying unexpectedly high fees.[13] This effectively transforms park entrance stations into border control checkpoints, fundamentally altering the welcoming nature of the park system.

1.2 Dual-Tier Pricing: The Nonresident Surcharge

The cornerstone of the administration's "America First" park policy is the introduction of a discriminatory pricing structure targeting international visitors. This policy stems from the executive order "Making America Beautiful Again by Improving Our National Parks," which directed the Interior Secretary to increase revenue from non-taxpayers.[14] The rationale provided is that U.S. taxpayers subsidize the park system through federal appropriations, and thus international visitors should pay a premium to "contribute their fair share".[1]

1.2.1 The 2026 Fee Schedule Analysis

The new fee structure, effective January 1, 2026, creates a stark bifurcation in the cost of access. The financial burden on international visitors has increased exponentially compared to previous years.

Pass Type	U.S. Resident Price	Nonresident Price	Operational Requirement
Annual Pass	$80	$250	U.S. residents must provide ZIP code and Photo ID at purchase/entry.
Per-Person Surcharge	$0	$100	Applies per person (16+) at 11

			designated "high-demand" parks.
Standard Entry Fee	varies ($20-$35)	varies + $100 surcharge	The surcharge is *in addition* to the standard vehicle or per-person fee.
Motorcycle Entry	Standard	Standard + Surcharge	New policy allows 2 motorcycles per pass.[1]

Table 1: Comparative Fee Schedule for Fiscal Year 2026.[1]

The $100 per-person surcharge applies specifically at the following 11 high-visitation units, which represent the "crown jewels" of the system and the primary destinations for international tourism [15]:

1. **Acadia National Park** (Maine)
2. **Bryce Canyon National Park** (Utah)
3. **Everglades National Park** (Florida)
4. **Glacier National Park** (Montana)
5. **Grand Canyon National Park** (Arizona)
6. **Grand Teton National Park** (Wyoming)
7. **Rocky Mountain National Park** (Colorado)
8. **Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks** (California)
9. **Yellowstone National Park** (Wyoming/Montana/Idaho)
10. **Yosemite National Park** (California)
11. **Zion National Park** (Utah)

1.2.2 Economic Rationalization vs. Operational Reality

Proponents of this policy, such as the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), argue that demand for these iconic destinations is highly inelastic, meaning visitors will not significantly alter their travel plans despite price increases. PERC estimates that a $100 surcharge could generate $55 million annually at Yellowstone alone, theoretically providing a massive infusion of funds to address the deferred maintenance backlog.[17] They argue that this "smart pricing" approach aligns the U.S. with other international destinations that charge differential rates for foreigners.

However, the implementation has collided with operational realities. The requirement to verify residency has created significant bottlenecks. Without a unified digital identity system for park access, rangers must manually inspect passports and IDs for every occupant of a vehicle claiming resident status. This slows processing times dramatically. Early reports from January 2026 describe lines stretching for miles and "irate visitors" abandoning plans upon facing unexpected costs.[13] For a family of four nonresidents traveling in a single vehicle to the Grand Canyon, the cost of entry has risen from $35 (one vehicle fee) to $435 ($35 vehicle fee + $400 in surcharges). This represents a price increase of over 1,100%, a shock that challenges even the most robust assumptions of price inelasticity.

Furthermore, the revenue collection mechanism is fraught with complexity. The $100 surcharge must be collected in person at entry points and cannot be processed through the centralized Recreation.gov portal for advance reservations, creating a cash-handling and credit-processing bottleneck at the gates.[18] This antiquated collection method undermines the goal of "modernizing" access and instead reverts the entry experience to a slow, manual transaction.

Part II: The Politicization of Access - The 2026 Pass Design

Perhaps no single action has galvanized public opposition and legal scrutiny more than the redesign of the 2026 "America the Beautiful" Annual Pass. The replacement of traditional nature photography with political portraiture has triggered a legal confrontation regarding the statutory requirements of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), raising questions about the use of public lands administration for political branding.

2.1 The Trump/Washington Design

On November 25, 2025, the DOI unveiled the new artwork for the 2026 annual pass. The pass for U.S. residents features a dual portrait of President Donald Trump and President George Washington.[19] This design replaces the traditional nature photograph, which is selected annually through the "Share the Experience" public photo contest. The military version of the pass also features imagery of President Trump saluting troops.[21]

The winner of the 2025 "Share the Experience" photo contest, a photograph of Glacier National Park by Akshay Joshi, was not used on the primary resident pass. Instead, it was relegated to the significantly more expensive ($250) Nonresident Annual Pass.[20] This decision effectively segregated the "beauty" of the parks to the international pass, while the domestic pass became a vehicle for political messaging. The juxtaposition of the current president with the nation's first president is framed by the administration as a celebration of the upcoming America 250 semi-quincentennial, but critics view it as an unprecedented insertion of partisan imagery into a non-partisan agency.

2.2 Legal Analysis: FLREA Violations

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on December 10, 2025, challenging the legality of the resident pass design.[3] The lawsuit contends that the design is not merely a matter of taste but a violation of federal statute.

2.2.1 Statutory Requirement for Photo Contest

The lawsuit alleges a direct violation of **16 U.S.C. § 6804(a)(2)** of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. The statute explicitly states:

> "The Secretaries shall hold an annual competition to select the image to be used on the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass for a year." [3]

By failing to use the winning image on the primary pass distributed to the American public, the DOI appears to have bypassed the mandatory public participation process codified in federal law. The CBD argues that the "bait-and-switch" of moving the winning photo to the nonresident pass does not satisfy the statutory requirement, as the "National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass" is legally defined as the interagency pass available to the general public.[3] The plaintiffs argue that the law was intended to showcase the *lands* themselves, not the administration managing them, and that the contest serves a specific educational and recreational purpose that has been nullified.

2.2.2 The "Void if Altered" Controversy and First Amendment Implications

In response to the new design, a grassroots protest movement emerged wherein passholders placed stickers over the image of President Trump. These stickers often featured nature scenes, smiley faces, or the actual contest-winning photo of Glacier National Park.[26]

In early January 2026, the DOI updated its "Void if Altered" policy to specifically address this form of protest. Internal emails to NPS staff instructed them to consider any pass with a sticker on the front as "altered" and therefore invalid.[19] The updated guidance empowers rangers to confiscate passes or demand the removal of stickers, under the pretext that alterations cover security features like the foil hologram.

However, rangers have historically exercised discretion regarding stickers (e.g., REI membership stickers often placed on passes), and the strict enforcement of this policy specifically regarding the presidential portrait has raised First Amendment concerns. While the CBD lawsuit focuses on the FLREA violation, civil liberties advocates argue that voiding a pass for political expression, when the sticker does not obscure the barcode or expiration date, constitutes an unconstitutional retaliation against protected speech.[20] The implementation of this policy puts frontline rangers in the difficult position of policing political dissent at the park gate, further increasing tension and delay.

2.3 Implications of the Lawsuit

If the court finds in favor of the plaintiffs, the DOI could be forced to recall millions of printed passes and reissue them with the compliant image. This would represent a significant financial loss and a judicial rebuke of the administration's attempt to utilize administrative instruments for political messaging. As of mid-January 2026, the litigation is ongoing, but the controversy has already deeply polarized the visitor base, with some refusing to purchase the pass and opting to pay daily fees instead, thereby reducing the stable revenue stream provided by annual pass sales.[23]

Part III: The Hollowed Agency – Workforce and Operations

While the pass design dominates headlines, a far more acute crisis is unfolding within the operational ranks of the NPS. The agency is currently grappling with a workforce shortage of unprecedented magnitude, precipitated by targeted firings, budget reductions, and a hostile administrative environment. The data suggests that the agency is being "hollowed out" from within, leaving it functionally incapable of meeting its mission.

3.1 The "Valentine's Day Massacre" and Continuing Layoffs

In February 2025, in an event colloquially termed the "Valentine's Day Massacre" by federal employees, the administration terminated approximately 1,000 probationary NPS employees.[29] Probationary employees are those in their first year of service, lacking the full civil service protections of tenured staff. These terminations were part of a broader "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) initiative to downsize the federal workforce and reduce government spending.[31]

The impact was immediate and severe. These employees often filled critical frontline roles, custodians, fee collectors, and interpretive rangers, essential for day-to-day park operations. The firing of these staff members created immediate vacancies in roles that directly interface with the public and maintain park sanitation. Furthermore, the administration simultaneously executed a hiring freeze and offered early retirement buyouts, which led to the departure of an additional ~700 senior staff.[33] This "brain drain" stripped the agency of decades of institutional memory and leadership.

3.1.1 Legal Context: The Supreme Court and RIFs

The administration's ability to execute these reductions was bolstered by a pivotal Supreme Court decision. The Court lifted a lower court injunction that had previously blocked President Trump's executive order directing federal agencies to prepare for large-scale reductions in force (RIF).[34] This ruling cleared the legal path for the mass layoffs, validating the executive branch's authority to aggressively reshape the civil service personnel structure despite lower court rulings that had questioned the legality of the process.

3.2 The 24% Workforce Shortage

By July 2025, internal DOI data analyzed by the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) revealed that the NPS permanent workforce had contracted by 24% since the beginning of the administration.[5] This attrition rate is catastrophic for an agency that relies heavily on institutional knowledge and specialized skills. The vacancy rate is not uniform; it disproportionately affects operational roles in maintenance and visitor protection.

3.2.1 Seasonal Hiring Failures

The crisis is compounded by a failure to recruit seasonal staff. The NPS relies on a surge of temporary employees during the summer months to handle peak visitation. While the administration pledged to hire 8,000 seasonal workers to offset permanent cuts, data from mid-2025 indicated only ~4,500 positions had been filled.[5] The gap is attributed to the chilling effect of the mass firings, which damaged the agency's reputation as a stable employer, and the administrative bottleneck caused by the firing of HR personnel who process hirings.[30]

3.3 Operational Impacts on the Ground: Case Studies of Collapse

The statistical shortages have translated into tangible degradations of the visitor experience and safety at specific park units. The following case studies illustrate the systemic failure:

- **Assateague Island National Seashore (Maryland/Virginia):** The operational reality here offers a stark illustration of staffing deficits. Typically, the park employs a robust team to manage visitor safety along its Atlantic beaches. However, reports from July 2025 indicate a complete collapse of this safety net, with *all 13 lifeguard positions*, including the critical role of chief lifeguard, remaining vacant. This left miles of popular swimming beaches completely unguarded during the height of summer.[5]
- **Big Bend National Park (Texas):** The park operated at nearly 50% staffing levels in 2025. The interpretive division was decimated, leading to the cancellation of educational programs and the departure of the chief of interpretation. This reduction means visitors receive less education on safety in the harsh desert environment, potentially increasing search and rescue incidents.[5]
- **Yosemite National Park (California):** The famous Pioneer History Center was forced to close its historic buildings after artifacts were stolen, a direct result of insufficient staffing to monitor the area. Without rangers to patrol, cultural resources became vulnerable to theft and vandalism.[5]
- **Blue Ridge Parkway (Virginia/North Carolina):** The Rocky Knob Visitor Center, a key waypoint for visitors, was shuttered for the entire 2025 season due to a lack of staff to man the desk.[37]
- **Grand Canyon National Park (Arizona):** Reduced pest control services raised concerns about zoonotic diseases in park lodging. The park reported a reduction in the ability to monitor for plague, hantavirus, and bedbugs, posing a direct public health risk to visitors.[38]
- **Indiana Dunes National Park (Indiana):** Four of six supervisors in the interpretive division retired, forcing a drastic reduction in ranger-led tours from 575 annually to approximately 100, an 82% decrease in educational programming.[38]

The proposed 2026 budget, which includes a further $1.2 billion cut to the NPS (the largest in history), threatens to institutionalize these deficits.[31] This would reduce per-visitor spending by nearly 55% relative to 2011 levels, adjusted for inflation.[31]

Part IV: The Disposal Agenda – Privatization Pressures

Parallel to the internal dismantling of the NPS, legislative efforts in 2025 sought to liquidate substantial portions of the federal estate managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). While these efforts targeted BLM lands rather than National Parks specifically, they reflect the broader administration philosophy regarding public land retention.

4.1 Senator Mike Lee's "HOUSING Act" and the Budget Reconciliation

Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) introduced provisions into the Senate's budget reconciliation package (referred to as the "Big Beautiful Bill") that would have authorized the sale of millions of acres of public land.[6] Framed as a solution to the housing crisis, the "HOUSING Act" initially proposed making vast swathes of BLM and Forest Service land eligible for purchase by developers.

4.1.1 Evolution of the Proposal

The proposal underwent several iterations in an attempt to survive the Senate's "Byrd Rule" (which governs reconciliation bills) and to quell public backlash:

1. **Initial Scope:** Included National Forest land and BLM land across 11 western states.
2. **Revision:** Excluded Forest Service land entirely; limited BLM sales to parcels within 5 miles of population centers; and capped sales between 612,500 and 1.2 million acres.[40]
3. **Exclusions:** Montana was notably exempted from the sale provisions after fierce opposition from Senator Steve Daines and Rep. Ryan Zinke. This exemption highlighted the political toxicity of land sales even within the Republican coalition, as Montana politicians recognized the electoral danger of selling off hunting and fishing grounds.[6]

4.1.2 Withdrawal and Future Prospects

Despite these modifications, the Senate parliamentarian ruled that the provisions violated budget reconciliation rules, specifically regarding the germane nature of the legislation to the budget. Furthermore, the proposal faced bipartisan opposition, with critics noting that the "affordable housing" mandates were unenforceable and that the land could easily be acquired by foreign interests or luxury developers once privatized.[6]

Senator Lee withdrew the provision in late June 2025.[6] However, environmental watchdog groups like the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance warn that the underlying intent to privatize public lands remains a core objective of the legislative wing aligned with the administration.[41] The "disposal" philosophy remains active in political discourse, with proponents arguing that the federal government holds "too much land" that hinders economic development.[7] This legislative push serves as the external pincer to the internal funding cuts, squeezing the public lands system from both sides.

Part V: Economic Impact Analysis

The administration's policies are predicated on the economic theory that the NPS is an asset that must maximize direct revenue from users, particularly non-taxpayers. However, a broader economic analysis suggests that these policies may generate negative externalities that outweigh the revenue gains, threatening the vital outdoor recreation economy.

5.1 Revenue Projections vs. Elasticity of Demand

The DOI projects that the nonresident surcharge could raise significant funds, up to $55 million annually at Yellowstone alone.[17] This projection relies heavily on the assumption that demand for national park visitation is highly inelastic (i.e., visitors will pay the higher price rather than cancel their trip).

5.1.1 International Visitor Elasticity

While some studies suggest demand is inelastic for "once-in-a-lifetime" trips, the magnitude of the 2026 fee hike is extreme and unprecedented. For a family of four nonresidents visiting the Grand Canyon:

- **2024 Cost:** $35 (per vehicle)
- **2026 Cost:** $35 (vehicle) + $400 ($100 x 4 people) = **$435**

This represents a **1,142% increase** in access costs. Economic literature on "gateway communities" suggests that while park *entry* might be prioritized by wealthy visitors, the middle-class market is highly sensitive to such shocks. A study by Sage et al. (2017) on fee increases found that "spending in local communities can be expected to decrease," as visitors shift their budget to cover entry costs or shorten their trips.[42]

Furthermore, the "hassle factor" of passport checks and long queues acts as a non-monetary cost. Travel industry analysts project an 8.2% decline in international visitation to the U.S. in 2025, exacerbated by these policies.[15] If international visitation drops significantly, the projected revenue windfall will fail to materialize, while the surrounding economies suffer from the "substitution effect" (tourists choosing Canada, New Zealand, or other destinations with more welcoming policies).

5.2 Congestion Costs of Fee-Free Days

The shift of fee-free days to Memorial Day and July 4th introduces severe "congestion costs" that affect the bottom line.

- **Resource Damage:** Peak-day crowds overwhelm waste management and trail infrastructure. The cost of remediating damage from a single overcrowded weekend often exceeds the revenue foregone by waiving fees.

- **Operational Overtime:** Managing gridlock requires increased staffing and overtime pay, resources the agency does not have.
- **Visitor Experience:** The "Zero-Price Effect" suggests that free entry disproportionately attracts casual visitors, increasing traffic volume.[12] On days like July 4th, this pushes parks past their carrying capacity. The resulting gridlock requires increased staffing for traffic control, staffing that the NPS currently lacks due to the 24% vacancy rate.[5]

5.3 The Gateway Community "Recession"

Gateway communities rely on the "multiplier effect" of visitor spending. International tourists are typically "high-value" visitors who stay longer and spend more than domestic day-trippers.[44] Alienating this demographic through discriminatory pricing and hostile entry procedures threatens the $29 billion annual contribution of park tourism to local economies.[45]

Case Study: Estes Park, Colorado
In Estes Park, the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, business owners have expressed alarm. Mayor Gary Hall noted that the fees send a message of "we don't really like you," fundamentally damaging the hospitality brand of the town.44 Business owners fear that international families will simply bypass the region, leading to a recession in towns that have built their economies around the reliable flow of global tourists. With international visitors spending five times more per trip than domestic counterparts, the loss of this segment cannot be easily offset by domestic volume.44

Conclusion: "Destruction" or "Reform"?

The evidence gathered in this report supports the conclusion that the National Park Service is undergoing a systematic dismantling of its traditional operational and philosophical framework. The claim that the administration is "attempting to destroy" the NPS, while politically charged, aligns with the observable outcomes of the implemented policies.

The combination of **fiscal starvation** ($1.2 billion budget cuts), **workforce decapitation** (mass firings and 24% vacancy), **regulatory capture** (pass design violations), and **exclusionary access** (dual-tier pricing) creates a perfect storm. The agency is being rendered functionally incapable of meeting its statutory mission to preserve resources "unimpaired."

While the administration frames these actions as "efficiency" and "putting America first," the operational reality is a park system that is understaffed, structurally insolvent, legally compromised, and increasingly hostile to a significant portion of its visitor base. The long-term economic damage to the U.S. tourism sector and the physical degradation of the park resources due to under-management may take decades to reverse. The policies enacted in 2025 and 2026 have fundamentally altered the compact between the American public and their shared lands, moving from a model of open, democratic preservation to one of gated, nationalistic consumption.

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