



After the Fact | [America's National Parks: Upkeep Required](#)

Originally aired April 20, 2017

Total runtime: 00:17:16

TRANSCRIPT

[Birdsong and sounds of running water]

Dan LeDuc, host: Yellowstone National Park. It's springtime, and the western meadow lark is welcoming a new day. These beautiful songbirds have been in slow decline over the past two decades, but thanks to protections afforded by the National Park System, they're still commonly found at Yellowstone—America's first national park.

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From Yellowstone, the National Park System has grown to include more than 400 sites. The Park System turned 100 last year, and 2016 was also a record year for visits to the parks—331 million of them. That popularity leads to a lot of wear and tear. The list of deferred maintenance to all that infrastructure that makes the parks run is a long one. It's also expensive, and the price tag is this episode's data point: 11.9 billion. That's dollars. \$11.9 billion is what the National Park Service says is necessary to catch up with years of deferred maintenance.

Dan Leduc: To learn more about how we got to this point, we called Phil Francis, the retired superintendent at the Blue Ridge Parkway, who also served as the deputy superintendent for the Great Smoky Mountains—one of the nation's most popular parks. Over his 40-year career at the National Park Service, he saw lots of changes and the impact of years of maintenance left unaddressed.

Phil Francis, executive council, The Coalition to Protect America's National Parks: In the early days, when I first joined the National Park Service, we had a set of standards that our maintenance managers were required to meet. They were called activity standards. And they were really pretty neat.

It said you had to cut the grass every so often to maintain the grass height at a certain place. Trails had to be taken care of, had to be so many feet wide and so many feet tall. There would be a trail prism that we would have to maintain our trails at. And we did a pretty good job actually of meeting all these standards.



Those standards are pretty much gone now. It's just so impossible now to meet that ongoing standard. And that has been the biggest change that I've noticed over the past four decades—we don't have the resources we once had. The thousand cuts have really caused a lot of damage and have changed the standard.

I've actually seen historic structures in the Smokies fall down to the ground and also on the Blue Ridge Parkway. I've seen foundations rotting away. And I've seen roofs actually collapse on historic structures, because we didn't have enough funds to take care of them.

The Smokies, for example, has the largest collection of historic log cabins anywhere in the U.S. They had a historic preservation crew that's been decimated by budget cuts. You know, those structures aren't going to last forever without attention.

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Dan Leduc: Last December, [Congress](#) approved the National Park Service Centennial Act, which provides about \$50 million a year for park needs, as well as seed money for an endowment fund. But Marcia Argust, who directs Pew's campaign to restore America's parks, says a lot more is needed.

Marcia Argust, project director, The Pew Charitable Trusts: I think it's critical that we address the restoration of our park infrastructure for a number of reasons. First and foremost, preservation of our historic assets is critical to ensure that future generations can enjoy and learn from our nation's history. We also do need to invest in park infrastructure to provide the safety and accessibility to the resources, to the trails, to the overlooks where you can enjoy wildlife and scenery.

Road systems are responsible for half of the backlog within the National Park System, almost \$6 billion worth. And that certainly needs to be addressed. The Park Service receives about \$260 million a year to address its transportation needs. And one project—for instance, the Arlington Memorial Bridge—that would cost about \$250 million to repair. That's almost the entire budget for the Park Service transportation needs.

Dan LeDuc: That brings us back to this episode's data point: \$11.9 billion. That's the price tag for the roads, trails, and infrastructure repairs for the national parks. In Congress, this deferred maintenance has lately been a topic of debate. Pew hopes Congress will increase funding permanently to address these repairs.



Marcia Argust: Just recently, there was a bipartisan bill introduced by Senator [Mark] Warner from Virginia and Senator [Rob] Portman from Ohio to do just that. It would establish a fund that provides guaranteed funding each year that would go towards park maintenance needs, and it would ramp up to \$500 million each year. In addition to dedicated federal funding for park maintenance, we should be thinking about a viable infrastructure package.

You know, a lot of people and a lot of members of Congress don't realized that the Park Service is maintaining over 24,000 buildings, over 10,000 roads, over 2,000 sewage systems. So these things require funding. They need to be cared for.

Dan LeDuc: The parks, of course, are some of the nation's most beautiful landscapes and historic places. You may be among the millions of families who have vacationed at a park recently—and Argust says those trips show another important benefit of the parks, especially for the towns and cities nearby.

Marcia Argust: We also need to make sure that parks are maintained because they're economic engines for local communities. And if they are not maintained and visitors don't come to the parks, then those local communities are going to take a hit. In 2015, park visitors spent \$17 billion in local communities. And that translated to a \$32 billion economic boost nationwide. That also led to almost 300,000 jobs nationwide that were generated by the National Park Service.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: And one of the towns powered by the economic engine of the national parks is Sevierville, Tennessee. It is the birthplace of country singer Dolly Parton, but what draws the crowds are the Great Smoky Mountains. Ten million visitors a year make the mountains the most popular national park in the U.S. Sevierville has 16,000 residents, and its mayor for more than 20 years has been Bryan Atchley.

Brian Atchley, mayor, Sevierville, Tennessee: We are at the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in East Tennessee. And it is a great location. We're within one day's drive of three-fourths of the population of this country. And, as they say in real estate, "location, location, location." That's also true with a tourism town like Sevierville.

Dan LeDuc: Well, I'm guessing that your town is a beautiful place. Take us there. Stand on Main Street, look around, tell us what we would see.



Brian Atchley: If I'm standing on Main Street, or Court Avenue, where our over 100-year-old courthouse is, and it is a beautiful courthouse. And then on the courthouse lawn is a statue of our hometown Dolly Parton. So that's downtown.

But then you look up over the buildings and you see, depending on what time of year it is, the beautiful Great Smoky Mountains National Park. And on one day last week we didn't have snow in Sevierville, but I looked up at the mountains and it was a beautiful, clear day and they were solid white.

Dan LeDuc: Well, it sounds like a beautiful, beautiful community. And, you know, so much of the talk about saving our national parks, rejuvenating the national parks, speaks to the natural beauty of the place and the historic role so many of these parks have played in our nation's history. But the park means even more to you and your surrounding communities, doesn't it?

Brian Atchley: Our county is a county of less than 100,000 people. But on any given day, from April through December—the peak season—we can be a county of 250,000 people. We have over 18,000 motel rooms and about that many cabins and overnight rentals. We had over \$1.5 billion in sales in 2016.

Dan LeDuc: I'm guessing, when we were talking about sales tax revenue and all the rest earlier, that you play, probably, a pretty good role in helping fund Tennessee's state budget.

Brian Atchley: We do. Although Sevier County is about the 25th largest county, we rank number three in sales tax dollars.

Dan LeDuc: But, again, how much of that would be going on if the Great Smoky Mountains National Park wasn't parked 10 miles from your door?

Brian Atchley: It wouldn't be here. There's just no way. The park was established in 1934. Then Franklin Roosevelt came down, and from there it has just taken off. The mountains are the responsibility for all this growth. And we don't forget that.

Dan LeDuc: Tell us a little bit about some of the infrastructure problems going on at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and your concerns about them.

Brian Atchley: Well, any time you have over 10 million visitors to your national park a year—and that is the most visited national park in the country—you've got road problems, and you've got picnic areas that need constant taking care of, campgrounds, restrooms. It's not in bad



shape now, but if we don't keep getting proper funding, it could get that way. And that would be devastating.

Dan LeDuc: So, what can be done about it?

Brian Atchley: Well, we have several volunteer organizations. Friends of the Smokies has a very active organization in North Carolina and Tennessee. They raise several hundred thousand dollars a year that go straight to the park. We have a special license plate that is funded. And a lot of that goes back to the park.

But we need to keep on our state, but mainly federal government, to keep the funding up for all the national parks. Because they're important all across the country.

Dan LeDuc: Of course, the reason we're talking today, and as pleasurable as that is, is the deferred maintenance issue facing the national parks. Across the country, the total bill is approaching \$12 billion, that's with a "B." And right there by you, in the Great Smokies, the price tag is about \$162 million for deferred maintenance needs, its roads, and other things. You're in the park a lot. Tell me what you see when you're there.

Brian Atchley: Well, when you stay on the main road, it's really not all that bad. But when you go to areas like Elkmont, there's some restrooms up there that could really use some work. There are some trails that could use some better maintenance because, especially your trails that you're expecting kids to walk on, you don't need crumbling asphalt and things like that. They need to be safe.

And deferred maintenance is just putting off the problem. They need to be fixed. Aesthetically, the mountains are gorgeous, but some of the things that the human race has done, we've not kept it up. And it needs to be fixed. It's got to be a cooperation between everybody—the park, federal, state, local government. It's got to be hand in hand that we keep our national parks as pristine as they are now.

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Dan LeDuc: From the mountains of Tennessee, we turn to another kind of majestic view, in the nation's capital. "After the Fact" correspondent Fred Baldassaro spent a spring afternoon talking with visitors at the Tidal Basin. They were enjoying the cherry blossoms and taking in historic monuments, like the Thomas Jefferson Memorial.



Fred Baldassaro, correspondent: We spent the afternoon talking to tourists about the national parks and their experiences. We also asked them about the costs associated with maintaining the parks and what more could be done to preserve these national treasures.

Haley Davis: I love the national parks. I think they're awesome, especially because we have children and we love coming and being able to visit, that we really enjoy it.

Fred Baldassaro: And do you have a favorite memory, and a favorite park that you like to visit more than others?

Haley Davis: Smoky Mountains National Park. We go there, we camp there almost every year. Our family has for a long, long time.

Fred Baldassaro: Did you know that the parks are also severely underfunded, that there's issues with maintenance, and that there's costs that are approaching up to \$12 billion in deferred maintenance? What should be done about that, if anything?

Haley Davis: I think the national parks absolutely should be a priority, because they should be preserved. I think even if people had to be charged a little bit to come in, I think that would help. But I think they absolutely should be a priority.

Fred Baldassaro: That was Haley Davis of Georgetown, Kentucky. Just up the sidewalk, we met the Dawkins family from Bozeman, Montana, visiting their friend Gene Molinelli and checking out the cherry blossoms and the historic monuments of the nation's capital.

Fred Baldassaro: So what do you think of the national parks?

Kathy Dawkins: Oh, fantastic.

Mike Dawkins: Bozeman is right next to Yellowstone Park.

Kathy Dawkins: And we're not far from Glacier. I grew up at the foot of Glacier Park.

Fred Baldassaro: And do you have a favorite memory? Is that like your favorite park, or?

Kathy Dawkins: Glacier Park is my favorite. And I grew up going to Glacier Park to hike with my priest, who took us there. He was an avid hiker, so he took us there as high school kids. And it was really some of my favorite memories.



Fred Baldassaro: One of the things we've noticed about the national parks—we work with the National Parks Service, and they do a lot of stuff with maintenance costs. There's a lot of deferred maintenance right now. There's—some of the stuff with the parks are kind of falling in disrepair. There's estimated that it's approaching \$12 billion in deferred maintenance costs. Did you guys know that?

Kathy Dawkins: No.

Fred Baldassaro: And what do you think of that? Is that something that should be addressed? Is it something that should be fixed? What do you guys think?

Kathy Dawkins: Oh, definitely fixed.

Mike Dawkins: It's the fabric of our history. I mean, it's—that's the one constant we have. And once we lose that, it can't be recaptured.

Gene Molinelli: One of the resources of the country includes our beautiful range of geography and peoples and populations. And that's what the national parks preserve. And I think we need that to have a sense of what we are as a country, as a very important part of that. We can thank Teddy Roosevelt for getting that started. And I think the national parks represent the best of what there is. And if there's a business cost to it, I think it's a very worthwhile cost.

Fred Baldassaro: Gunter Finkenbauer lives in Waldorf, Maryland, which is not far from Washington. He's says he has seen a lot of changes on the National Mall and Memorial Park and at the Jefferson Memorial over the last two decades.

Gunter Finkenbauer: The deterioration of the infrastructure—when you take a look at the marble steps, for example, you can see how, whether it's acid rain, whether it's just everyday pollution, whether it's just wear and tear of the millions of people who come to Washington, there are maintenance issues to be had. When you look at the marble on top of this particular structure and so on, it needs to be taken care of. It needs to be maintained, like everything else. You can't just build it, walk away for 100 years, and expect it to look the same.

Fred Baldassaro: And how should that be handled? Is that something Congress should do? Is that something Americans should do?

Gunter Finkenbauer: You mean in terms of fiscal responsibility?

Fred Baldassaro: Yes.



Gunter Finkenauer: I do believe that it was paid for with tax dollars. It ought to be maintained with tax dollars. And I think whether or not you're an American citizen coming here, in which case your taxes are already contributing towards it, or you're a foreign national coming here or a visitor from abroad, then that's just part of the cost of doing business. If you're going to be the leader of the free world, then there is an operating cost that's associated with representing what we stand for. And this is part of what we stand for.

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Dan LeDuc: From the marble columns of the Jefferson Memorial to the childhood home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Atlanta, to the song birds who greet the dawn in Yellowstone, to the rolling Smokey Mountains of Tennessee—America's national parks are as varied as the nation and its people. We depend on these places for tranquility and for history and memory. And these places depend on us—for upkeep and maintenance.

To learn more about Pew's campaign to restore America's parks or to view images from the national parks, go to pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

And if you like what you've heard on this podcast, subscribe on iTunes and other streaming services. We'd like to hear from you, too, so write a review and let us know what you think. And thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. And this is "After the Fact."

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