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“Like an oven”: heat and tourism create headache for US park rangers

Temperature-related deaths led park service¹ to create a new advice page for visitors who want to explore despite the heat

This summer, at a brutally hot Grand Canyon national park, something new is popping up at trailheads².

- 5 It's a QR code that takes people to a webpage designed for heat-related advice. There, they can find information on current weather and trail conditions, as well as spots along the trails where hikers can find water and general tips on taking care of themselves.

“It's too early to tell how well it's working, but we are getting a lot of eyeballs³ on it,” says Jeff Stebbins, public affairs specialist at the park.



Visitors walk on the salt flats at Badwater Basin in Death Valley national park in California on 16 July 2023.

¹ *park service*: administrationen for naturparker i USA

² startpunkter på vandrestier

³ (her) opmærksomhed

10 The change is among a range of precautions⁴ that officials across the national park system are taking as the summer tourism crush⁵ collides with blistering⁶ heatwaves – sometimes with deadly consequences.

This month alone, a 57-year-old woman died while hiking at Grand Canyon national park. A father and stepson both died in Texas’s Big Bend national park after hiking in 119F⁷ (48C⁸) heat. In Death Valley, 15 two people have died including a 71-year-old man who collapsed after hiking a trail at Golden Canyon, and a 65-year-old man who was found in his car dead from “apparent heat illness”.

Heat has always been a risk for parks, and visitors, to contend with⁹. In the last decade, at least 26 deaths have been tied to extreme heat at US national parks, according to press releases from the park service. But with July shattering temperature records across the US and the globe, this summer is 20 bringing new challenges.

At the Grand Canyon, Stebbins says there has been talk of trail closures – unless users have backcountry permits¹⁰. But so far, officials haven’t enacted¹¹ them. Visitation¹² has actually been slow for this time of year, he says. “I think this heat may be dissuading¹³ people from visiting, which might be a good thing.”

25 At Death Valley national park in California, where temperatures hit 130F (54C) last week, the number of visitors has skyrocketed as the temperatures soared. The park’s busiest months for visitation are March, April, July and August. Half of the visitors in the summer come from other countries – and have planned their trips long before any heatwaves started. A fraction¹⁴, park officials say, come to the desert park simply seeking to experience the record-breaking heat.

30 “If it’s not windy, the park feels like sticking your body in an oven,” says Abby Wines, management analyst at Death Valley national park, speaking to *the Guardian* on the 13th day of temperatures above 120F (48.8C). “But when it’s windy, it feels like being inside a hairdryer.”

The park has put up extra signs encouraging drinking water and taking short hikes. Staff also have added red octagonal signs on posts at low-elevation¹⁵ trailheads that say, “STOP. Extreme Heat 35 Danger. Walking after 10 AM is not recommended,” followed by a translation in eight languages. Despite the warnings, Wines says that park rangers respond to overheated park visitors multiple times

⁴ forholdsregler

⁵ trængsel

⁶ intense

⁷ fahrenheit

⁸ celsius

⁹ contend with: tage højde for

¹⁰ backcountry permits: speciel tilladelse til at opholde sig i nationalparken

¹¹ udført

¹² besøgstallene

¹³ afholde

¹⁴ lille mindretal

¹⁵ med små stigninger

each week, and that rescues are not always possible. Park managers will not put rangers' lives at risk for lengthy search and rescue operations in extreme heat.



*Visitors walk by the salt flats of Badwater Basin inside Death Valley national park.
Photograph: Patrick T Fallon/AFP/Getty Images*

40 Wines has a strange local hack for dealing with summer heat in Death Valley: since the water in the cold water tap gets heated in the pipes and comes out at hot tub temperatures – about 108F (42C) – in the summer, she turns off the power to the water heater, so that water in the heater can cool down to room temperature. Then, when she turns on the hot tap, the water comes out lukewarm – which is refreshing by comparison.

45 At Saguaro national park near Tucson, Arizona, where temperatures topped 107F (41C), officials are focused on helping visitors plan ahead, particularly when it comes to hiking and water needs. Volunteers and rangers at Death Valley and Saguaro also do preventative¹⁶ search and rescue operations, during which they patrol the trails to make sure no one is struggling, and make sure they have what they need.

50 Cam Juárez, a community outreach coordinator¹⁷, is focused on using social media to get the message out. He says that people coming from out of town have to drink twice as much water as locals, who are more adapted to the aridity¹⁸ and heat of the desert environment.

That's why he shot a video with the park's mascot, an anthropomorphic¹⁹ Saguaro cactus²⁰ named Sunny who holds a water bottle, with the message "Even Saguaro cactus need to hydrate", says Juarez. "Using humor is a good way to get through to people."

¹⁶ forebyggende

¹⁷ *community outreach coordinator*: kontaktperson mellem en organisation og offentligheden

¹⁸ tørhed

¹⁹ menneskelignende

²⁰ *Saguaro cactus*: kæmpekaktus

55 There's another catchy phrase he's coined²¹ and wants hikers to bear in mind. "If your bottle is halfway down, turn around."

(2023)

²¹ opfundet