

# Polluted Parks

How America is Failing to Protect Our National Parks, People and Planet from Air Pollution



Air pollution is obscuring views and harming our nation's most precious park sites, from Glacier National Park in Montana to the Natchez Trace Parkway in Tennessee to Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio. Air pollution also drives the most serious problem of our time — climate change.

**96 PERCENT**  
of the 417 national parks assessed are plagued by significant air pollution problems



Health

UNHEALTHY AIR

**85%**

National parks that have air that is unhealthy to breathe at times



Nature

HARM TO NATURE

**88%**

National parks where air pollution is damaging sensitive species and habitat



Visibility

HAZY SKIES

**89%**

National parks that suffer from haze pollution



Climate

CLIMATE CHANGE

**80%**

National parks where climate change is a significant concern

To assess the degree to which air pollution affects America's national parks and their more than 330 million visitors each year, NPCA evaluated more than 400 parks based on four categories: **harm to nature, hazy skies, unhealthy air and climate change.**

While most air pollution doesn't originate in national parks, it can travel hundreds of miles from its source, thereby affecting all parks — even remote ones. Much of this pollution begins with extracting fossil fuels, including oil, gas and coal, and burning them in power plants and vehicles.

Behind these alarming numbers are children, families, recreation enthusiasts, business owners and others with firsthand experiences dealing with the effects of air and climate pollution across the country. These human connections reveal a common theme: the problems of pollution afflict both people and our parks in similar ways.

Air pollution harms people's health, with people of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities often suffering first and worst from exposure to pollution. It also harms local economies as park visitation drops by at least eight percent when air pollution is high — indicating that air quality directly affects public use and enjoyment of our national parks.

**33**

OF AMERICA'S MOST-VISITED NATIONAL PARKS ARE AS POLLUTED AS OUR

**20**

LARGEST CITIES

Air quality in metropolitan areas has significantly improved since the 1990s.

National parks have not experienced a similar rate of improvement.

**RISKS TO NATIONAL PARKS AS A RESULT OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

**DROUGHT**

**FLOODING**

**WILDFIRES**

**INVASIVE SPECIES**

# POLLUTED PARKS KEY FINDINGS

## EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

In analyzing scientific studies, we found that climate change is a significant concern for 80 percent of our national parks (335 parks). These parks are experiencing changes in climate through extreme trends in temperature, precipitation, or early onset of spring.

## HAZY SKIES

At eighty-nine percent of parks (370 parks), visibility impairment is either a moderate or significant concern (304 and 66 parks respectively). Air pollution obscures scenic park views — in some cases obliterating more than 90 miles in visibility.

## UNHEALTHY AIR

Eighty-five percent of national parks (354 parks) have air that is unhealthy to breathe at times. At 87 parks, ozone levels are a significant concern, and another 267 parks have a moderate level of concern.

## HARM TO NATURE

Our findings show that air pollution is harming sensitive species and habitat at 88 percent of national parks (368 parks). At 283 parks, the problem is of a significant concern and in 85 parks, the concern level is moderate.



Data Source: IMPROVE © Daveallenphoto

## SOLUTIONS

**While the Clean Air Act has steadily reduced pollution over the past five decades, in just two years, the Trump administration’s policies have contributed to reversing this trend. Fortunately, there are clear and feasible solutions to drive down air pollution. Key solutions include reducing pollution and a just transition to clean energy. To get there, we will need policies supported by all levels of government to benefit our air, parks and climate, which is why NPCA works to:**

- Defend critical clean air and climate laws by demonstrating the effects pollution has on people and our parks and engaging in rule makings and litigation as necessary to protect them.
- Hold polluters and government accountable by identifying the sources of park pollution and advancing policy, technical and legal solutions for mitigating harm.
- Advocate for pollution reductions by empowering people and communities to speak up against harmful policies and practices that place polluter interests above the good of the commons.

This year, as NPCA celebrates a century of working to protect places of unparalleled natural wonder, historic significance and cultural value, we also commit to a future for our parks that is grounded in principles of justice and equity. With this commitment in mind, we are pledging to act on fair solutions for clean air and a healthy climate for everyone.

