

# Economy drives up Yosemite tourism

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By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

The economic crash that devastated both Wall Street and Main Street last year might have been a boon to America's national parks -- and Yosemite National Park is a case in point.

The park had its highest turnout since the mid-1990s with nearly 4 million visitors, reversing years of tourism losses. It supports the theory that people are driving to nature rather than flying to Europe or Hawaii, says one National Park Service expert.

"You'd think visitorship would be down in a bad economy," said visiting chief social scientist Jim Gramann, a Texas A&M University professor working temporarily with the park service. "But many studies show that people save money by going to national parks in bad times. Yellowstone had a record number of visitors."

Yosemite's 3.86 million total fell short of the park's record of 4.19 million in 1996. But the latest total was nearly 9% higher than 2008.

It marked the first clear improvement in visitor numbers since a destructive flood in 1997, which was followed by a series of public relations nightmares ranging from gruesome murders to powerful rockfalls.

"A cloud seems to have lifted here," said Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman. "I would not be surprised if we're back up to 4 million visitors in 2010."

Other national parks around California -- including Sequoia and Kings Canyon, Lassen Volcanic and Redwood -- recorded visitor increases of 4% to 13%. Channel Islands National Park off the Southern California coast jumped nearly 30%.

But Death Valley and Joshua Tree national parks in the state's southeastern desert had fewer visitors, suggesting that parks closer to heavily traveled corridors were more attractive, experts said.

Among other national parks in the West, the biggest visitor increases included a 7% bump at Arches in Utah and 12% at Glacier in Montana. The park service reports a 5% increase nationally.

In California, Yosemite officials say they heard from residents of San Francisco and Los Angeles who said they were rediscovering their own backyard. In the process, visitors trimmed their vacation costs in half or more, officials said.

Free admission on some weekends over the summer might have helped build visitorship, said Ranger Adrienne Freeman of Sequoia and Kings Canyon. Sequoia visitor totals climbed by almost 4% and Kings Canyon nearly 6%.

Freeman said people also might have been more motivated to visit because of the Ken Burns PBS series titled "The National Parks: America's Best Idea." The park service helped to promote the series throughout the summer.

"There were a lot more rangers out in communities," she said.

Yosemite was one of the focal points in the PBS series, which aired in late September. In October, Yosemite's visitation was 356,177, a 16% jump over the previous year.

It was the highest October turnout since 1999, which was a tragic year in Yosemite. Three women were murdered just outside the park and a fourth was beheaded inside the park.

Tourism tailed off as grisly stories spread through the international media.

But Yosemite's visitor totals already had been slipping. In January 1997, the Merced River flooded and swamped motel units, campgrounds, utilities and sewage treatment facilities. Yosemite Valley was closed for weeks, frightening off many potential visitors.

In 2001, the 9/11 disaster took another bite out of tourism nationwide as well as in Yosemite.

Rockfalls, road rebuilding, construction work and rising gasoline prices took their toll thereafter until Yosemite bottomed out in 2006 at 3.66 million people, the lowest total since 1990.

Surrounding communities suffered from the drop in tourism. But now, even as many parts of California's economy staggers, Tuolumne, Mariposa and Madera counties are holding their own or even increasing income compared to 2008, officials say.

But visitors are spending their money differently now, said Sandy Gordon, marketing manager for the Tuolumne County Visitors Bureau, based in Sonora.

"People are really looking for bargains," she said. "They're not looking for expensive, five-star hotels. They're looking for something affordable."

In Oakhurst along Highway 41, executive director Dan Cuning of the Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau said area merchants and hotels probably increased income by 3% to 5%.

"We are very fortunate here," he said. "We consider ourselves California's gateway to Yosemite. That's a good place to be right now."