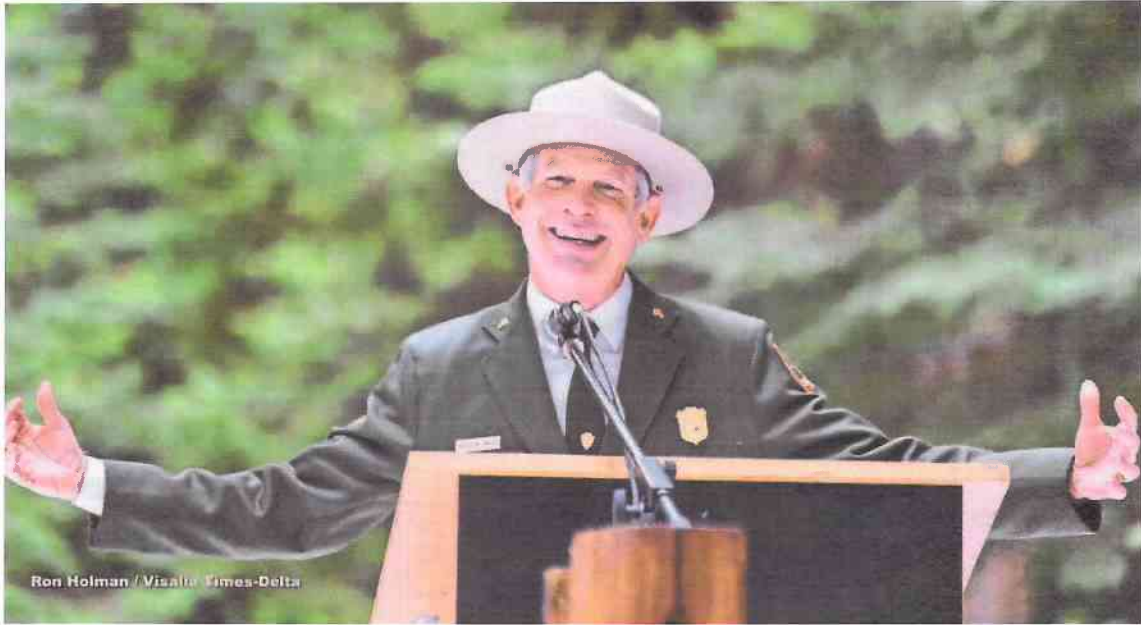


Big changes coming to Sequoias Park



Woody Smeck, Superintendent for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, speaks to hundreds gathered Sunday, December 8, 2019 at the General Grant Tree in Kings Canyon National Park to observe the 93rd Annual Trek to the Nation's Christmas Tree Ceremony. Smeck later joined by two park rangers placed a memorial wreath placed at the base of the 267-foot tree. RON HOLMAN

As park attendance booms, locals also benefit

Joshua Yeager Visalia Times-Delta
USA TODAY NETWORK

Big changes are coming down the mountain at Sequoia National Park as officials prepare for skyrocketing attendance in the new decade.

Superintendent Woody Smeck and Sequoia Parks Conservancy Director Savannah Boiano ditched their ranger boots and became city slickers in downtown Visalia on Wednesday during a "Fire-side Chat" discussion.

The informal talk was hosted by Visit Visalia, the city's newly-established tourism bureau.

The two discussed the building of a transit center near Lodgepole, road improvements, new programming and the park's historic relationship with Visalia.

Booming attendance

A little more than 1.9 million people visited Sequoia National Park in 2019, a half-million increase

over 2015. By 2025, Smeck says 2.5 million annual visitors "is in the realm of possibility."

"That's the number we're planning around," he said. Booming attendance means a growing tourism industry and a strong trickle-down effect for Tulare County's economy, Smeck said. For every \$1 appropriated to national parks, \$9 is generated and funneled back into the local economy.

Roughly 70% of all park visitors pass directly through Visalia, Smeck added. About half lodge outside the parks, staying 2.1 days on average.

"That money is going directly to your hotels, restaurants and retail shops," Smeck said. "The parks can be a really important economic engine for communities around Tulare County."

Smeck said the parks are ramping up infrastructure to accommodate ballooning attendance.

"You have more incredible here in your backyard than anywhere in the world," he said. "Please use it."

See SEQUOIAS. Page 6A

Sequoias

Continued from Page 3A

Getting around

During Sequoia's busiest period, Independence Day afternoon, about 900 cars pass through the gate every hour, Smeck said. Park inflow typically maxes out at 500 cars per hour.

"It's a huge effort to accommodate 2 million visitors per year, especially when you consider 60% of them come between Memorial Day and Labor Day," Smeck said.

To accommodate the explosion in attendance, park officials have converted exit lanes to entrance lanes and continue to push electronic passes purchased online in advance.

Smeck also hopes to expand Sequoia Shuttle and reorient the park's circulation patterns around a new transit center planned for construction near Lodgepole.

Sequoia Shuttle is a partnership between the parks service and Visalia, providing \$20 round-trip tickets to the park from Visalia. The 2020 season will start at the end of May and run through the summer.

"You can still drive private vehicles," Smeck said, adding that the park also planned to increase parking.

Employee housing challenges Smeck fears the biggest impediment to the park's growth is access to affordable housing for employees, he said.

"The shortage of affordable housing is affecting our ability to recruit and retain employment," Smeck said.

Though the Visalia metro area enjoys some of the most affordable housing in the state, Airbnbs and short-term rentals have gobbled up most long-term housing, especially in Three Rivers and the foothill communities, Smeck said.

"Airbnb has effectively pushed up rental prices far out of the range of our employees' income," he said. "It's one of our biggest operational challenges."

Boiano said the problem affects the conservancy, too. The conservancy is the parks' dedicated nonprofit and fundraising arm.

"It's a bit confounding," she said. "It definitely affects our business model."

One potential solution officials are considering is creating a dedicated employee shuttle out of Visalia.

'Go Native'

Boiano and Smeck said they are working with locals to foster better relationships between the parks and Tulare County communities.

The conservancy is planning a Go Native festival to celebrate indigenous cultures and their history within the parks, Boiano said. Local tribal officials are working with the conservancy on the project.

"We want to connect the parks' history to its future," Boiano said.

A past Visalia Times-Delta editor (then the Visalia Weekly Delta) was instrumental in saving the giant sequoia trees and inspiring local politicians to lobby Congress to draft legislation that directly led to the creation of the National Parks Service, Smeck said.

Sequoia National Park is the second oldest national park in the United States, behind Yellowstone National Park. "There wouldn't be a Sequoia National Park if not for the citizens of Visalia," Smeck said.

It's a relationship Smeck, Boiano and Visit Visalia hope to continue for generations to come.

"Use your parks, they belong to you," Smeck said. "They're your birthright."



Snow capped Castle Rocks in Sequoia National Park December 2019. RON HOLLMAN