Western Values Project

100 Years of National Park Service Stewardship

Oil and Gas Development at the Doorstep of "America's Best Idea"

(Aug. 24, 2016)—The National Park Service is commemorating 100 years of protecting some of our most spectacular landscapes. Our willingness to set aside these areas as national parks – to declare their preservation to be of the highest importance – shows that we are a magnanimous, forward-looking people. And we have come to discover, almost by accident, that national parks are an economic force, a major one that in 2015 alone generated $32 billion in economic output.

But it is often forgotten that our national parks frequently emerge from political compromise. Their boundaries do not capture all of the scenery, just some of it. For that reason, conflict has flared over the years when development projects have been proposed on lands just beyond a park's boundaries. In recent years, this conflict has centered on oil and gas development – from the remote mountain valleys that border Glacier National Park in Montana to the stunning red-rock canyons that surround Arches National Park in Utah. Important park values have been threatened – perhaps most notably at Arches, where a misguided leasing proposal would have permitted oil and gas drills to operate directly across from Delicate Arch, the iconic landmark featured on the State of Utah's license plate.

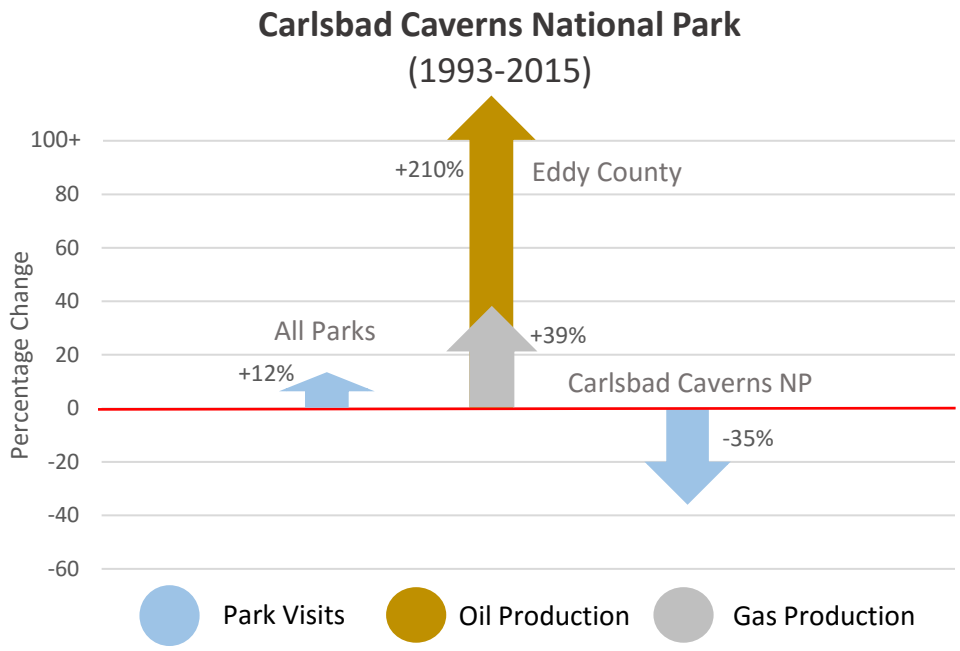
Park visitors are taking notice. They – and the millions they pump into state and local economies – are staying away from parks where oil and gas production has surged on nearby lands. For example, a recent study by the Bureau of Land Management found that visitation to Utah's Dinosaur National Monument declined by over 40 percent between 1999 and 2014 as oil production in Uintah County increased by 358 percent and gas production increased by 339 percent.

This phenomenon is not just limited to Dinosaur, and has driven down visitation at several other national parks in the West. While other factors may be contributing to these declines, a clear pattern is emerging between park visitation and the intensity of nearby oil and gas production. In the following examples, the Western Values Project identifies parks in the West where park visitation has declined, significantly in some cases, as oil and gas production has intensified in neighboring counties. (All production data in this report from www.drillingedge.com.)

Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico

Carlsbad Caverns National Park protects some of the best remaining wildlife habitat in the Chihuahuan Desert, in addition to scores of underground caves. In the United States, the desert has been heavily fragmented by years of oil and gas drilling, pipeline construction and road-building in the Permian Basin. This activity is associated mostly with oil production, which increased by 200 percent in Eddy County between 1993 and 2015, with over 6,000 wells completed in a recent four-year stretch (2008-11). Meanwhile, visitation to Carlsbad Caverns declined by 35 percent from 1993 to 2015.

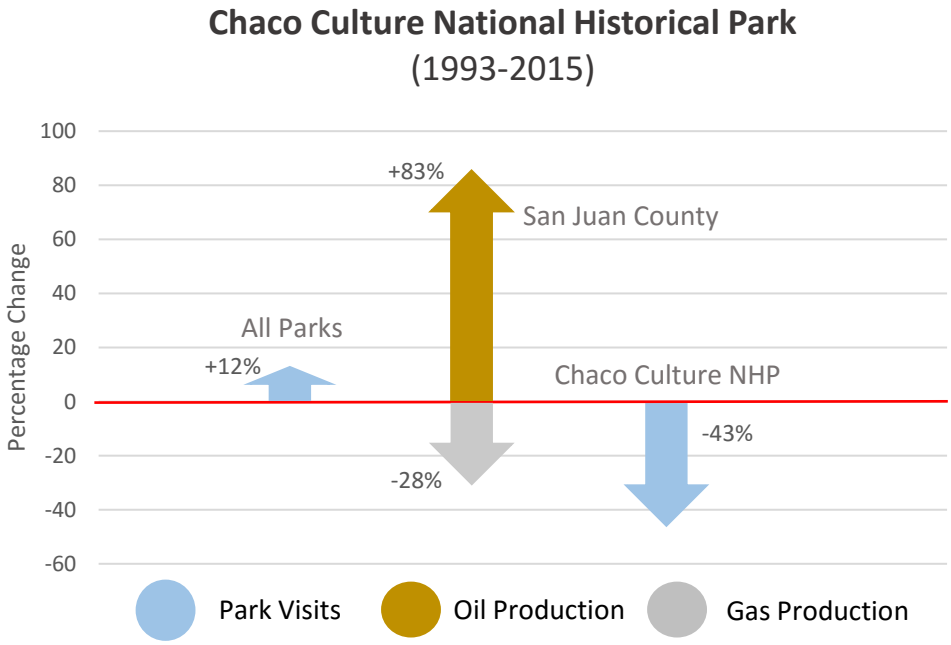
Carlsbad Caverns National Park



Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico

A World Heritage Site, Chaco Culture National Historical Park is home to dozens of multi-story pueblos, great kivas and other structures that were built centuries ago by the ancestors of modern-day pueblo people. The park also sits in the heart of the San Juan Basin, one of the most prolific oil and gas producing regions in the world. While gas production has declined modestly since 1993, industry has continued the rapid pace of development, completing almost 3,500 new wells between 2005 and 2007. Oil production has also increased (by 83 percent) since 1993. Over the same period, the park experienced a dramatic, 43 percent decline in visitation.

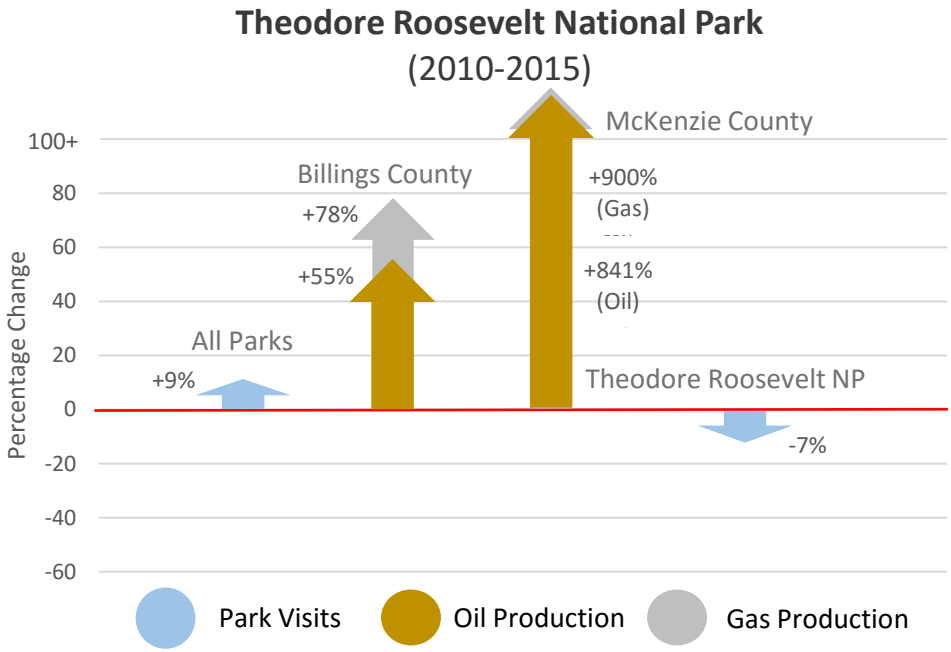
Chaco Culture National Historical Park



Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota

Known as the "cradle of conservation," Theodore Roosevelt National Park includes the rolling grasslands, fragile badlands and wildlife herds that shaped the legendary conservation ethic of President Theodore Roosevelt. Over the past few years, however, drill rigs, wells and other infrastructure associated with oil and gas production in the Bakken formation has surrounded the national park. Between 2010 and 2015, oil production in McKenzie County rose by 841 percent, while gas production increased by 900 percent (oil and gas production also grew in Billings County by 55 and 77 percent, respectively). Visitation to the park decreased by 7 percent over the same period.

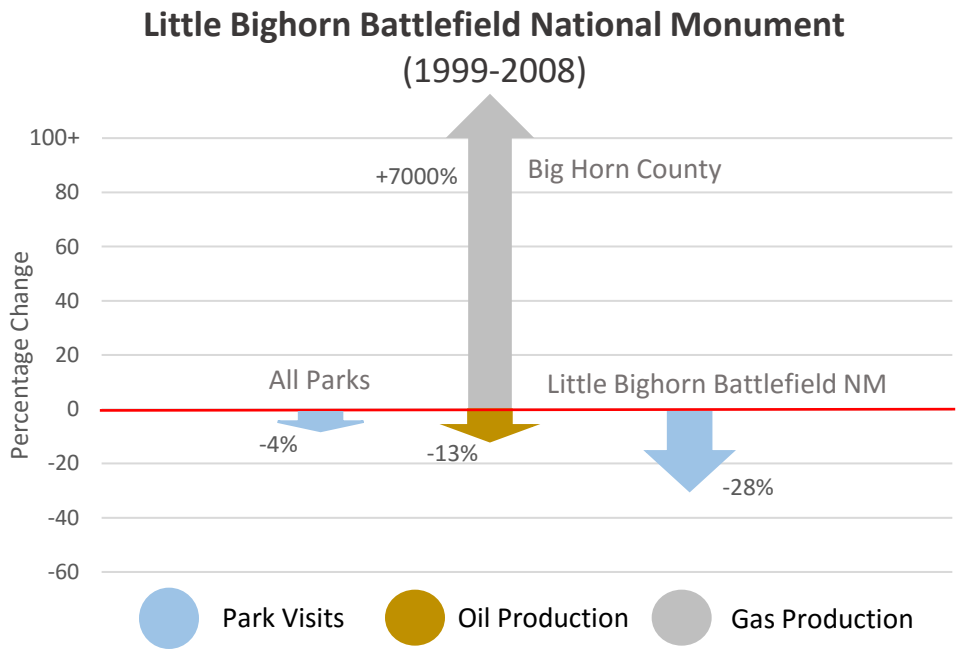
Theodore Roosevelt National Park



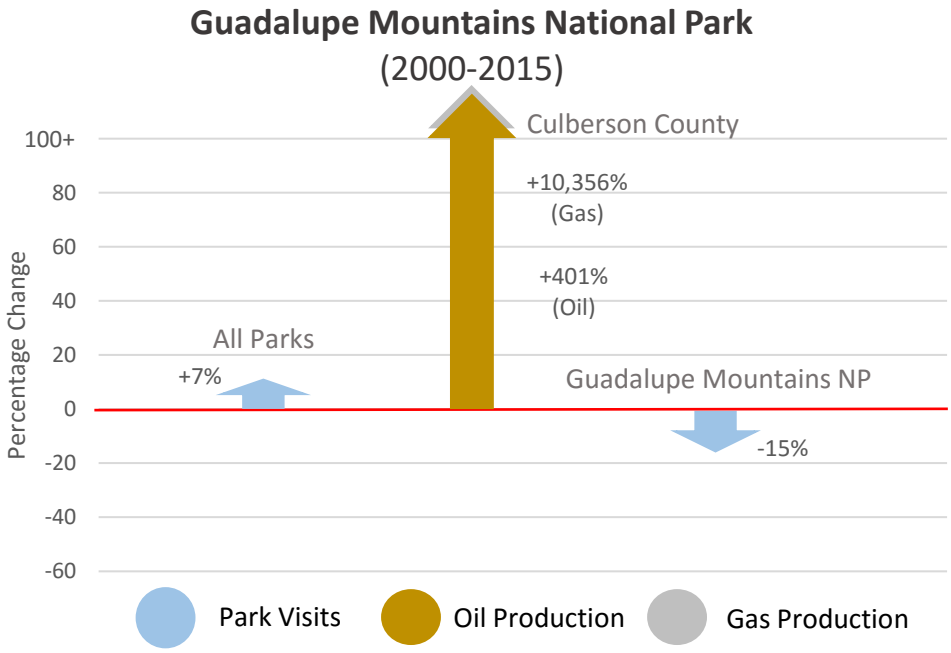
Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument commemorates the famous conflict between the Sioux and Cheyenne and the U.S. Calvary, led by George Armstrong Custer. The national monument is embedded in the upper half of the Powder River Basin, where natural gas production soared in the early 2000s. In fact, gas production in Big Horn County increased by over 7,000 percent between 1999 and 2008, with industry completing 325 new wells in 2006 alone. Over the same period, visitation to Little Bighorn Battlefield dropped by 28 percent.

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument



Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas

Home to the highest point in Texas, Guadalupe Mountains National Park protects a fragile desert ecosystem that includes one of the finest preserved fossil reefs in the world. Like Carlsbad Caverns, the national park is located in the Permian Basin, and oil and gas production has steadily increased around its borders. Between 2000 and 2015, natural gas production in Culberson County increased astronomically (by more than 10,000 percent), while oil production grew by 400 percent. Over the same time frame, visitation to Guadalupe Mountains declined by 15 percent.

Guadalupe Mountains National Park