

Lull in visitors to national parks

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON – Go ahead, blame harsh weather or high gas prices for a marked reduction in visits to Yosemite and other national parks so far this year. The summer drives, though, are returning.

In other words, the time to really beat the crowds may have passed.

At traditionally popular parks from Yosemite and Yellowstone to Mount Rainier and the Great Smoky Mountains, visitation from January through May fell compared with last year, sometimes dramatically. The smaller crowds thrilled park visitors but worried the businesses that depend on them.

“The concessionaires and the gateway communities had a very tough spring,” Yosemite National Park spokesman Scott Gediman acknowledged Tuesday, “but the summer will be huge.”

Through May 31, Yosemite reported an approximately 7 percent decline in recreation visits compared with the same period last year; the Great Smoky Mountains’ decline exceeded 8 percent.

Elsewhere, the falloff has been even more dramatic. Yellowstone recorded a 14 percent decline in recreation visits through May 31 compared with 2010, and Mount Rainier reported a stunning 26 percent reduction.

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