

Private business on public lands a growing trend



Recreational vehicles at an RV-only camping area in Yellowstone National Park run by Xanterra. Photo/Jim Peaco/National Park Service

By Joshua Zaffos, High Country News

A family heading to Yellowstone National Park this summer to sleep amid the geysers and grizzlies had lots of choice in accommodations. They could throw up a tent on a simple campsite without flush toilets for less than \$20 a night. Campgrounds with full RV hookups, showers and bathrooms would cost \$24 to \$47. Cabins and rooms around Old Faithful, while much pricier, offer easy access to restaurants, stores, cell service and Wi-Fi.

Beyond the upgraded amenities, a difference the park-visiting family might not have noticed is who was running those campsites and cabins. The National Park Service manages the basic campgrounds, while Xanterra Parks & Resorts, a private concessionaire, operates the more developed campgrounds and lodges, food services, gift shops and guide outfits – all the

services, in other words, that are well positioned to turn a profit.

Turning over campgrounds and other services to private companies is a common – and somewhat controversial – practice in popular national parks, and even many well trafficked national forests. And it may soon become even more ubiquitous, bringing changes that could alter the natural settings of campgrounds and public lands.

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