

The Great American Outdoors Act is providing crucial funding – up to \$6.65 billion over five years – to fix our national parks' crumbling roads, decaying buildings, outdated water systems and many more repair needs. This bill, along with other funding sources, is ensuring our parks can continue to welcome millions of visitors each year and protect the natural and cultural resources that tell our nation's history.

Mammoth Cave NATIONAL PARK

Boasting the world's longest known cave system, Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky is also home to thousands of years of human history and a rich diversity of plant and animal life, earning it an added designation of UNESCO World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve.

Park staff often describe Mammoth as “two parks in one,” with breathtaking worlds to explore both below ground and above. Nestled in the rolling hills of south-central Kentucky's scenic Green River Valley, the park features 420 miles of underground surveyed passageways—13 of which are available to visitors. It also offers more than 30 miles of the Green and Nolin Rivers, ideal for paddling and fishing. In 2019, the park attracted more than a half million visits and \$48 million in visitor spending.

The cave tours—which have been occurring for more than 200 years—are the park's most popular attractions by far. Visitors can select from more than 19 different underground tours, including a fully wheelchair accessible tour,

short and long walking tours, lantern tours, and adventurous crawling tours. Rangers inform visitors about the demands of the tour they're embarking on before departure, often describing them as hikes of varying difficulty that just happen to be underground. Some tours ascend and descend hundreds of stairs and contain especially steep inclines. Many of the cave tours sell out.

Yet for all its riches, the park's ability to provide a quality visiting experience has been increasingly undermined in recent years, as it confronts more than \$70 million in deferred maintenance. The backlog includes eroding trails through its treasured caves that pose a risk to visitors and ultimately threaten to damage the caves themselves.



BY THE NUMBERS:



\$8.5 million from the Great American Outdoors Act to repair cave trails



\$35 million in annual economic output



516,000 annual visitors



420 miles of underground passageways



74 miles of roads

PHOTOS: Cover: ©National Park Service
Back: ©National Park Service

THE CHALLENGE: degrading trails that undermine the visiting experience and threaten resources

The highlight of Mammoth Cave's formations is the area known as Frozen Niagara, a heavily trafficked section that has been used for more than a century. Along this segment, visitors and staff travel on a bumpy, rough dirt trail through particularly steep, small, and narrow sections. One of the worst trail sections is Big Break, where the trail is very steep, smooth, and generally difficult to traverse. Many visitors struggle to ascend and keep solid footing. In some places, visitors have to climb to get out of the cave; one spot is so narrow, it is affectionately known as the Submarine Stairs. "It's a neat experience," says park spokesperson Molly Schroer, "but it can be difficult and unsafe if we have to escort someone out in a medical emergency."

Over time, the trail surfaces between the New Entrance and the Frozen Niagara Entrance have deteriorated due to heavy use. Dust and lint produced by foot traffic sticks to the cave walls and cultural artifacts and promotes algae, threatening a section of the cave almost one mile long.

In addition, the lack of handrails allows visitors to stray off the routes, causing damage to both cultural and natural resources. Stairway handrails, built with iron nearly a century ago, are

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significantly worn and pitted. The last major investment in trails along this tour route occurred during the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) period in the 1930s.

THE PROJECT

Through an investment that is approximately \$8.5 million, the Great American Outdoors Act will fund updates and improvements along a one-mile section of Frozen Niagara Route, New Entrance Route, and Drapery Room so visitors will not stray off the trail, trip on potholes, or slip on steep sections of the walkway. Among those enhancements: replacement of all materials along the walking path to provide a consistent, hardened, and more even trail surface; replacement of some steep inclines with stairs; replacement of iron handrails with stainless steel; installation of new benches and electrical/communication conduits; and addition of short retaining walls along each side of the pathways to keep visitors on the trail and to protect cave walls and artifacts from potential algae growth. The

section along the Submarine Stairs will be re-routed to a wider section of cave that will ease visitor passage and medical team access (wide enough for a stretcher) in the case of an emergency.



THE IMPACT

The project, which is expected to begin after Labor Day 2022 and end by Memorial Day 2023, before the park's busiest season, will alleviate most of the existing issues and will enhance visitor experience and staff peace of mind for decades. This investment also benefits the cave, by protecting cultural and natural resources from off-trail visitor traffic and damaging dust and lint. The project will reduce unscheduled and emergency repairs and long-term trail maintenance costs. After project completion, the issues addressed by this investment should not require major work for the next 50 years.

The Great American Outdoors Act is successfully repairing infrastructure at hundreds of parks across the country. However, with a nearly \$22 billion backlog, much more is needed. We urge Congress to extend the Legacy Restoration Fund for an additional five years.

Preserving Our Past.



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Protecting Our Future.