



CARES Act Flash Report

The National Park Service's Coronavirus Response Operating Plans

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NPS closed most park facilities and some parks entirely. As the NPS begins to reopen parks across the country, we reached out to park superintendents to determine whether the national parks had developed or had begun developing COVID-19 response operating plans.

We found:

- The NPS maintained ongoing communication, provided interim COVID-related guidance, and issued its finalized COVID-19 operating guidance on reopening its parks on May 28, 2020.
- Thirty national parks had already begun opening or anticipated a phased reopening between May 2020 and July 2020.
- Ten of those 30 national parks had not begun developing a plan to reopen.

The National Park Service (NPS) manages 419 parks, including national parks, recreation areas, seashores, and monuments, in 50 States, the District of Columbia, and U.S. Territories. In response to the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), the NPS made significant changes to its normal operations to ensure the safety of its visitors, employees, volunteers, and partners. These operational changes included closing most park buildings, facilities, and restrooms, and in some cases, entire parks. As an outdoor respite for the public, however, some outdoor recreational spaces—where local public health guidance allowed—remained opened. Through internal guidance, the NPS directed its parks to follow the most stringent public health guidance provided by Federal, State, and local officials when making decisions related to park operations.

With States now easing stay-at-home restrictions, and in response to the White House's emphasis to open the national parks, some parks intend to or have already increased access by implementing a phased reopening. Therefore, on May 5, 2020, we initiated a review of the NPS' COVID-19 response operating plans to reopen the parks. Our scope included reviewing the reopening plans for the NPS' 62 national parks.

We initially planned to review the guidance the NPS provided to the national parks, obtain each national park's individual plan, and determine if the national parks followed NPS guidelines. We could not continue with our review as planned because the NPS had not yet disseminated its finalized guidance, *National Park Service COVID-19 Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan*, to assist the national parks in developing reopening plans. Specifically, the NPS told us on May 7, 2020, that it had developed the guidance, but the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) still needed to review and approve it, which occurred by May 19, 2020. When we learned that the NPS had not yet distributed guidance, we revised our review to contact each of the 62 national park superintendents and report on each national park's current operating status, anticipated reopening date, and whether the national park had begun developing a COVID-19 response operating plan. The NPS issued its guidance to the parks on May 28, 2020.

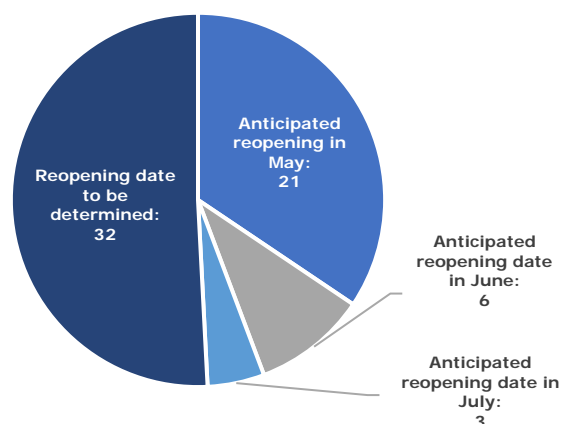
The *National Park Service COVID-19 Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan* provides:

- Strategic direction, guidance, and an adaptive decision making framework to reopen in a phased approach, when the risk to employees and the public can be sufficiently mitigated
- A risk assessment tool for reopening public-facing facilities and identifying reasonable mitigation techniques to protect employees, volunteers, contractors, and visitors
- NPS’ roles and responsibilities regarding reopening plans
- COVID-19 mitigation strategies such as:
 - Social distancing protocols
 - Cleaning procedures
 - Occupancy limits
 - Monitoring employees health in the workplace
 - Signage requirements
 - Ventilation guidance

Results of Our Review

We found that as of May 12, 2020, most of the national parks were entirely closed or still partially closed—only allowing access to outdoor recreational spaces, such as hiking trails, roads, and open water. Of the 62 national parks, we noted that 32 did not yet have an anticipated date to increase recreational access, visitor services, or use of some facilities, while 30 had either already begun a phased reopening or anticipated an opening date between May 2020 and July 2020.¹ We also noted that 21 of those 30 parks had already begun reopening or anticipated opening in May 2020 (see Figure 1). Yellowstone National Park, for example, began its first phase of reopening on May 18, 2020. Bryce Canyon National Park and Grand Teton National Park are other examples of national parks that reported a phased reopening on May 13, 2020, and May 18, 2020, respectively.

Figure 1: The National Parks' Anticipated Reopening Dates Varied Between May and July 2020



Although the *National Park Service COVID-19 Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan* was not yet finalized when some parks began to consider reopening, the NPS had maintained communication with its national parks and provided interim COVID-19-related guidance throughout the closure. To the NPS’ credit, when we contacted the superintendents, we found that many of the national parks had already developed or had begun developing COVID-19 reopening plans. Specifically, for the 30 national parks that had either already begun a phased reopening or anticipated reopening between May 2020 and July 2020, we found that 20 national parks had developed or had begun developing a phased reopening plan with COVID-19 considerations.

¹ We did not receive a response from one park, and one national park in Alaska, which is a preserve with no facilities or trails, did not close because of the pandemic.

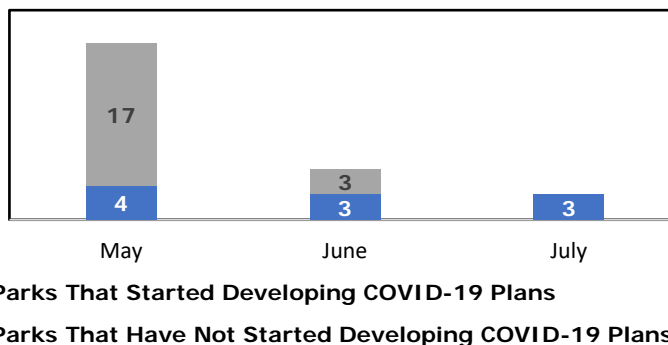
Considering the risks associated with COVID-19 and the phased reopening of the national parks, and now that the NPS has issued formal guidance to all 419 parks, the NPS must ensure:

- All locations have a park-specific plan to reopen that incorporates, at a minimum, the guidance in the *National Park Service COVID-19 Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan*
- Every location has appropriate policies and procedures in place to operate in a way that provides public access while protecting visitors and staff from further transmission of the virus



We also found, however, that 10 of those 30 parks had not started developing a COVID-19 operating plan for reopening (see Figure 2). For example, Biscayne National Park in Florida and Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona had not begun developing COVID-19 reopening plans but had anticipated reopening in May and June, respectively. Further, on May 4, 2020, Everglades National Park reopened some of its park facilities and services, including the marina store, restrooms, gas pumps, and fish-cleaning stations. We found that although the Everglades National Park provided us with a document listing a few general park restrictions and a concessionaire’s plan noting precautions for operating the marina store, fuel pumps, and bath house, Everglades National Park had not begun developing an overall COVID-19 reopening plan. The Everglades National Park, as well as other parks that have begun a phased reopening before receiving the NPS guidance, should develop or update their COVID-19 operating plans to incorporate, at a minimum, the guidance provided by the NPS.

Figure 2: National Parks Anticipating Reopening in May, June, or July Had Not All Started Developing COVID-19 Plans



We acknowledge the challenge the NPS has had in this ever-changing and unprecedented situation. We also recognize that the NPS cannot take a one-size-fits all approach to reopening its locations, as each national park must consider guidance from Federal, State, and local officials. Considering the risks associated with COVID-19 and the phased reopening of the national parks, it is imperative that all NPS locations have a park-specific plan to reopen. Now that the NPS has issued its formal guidance to all 419 locations, it must ensure that moving forward every location follows, at a minimum, the NPS guidance and has appropriate policies and procedures in place to operate in a way that provides public access while protecting visitors and staff from further transmission of the virus.