



John Flesher/AP

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore needs \$20 million in repairs, including \$2 million for campgrounds and picnic areas.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

Michigan

Overview

In 2011, viewers of ABC's "Good Morning America" chose Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore as the "Most Beautiful Place in America."¹ This spectacular 35-mile stretch along Lake Michigan's eastern coast is best known for its pristine beaches and steep sand dunes and bluffs formed by retreating glaciers. It also has more than two dozen small lakes as well as marshes and tracts of hardwood forest.

The park has a rich history. It is named for the Chippewa legend of Sleeping Bear, the story of a mother bear and two cubs that go to the lake to escape a forest fire. All three attempt to swim to the other shore, but only the mother bear makes it. According to folklore, one of the large dunes depicts the mother bear looking out

over the water for the cubs—now represented by islands that rose in their honor.² The site later became a center for shipping, logging, and agriculture. Today, visitors can enjoy swimming at seven beaches, hiking through the maple and beech tree forests, and climbing the dunes. Unfortunately, the park has deferred maintenance needs of \$20 million that may disrupt those visits.

Maintenance challenges

When the park was established in 1970, the National Park Service became the owner of an old lighthouse, a former Coast Guard station, and a historic farm area. It is now responsible for maintaining 368 buildings, which account for nearly 40 percent of its repair backlog. NPS needs another \$2 million to maintain campgrounds, picnic areas, and the landscape itself. Hiking along the dunes and up the steep bluffs is very popular, but heavy use has worn down many trails. Restoring them would cost nearly \$600,000. The park also includes two uninhabited islands—North Manitou and South Manitou—that visitors can reach by ferry. The dock stations they launch from need more than \$350,000 worth of repairs.

The 23 miles of roads inside the park have also deteriorated because of age and the toll of thousands of yearly visitors. Repairing them would cost \$5 million. Most of that sum is needed to repave Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive, which winds to vantage points for Lake Michigan and Glen Lake.

“ Each year, guests from more than 20 states and six countries stay at my RV park, resort, and cottages to enjoy the fabled Sleeping Bear Dunes and its many trails and activities. Many community business owners rely on that tourism to make a living. That’s why it’s so important that we maintain the park’s roads, trails, campgrounds, and picnic areas so that visitors will continue to make the trip to this beautiful landscape.”

Gary Becker, president, Indigo Bluffs RV Park & Resort, Empire, Michigan

Recommendations

To address the deferred maintenance at Sleeping Bear Dunes and other NPS sites in Michigan and across the country, Congress should:

- Ensure that infrastructure initiatives include provisions to address park maintenance.
- Provide dedicated annual federal funding for national park repairs.
- Enact innovative policy reforms to ensure that deferred maintenance does not escalate.
- Provide more highway funding for NPS maintenance needs.
- Create more opportunities for public-private collaboration and donations to help restore park infrastructure.

Table 1

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore Facts 2016

Visitor spending	\$183.1 million
Jobs created by visitor spending	2,900
Economic output	\$231 million
Labor income	\$71.4 million
Visits	1,683,553
Deferred maintenance (fiscal year 2015)	\$20.2 million

Sources: National Park Service, "Annual Visitation Report by Years: 2006 to 2016," accessed July 13, 2017, [https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/National%20Reports/Annual%20Visitation%20By%20Park%20\(1979%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year\)](https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/National%20Reports/Annual%20Visitation%20By%20Park%20(1979%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year)); National Park Service, "Visitor Spending Effects," accessed July 13, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>; National Park Service, "NPS Deferred Maintenance Reports," accessed Aug. 19, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/plandesignconstruct/defermain.htm>

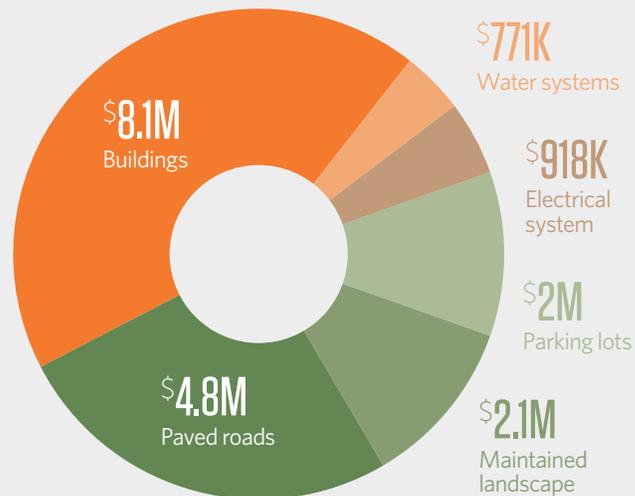
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Figure 1
**Sleeping Bear
 Dunes National
 Lakeshore Needs
 Millions of Dollars
 for Infrastructure
 Repairs**
 Key deferred
 maintenance

Note: This chart depicts the largest maintenance categories.

Source: Pew analysis of National Park Service data

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The Pew Charitable Trusts works alongside the National Parks Conservation Association, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and other national and local groups to ensure that our national park resources are maintained and protected for future generations to enjoy.

Endnotes

- 1 ABC News, "Most Beautiful Place in America Revealed!" accessed Dec. 12, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/beautiful-place-america-revealed-sleeping-bear-dunes-michigan-14323307?tab=9482930§ion=1206852&playlist=14322444>.
- 2 National Park Service, "Sleeping Bear Dunes Stories," accessed Dec. 12, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/slbe/learn/historyculture/stories.htm>.

This case study was updated on July 31, 2017, to reflect newly released 2016 data and to correct references to calendar and fiscal year.

For further information, please visit:

pewtrusts.org/nationalparks

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