

UNCROWDED, INC.

Open space and the breathing room it provides us is increasingly at risk of being treated as a luxury commodity as population growth exacerbates the glaring wealth gap in the U.S.

An NPG Forum Paper
by Mark Cromer

Abstract: The stark divide between the proverbial ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ has been a feature in America since the founding of the nation. It’s a disparity that’s often garishly reflected by material goods – the number and size of homes, cars and many other items accrued through success or inherited by bloodline – but it’s a chasm that’s more accurately assessed through a metric of access; from educational and professional opportunities to medical and legal services. As population densities continue to grow throughout the country, open space and the sense of inner-peace that uncrowded environs provide is at risk of becoming another luxury amenity extended to those who can afford it and out of reach to those who can’t. Vast tracts of public lands are now facing possible sale as more politicians in Washington, D.C. see the land as an asset to provide more housing or as a means to reduce the deficit, even while social media influencers are driving ever more people deeper into the wild to seek out scenic locations and previously less traveled destinations. Trends like ‘glamping’ that promote luxury getaways in the wild are also playing a role in the commodification of uncrowded places and spaces.

More than two decades have passed since filmmaker Alexander Payne bottled some of California’s golden myths and served it to theater audiences around the nation with his cinematic masterwork *Sideways*. A brilliantly crafted and quite believable account of one writer’s midlife crisis that’s overlaid and contrasted with his college buddy’s perpetual residency in reckless abandon, the film also reintroduced America to the lush landscape of the California Central Coast with its rolling hills, verdant vineyards and small towns all playing a powerful supporting cast.

While *Sideways* became an instant classic that captured the critics, triumphed at the box office and instantly elevated the careers of its thespians, the film also managed to accomplish something else, and not just notably increasing national demand for California’s pinot noir while putting a significant dent in the nation’s consumption of merlot – both of which it did.¹

Under the guise of deconstructing the quirky beauty of oenophilia while humorously mocking its inescapable snobbery, the film definitively captures a

place and time in California in which the benefits of open space and uncrowded environs were available, easily accessed and enjoyed pretty much by all who cared to venture forth to find and revel in them. The four principal characters of *Sideways* are all working class; Miles is the frustrated and struggling writer who teaches middle school English to get by, Maya is a post-divorce waitress who studies horticulture with an eye of turning her love of vino into a professional career, Jack is an aging actor professionally holding on with work in commercials while poised to marry into family money and Stephanie is a free spirit who pours wine for the tasting crowds.

They are not the Martha’s Vineyard money crowd on a playdate; they are all working Californians enjoying some time off in their own backyard.

Their week-long, darkly comedic adventure-turned-social commentary that’s chronicled in *Sideways* is centered around the small town of Buellton in Santa Barbara County and their day-tripping that carries the four of them into the surrounding wine country and iconic burgs like

Solvang and Los Olivos.

While there are certainly crowds to be glimpsed throughout the film, from haughty winery tastings to arty street festivals, it is amid the alluring quiet and sparsely populated splendor of the Golden State's hillsides, backroads and hamlets where the story is told and its questions are posed and partially answered. In one of the most understated but wonderfully evocative moments of the movie, the two couples ditch a winery tour for a hillside picnic as dusk lingers, the setting sun blanketing the swells of the landscape's tallgrass in a gauzy cocoon of warmth that silhouettes the foursome as they savor the moment and each other like the fine wine they share without another soul in sight.

Well, as Mary Hopkin famously sang: *'Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end...'*

But in many places, those days of wine and open spaces are indeed coming to an end.

Much of the iconography that was featured in *Sideways* can still be found and the unadulterated landscape that informed its narrative can still be experienced by residents and travelers alike, but there's no escaping the escalating impacts of California's population growth and its associated development over the past twenty years.

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' TURNED DEVELOPERS SCHEMIN'

And there's no escaping the outsized and rapidly accelerating impact that social media is having on previously quiet backroads and byways leading to scenic views and cozy road stops. What was once off the beaten path is becoming jammed with traffic, people waiting in lines and squabbling over who got there first and, inevitably, who is really welcome at all.² As uncrowded spaces are increasingly becoming an amenity reserved for 'members only,' it is clear that those without a bankroll to burn can find themselves shut out and relegated to the SRO section of an overlook.

California is now home to 5 million more people than it was in 2004, when *Sideways* was filmed, and since then its rustic wine country has not been immune to the development. The land has the scars to show for it, with multifamily housing projects rapidly sprouting across the ranches and farmland that once made U.S. Route 101 an idyllic ride through the

country.³ Even in the small towns where slower-paced surroundings are marketed as a destination experience, the resulting crowds and development chip away at the bucolic atmosphere.

In Buellton, the century-old Andersen's Split Pea Soup House was sold to an aggressive developer who promptly closed the beloved Danish eatery and inn and is now seeking to demolish and replace it with a massive four-story condominium complex with commercial, office and retail space.⁴ In nearby Solvang, the quaint Dutch-themed village has been roiled by the same developer looking to put Andersen's to the wrecking ball. Developer Ed St. George's plans to build more than 100 multifamily housing units on a five-acre parcel has created even more controversy and local backlash with the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Santa Maria Times* echoing angry residents by labeling him 'notorious,' 'controversial' and worse.^{5,6,7}

The impact of investors and developers' land rush on small towns along California's Central Coast can also be seen in various states of progression up and down the Golden State and across some of its most scenic spots.

Laguna Beach is a former bohemian arts colony that long featured a friendly 'Greeter' who became part of California's coastal lore by standing alongside the Pacific Coast Highway – from the early 1940s well into the mid-1970s – and welcoming *all visitors* to the beach town with a joyful shout of 'Delighted to see you!'⁸ This writer was fortunate enough to receive the jovial greetings on several occasions decades ago, during an era when Southern California's beaches could still be found uncrowded at times and sometimes even borderline deserted during the late fall and winter months of yesteryear.

While Laguna's artistic roots are still on vivid display with the town's renowned Pageant of The Masters, its Sawdust Art Festival and the ubiquitous art galleries and shops found along its streets, the nouveau riche have also made their mark on the shoreline community of 23,000 people, leading to literal lines being drawn in the sand. This spring, the Hotel Laguna made headlines and raised tempers when it cordoned off a sweep of the beachfront, placing tables and chairs for its guests on what suddenly became a private beach reserved for the luxe crowd.⁹

California's Coastal Act of 1976 prohibits businesses and other entities from sectioning off

slices of beachfront in an effort to make such public stretches of sand appear to be private.¹⁰

But what good is one law or a hundred codes if they aren't consistently enforced or if they lack enough prohibitive teeth to merit compliance, especially by those who can comfortably afford to be habitual scofflaws?

The Hotel Laguna has catered to the rich and famous for more than a century and still bills itself as a “dreamy seaside hideaway” that’s reserved primarily for executives and visiting dignitaries.¹¹ Its decision to suddenly annex portions of the beach and declare them off limits to the public was unfortunately nothing new for the establishment. The California Coastal Commission (CCC), which regulates public and private uses of and access to the state’s coast, cited the hotel for blocking the public’s access to the beach in August 2022. The CCC has issued multiple citations to Hotel Laguna since then.¹²

As the summer of 2025 got underway, the Hotel Laguna’s rooms for standard hospitality stays were closed ostensibly for renovations but the hotel’s beach side operations for food, drinks and sand-between-your-toes leisure remained open – at least for its members. A review of the hotel’s site offers no room-booking portals, only an email and a portal for membership to its exclusive ‘Beach Club’ which costs \$20,000 upfront and \$5,000-per-month in dues.

The historic hotel’s owners aren’t exactly bashful about who they believe should have access to their seafront sand, even if their marketing message presents rank contradictions:

“Over a century after its establishment, Laguna Beach’s oldest social club has been reimaged by locals, for locals, with a curated and elevated experience that celebrates individuals and families of all cultures and lifestyles. Located in the heart of our bohemian artist colony, you’ll find an easy, laid back luxury that’s distinctly Laguna Beach in flavor. The original Mission Revival structure has been revitalized as a Chic Riviera-inspired escape. Just steps from the sparkling sea, Laguna Beach Club invites private members and hotel guests to the best beach in town with the luxurious comfort of full-service hospitality. Enjoy breezy indoor/outdoor dining and cocktails in the clubhouse, or reserve your chair and umbrella on the sand. It’s a dreamy, decadent beach experience, designed to make everyone feel like a Hollywood star on retreat.

Welcome to your new living room on the beach.”¹³

The heart of their *bohemian* artist colony? Laguna hasn’t been authentically boho since the dawn of the 1980s.

But at least the hotel-turned-luxury club is self-aware to some extent, as it is a *decadent* endeavor indeed to brazenly and repeatedly close off stretches of public beach and offer it up to those who can afford to spend \$80,000 on a first-year membership. Applicants are also vetted on who they know at the club and other exclusive clubs where they may hold memberships.¹⁴

Unfortunately, public beachfronts and their public access routes to the shoreline that suddenly close and are converted to a private play space for the wealthy is not a new development in California. Whether done in a patently illegal fashion or carried out in a legally dubious manner that is calculated around the ability to sustain costly court challenges, limiting access has outsized impacts on a brimming population eager to explore the state’s public space resources.

Record industry mogul and multibillionaire David Geffen had a talent for understanding and promoting creative geniuses like The Eagles, Linda Ronstadt and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. He played a pivotal role in crafting America’s popular perception of California during the state’s ‘Take It Easy’ era as it emerged in the early 1970s. As The Eagles’ opus ‘Hotel California’ was saturating the airwaves in 1976, with its lyrical homage to a gilded California whose casual debauchery concealed decay and the spreading rot of corruption, Geffen moved into Malibu.

The year of America’s bicentennial also happened to be the same year that California guaranteed – at least ostensibly – public access to all 1,100 miles of the state’s coastline.¹⁵

But whatever laid back vibes and creative energy Geffen had enjoyed stoking among his Laurel Canyon troubadours and their fabled folk, country and rock haunts around LA had gone up in smoke by the 1980s, when Geffen decided his Malibu digs weren’t nearly exclusive enough.

Geffen slapped locked gates on the public access trails that run from the Pacific Coast Highway down to the public Carbon Beach and posted ‘No Trespassing’ signs. As surfers and beachgoers of all stripes began to complain that Geffen had effectively created his own private beach by a fiat granted

through his wealth, a decades-long legal dispute over the general public's access to tax-payer owned oceanfront shoreline unspooled and roiled much of Southern California.¹⁶

Some access activists began to sarcastically refer to Carbon Beach as "Billionaires Beach."¹⁷

For his part, Geffen remained not only unrepentant but often defiantly provocative. He deployed security guards on the sand and built 'false' garages and driveways along the highway as a façade and painted curbs red to prevent public parking around his 10-acre coastal spread. It was an estate that featured a 25,000-square-foot mansion, further escalating the public's ire and drawing increased media scrutiny to his proclivities of privatizing public space.¹⁸

Geffen was hardly alone in his quest to cocoon himself off from the rising pressures that elevated with the human tide of population growth in the state and nation. When he first took up residence in Malibu in 1976, California's population was half of what it is today.¹⁹

Billionaire businessman and publishing magnate Sam Zell followed Geffen to Malibu, along with tech titans like Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison, leveraging their vast resources to dominate the coastal landscape. Ellison, whose mega-yacht *Musashi* is frequently anchored near the pier, reportedly bought up as many as a dozen Malibu beachfront homes, cloistered them off and offers them to friends and associates that he seeks to entertain – thus avoiding even rental restrictions and requirements.²⁰

FROM THE CALIFORNIA COAST TO AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS

While Zell died in 2023 and Geffen has moved on – he sold his Malibu compound for \$85 million in 2017²¹ – what's happened in California has also been occurring to varying degrees throughout the United States, as a confluence of high-net-worth individuals and investment entities fueled by private equity gobble up and cordon off spaces and places. As more places are closed off and repurposed as profit centers catering to the fabulously wealthy, the public's interest in accessing off-the-beaten path locales accelerates with social media platforms leading the charge.²²

America's National Park System is on the frontlines of these competing societal pressures.

The National Park Service (NPS), functioning within the Department of the Interior, oversees the patchwork of 433 parks, monuments and historic sites, among other locations covering 85 million acres throughout the nation, that in 2024 drew an estimated 332 million visitors.²³ That scale of human traffic produces, as one would suspect, both pros and cons for the parks and the spiritual enriching serenity and emotional uplifting awe that they were intended to provide.

On the plus-side of the ledger, the hundreds of millions of annual visitors to America's national parks and monuments provide a vital revenue source for the economies of communities that cater to providing services for visitors. Last year, the 485-square-mile Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming drew 3.6 million visitors, a human tide that economists said resulted in \$738 million in revenue for area businesses in 2023 and supported more than 9,000 regional jobs.²⁴

As wildlife author Ted Kerasote observed with intentional understatement: "Not a bad return for a park that runs on a budget of about \$15 million a year."²⁵

On the negative side of the ledger, those hundreds of millions of visitors to America's national parks and monuments unsurprisingly impact the very landscapes they have come to experience. Increasingly, they also challenge the parkland administrative staff's ability to thread-the-needle of accommodating all who wish to access the pristine wildlands while preventing it from being overrun.

The popularity of the parks and human tide surging into them are not recent developments that can be attributed to post-COVID lockdown escapism. In 2021, as much of the nation was still grappling with pandemic-related protocols, Grand Teton National Park saw record attendance as nearly 4 million visitors entered the park that year alone, with nearly 5 million people pouring into nearby Yellowstone National Park.²⁶

While momentarily falling off during the initial COVID lockdowns and travel restrictions – in 2020 national park attendance was reported to have dropped by about 100 million visitors – the human surge quickly recovered to its pre-pandemic levels and has been steadily rising since by nearly 10 million more people each year since.²⁷ A variety of factors contributed to driving the public's increased interest in and visits to America's national parks, including

the ‘Find Your Park’ public awareness campaign that the park service launched in the 2010s and the solar eclipse of 2017.²⁸

SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES ITS MARK

There has also been a relatively new phenomenon driving more people into open spaces and previously out-of-the-way locales, including the national parks: social media influencers. According to a study conducted by Georgia Tech’s School of Economics and published by the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in April 2024, social media influencers were determined to be “One of the main drivers of the huge increase in visitation to national parks.”²⁹

In an associated article published by Georgia Tech News Center, social media platforms and the influencers that ply them have driven dramatic increases of traffic to already well-worn places such as Yosemite, the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Parks, but have also propelled significant numbers of people into lesser-known places across the American West, stretching from the Rocky Mountains to Alaska.³⁰

The NPS has an operating budget of \$3.1 billion in 2025.³¹ The Pentagon’s, by contrast, is \$833 billion. But cuts are expected to be made to the NPS and will undoubtedly impact how many people can enjoy the experience of nature’s wonderland that the parks preserve, but also how they experience them.

Since January, NPS has shed approximately 13-percent of its staff workforce through buyouts, retirements and deferred resignations, stretching an already lean operation that oversees vast tracts of public space even thinner.³² Additional proposed cuts to the park service’s operating budget, presented as a means to reduce the federal budget deficit, have some observers predicting “catastrophic” consequences for the national quilt of parkland. If carried out, that would likely result in transferring some parks and wildland to state and native tribal control, where they are more likely to face liquidation through sales to private enterprise.³³

“Should anything even remotely like that come to pass,” notes Kerasote, “We would be witnessing the dismantling of a century-old system that has protected majestic scenery and places of ecological or historical importance from development. It has been a model of stewardship of landscapes that belong to all Americans.”³⁴

PUBLIC LANDS AT RISK OF SALES

The risk of federally held lands being peeled off – perhaps at first to state governments and indigenous tribal governments – is very real and the potential outcomes are as clear and grim as Kerasote envisions in his nightmare scenario.

A myriad of federal agencies manage Uncle Sam’s holdings across the nation – approximately 600 million acres of every type of landscape imaginable but with most of the largest tracts located in the Western U.S. – and include the NPS, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service, with all of them acting as stewards at the behest of the American people.³⁵

Environmental writer Michelle Nijhuis recently pointed out that a proposed sale of 500,000 acres of public lands, once again ostensibly as a ‘deficit reduction’ measure with an ‘affordable housing’ cherry put on top of it for good measure, came precariously close to being ushered through the House of Representatives but was stalled by Congressman Ryan Zinke of Montana. The Republican holdout against what would have been the largest sale of public lands in modern American history, stoically told the *Associated Press*: “It was a ‘no’ now. It will be a ‘no’ later. It will be a ‘no’ forever.”³⁶

Environmentalists, nature enthusiasts, wildlife preservationists, population reduction advocates and garden variety common-sense Americans everywhere who are disturbed by a mentality permeating the nation’s capital that views public lands as a cash cow may all breathe a sigh of relief that Zinke had the courage to stand up and help kill the amendment.³⁷

But the fate of public lands is hardly out of the woods.

This spring, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum declared during a press event that America’s public lands are “an incredible asset on America’s balance sheet” that can be sold off to developers in a bid to “solve our nation’s affordable housing crisis.”³⁸

Nijhuis, who describes herself as a ‘lapsed biologist’ who lived off the grid for 15 years in Colorado and is now based in Washington State,³⁹ opines that the proposed sale would have resulted in precious little, if any, affordable housing. Rather, a sale would far more likely have ended up serving the tastes of the über-wealthy who can never have too many vacation homes or luxury resorts to choose

from in scenic locations increasingly turning into exclusive enclaves.⁴⁰

The State of Utah, where huge tracts of public land remain under federal control, filed a lawsuit seeking to wrest more than 18 million acres away from its public-keepers in Washington, DC, in the hope that the Beehive State could then start selling much of it off to developers. The United States Supreme Court intervened in January, dismissing the state's attempt in a brief that did not explain its decision.⁴¹

But Utah's governing powers and the private equity money machine that's driving developers are hardly giving up.

Both of the state's U.S. Senators – Mike Lee and John Curtis – have vowed to pursue the acquisition of federally managed public lands in their state and others for the express purpose of putting much of it on the auction block. For wilderness advocates in Utah, the current political climate and the associated pressures wrought by increasing populations presents an existential threat to the open spaces the public treasures.

Steve Bloch, the Legal Director for Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, was succinct in summing it up: “If successful, Utah's lawsuit would result in the sale of millions of acres of public lands in red-rock country to the highest bidder. [It would mark] an end to America's system of federal public lands and [result in] the dismantling of the American West as we know it.”⁴²

If anyone thought that Sen. Lee of Utah wasn't terribly serious with his stated intent to sell off public lands, his commitment was again made clear in the wee hours of June 11, when he introduced a rider to the budget reconciliation bill. It would require the U.S. Forestry Service and the BLM to sell off as much as 3.2 million acres of public lands in the West.⁴³ Lee attempted to use the reconciliation process for the so-called ‘Big Beautiful Bill’ to get public lands spanning 11 states to be opened up to private enterprises for maximum exploitation, prioritizing development and industry profit over public usage. Lee ended his efforts after it became clear the provisions might kill the measure, but announced he was not giving up on selling off public lands in the future.⁴⁴

Whatever the fate of Lee's current efforts to feed public lands into the furnace of ever more

development, the pressures to sell off public lands will remain and almost certainly continue to escalate. This is an era when residents of crowded and collapsing cities and increasingly congested suburbs are seeking mental refuge, emotional sustenance and spiritual recharge not only in the wild lands but just low-density landscapes they can still access.

WHEN GETAWAYS BECOME GLAMOUR PLAYS

In its summer issue this year, the venerable *Westways* magazine of the Southern California Automobile Club – which reaches an estimated 13 million readers⁴⁵ – featured a cover story entitled *In Pursuit of Awe: Discover How Travel Can Transform and Heal You*, and its cover photograph depicted a lone hiker crossing a beach in Senja, Norway. The deep hues of blue that surround the solo sojourner convey a sense of tranquility, the sort of which one will not find amid the clamor and rancor unfolding across many beaches in Southern California today.⁴⁶

Writer Sandy Cohen penned the cover story's exploration of the ‘chicken soup for the soul’ qualities that can be derived in heading out for parts less known and on the path less traveled, observing: “Connecting with a vastness that changes the way you look at the world, feeling small but part of a greater expanse. It's remarkably good for your physical and mental health, too.”

The story connects dispatches from writers getting their awe on all over the world, from locales as disparate as Iceland and Ethiopia and with a domestic recommendation included from breathtaking Eagle Cliff in Hudson Valley, New York. But many Americans are going to find the prescription of indulging some peaceful, easy feelings harder to find and more costly to fill.

From the hillsides of California to the eastern edge of Long Island, seeking solace in some downtime is getting ever more expensive. While it routinely promotes high-end getaways through its advertising base and editorial reviews, *The Wall Street Journal* recently fessed up that even a weekend out with friends in one choice locale known for its Atlantic beachfront beauty was becoming out of reach for all but the flushes of New Yorkers.

Writer Rory Satran explores the contradictions that can come into play when spending a weekend in The Hamptons, an excursion that can now carry a five-figure price tag without even going full

Kardashian. But as Satran, who is the Executive Fashion Director and Chief Columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, confesses in her column: “It’s not really about the beach.”⁴⁷

No, it’s not. At least for an increasing number of people shopping for faux movie sets.

It’s about using The Hamptons as a backdrop for social media influencers, whose vamping and mugging in perfect spaces and places is driving up prices as the tide of digital mimicry and Live Action Role Playing (‘LARPing’) lifestyles of the rich and famous rises high in their wake. Satran’s column in *The Journal* was accompanied with photos of some of “the droves of influencers” that arrived for Round Swamp Farm’s opening day and an illustration of an itemized price tag totaling \$3,283.00 for a ‘girls’ weekend’ that included \$950 for Surf Lodge Bottle Service.

The impacts of social media influencers now reach far beyond marquee destinations such as The Hamptons and well off the beaten path into small little gems tucked around the nation.

In April, my wife and I checked into a small inn on the waterfront of Morro Bay, a quaint and quiet harbor town nestled on the Central California coast that I have enjoyed since my parents first introduced me to it in the late 1960s. What we didn’t know is that the family-run inn we had enjoyed in years past had just been bought by a larger hospitality outfit and big changes were underway in a place where remarkably little has changed around town over the past half-century.

The quiet of night is more often punctuated by seals barking and otters chirping, not engines revving or humans shouting. But that tranquility, too, seems to be poised on the edge of oblivion.

Developers are moving in to snap up real estate along the embarcadero and carry out the demolitions/renovations and buildouts to cater to the gaudy wealth-flashers that chase and revel in so-called exclusivity. The day my wife and I checked out of our cozy little room above the harbor, social media influencer Michele Soel checked in to that very same room and began to post faux Kardashian shots of herself preening on the balcony with Morro Bay’s iconic rock towering in the background of the harbor.⁴⁸

Just how many of Soel’s 2.3 million Instagram followers will now decide to descend on the harbor

town of 10,000 people and pay top dollar for the privilege of pretending to be her remains to be seen – Stoel has since decamped for the south of France where she’s frolicking and posting on the beaches there – but there’s no question that Soel and influencers like her possess the ability to trigger a Lemming-like rush that can irrevocably alter, i.e. destroy, the very essence of what makes the uncrowded surroundings so desirable to begin with.

Both *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, the two remaining national newspapers of note, have featured marketing campaigns that explicitly advertise how uncrowded environments are now commodified amenities offered to those who can afford it. Whatever the distance to open spaces and uncrowded places for Americans may be, the escalating costs of accessing them can also be glimpsed in travel data.

On May 19, 2025, *The New York Times* published an article on declining projections for traveling in America, noting that both foreign and domestic airlines were anticipating a dip in vacationers planning summer get-aways in the United States for a variety of reasons. However, there was one notable exception: upscale travelers were still on-the-go. “Indeed, the one segment that has managed to withstand the volatile economy is luxury travel. Virtuoso, a network of upscale travel agencies, said summer demand is up 23-percent,” the newspaper reported. “The U.S. is our No. 1 destination, and domestic travel is still holding really strong,” Misty Belles, the company’s Vice President for Global Public Relations, told *The Times*.⁴⁹

Late last year, Windham Mountain Club in New York published ads in *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* that garnished its appeal with the pitch: ‘Thoughtfully elevated. *Intentionally uncrowded.*’ The ad’s copy describes the resort as: “A premiere, public-private mountain community with best-in-class skiing for all and exclusive, four-season, luxury amenities for private club members, just a short drive from New York City.”

Just how long the ‘public’ part of that ‘private’ mountain resort will survive is anyone’s guess, but the question remains: Is reliable and affordable access to uncrowded spaces a privilege or a right?

If the answer is the former, then we’re already in real trouble, and if it’s the latter, we must take steps now to reduce population growth while expanding access to breathable space.

NOTES:

1. 'The Sideways Effect,' Wine Business Analytics, January 2009
2. 'How Much Are Social Media Influencers Impacting Travel Decisions,' TravelAge West, May 22, 2025
3. California Population Data 1900 to 2024, Macrotrends.net, June 2025
4. City of Buellton, 376 Ave. of Flags Mixed-Use Project, May 2025
5. 'Notorious Developer Buys California Icon,' San Francisco Chronicle, Sept. 19, 2024
6. 'Solvang's Wildwood Housing Proposal Creates Tension,' Santa Maria Sun, Oct. 4, 2024
7. 'Legacy of Pea Soup Andersen's Will Remain, Developer Says,' Santa Maria Times, Sept. 25, 2024
8. 'Laguna Beach Greeter Left Indelible Mark,' Los Angeles Times, January 6, 2008
9. 'Laguna Beach Hotel Faces Backlash,' KCAL News, May 16, 2025
10. Ibid.
11. HotelLaguna.org, June 11, 2025
12. 'Laguna Beach Hotel Faces Backlash,' KCAL News, May 16, 2025
13. HotelLaguna.org, June 11, 2025
14. Ibid.
15. 'David Geffen's Beach Is Yours,' The Verge, July 25, 2013
16. 'David Geffen's Malibu Mansion Sells for \$85 Million,' Mansion Global, May 2, 2017
17. 'Behind A 50-Year Battle For Public Access,' NBC News, Aug. 14, 2023
18. 'David Geffen's Beach Is Yours,' The Verge, July 25, 2013
19. U.S. Census Bureau, 1976
20. 'Oracle CEO Larry Ellison Makes Malibu Real Estate His Own,' Los Angeles Times, May 5, 2013
21. 'David Geffen's Malibu Mansion Sells for \$85 Million,' Mansion Global, May 2, 2017
22. 'How Much Are Social Media Influencers Impacting Travel Decisions,' TravelAge West, May 22, 2025
23. National Park Service, U.S. Department of The Interior
24. 'They're Majestic, Popular and Now in Peril,' The New York Times, June 8, 2025
25. Ibid.
26. 'Contemplating Growing Crowds,' Idaho Capital Sun, July 12, 2024
27. Visitation Numbers, U.S. National Park Service, June 2025
28. 'Contemplating Growing Crowds,' Idaho Capital Sun, July 12, 2024
29. 'Social Media Influences National Park Visitation,' PNAS, April 1, 2024
30. 'Social Media Driving Force Behind Increased Visits to National Parks,' Georgia Tech, April 1, 2024
31. NPS Funding Projections, National Park Service, 2025
32. 'They're Majestic, Popular and Now in Peril,' The New York Times, June 8, 2025
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. 'It Turns Out, Some Republicans In Congress Do Have A Red Line,' The New York Times, May 20, 2025
36. Ibid.
37. 'Public Land Sell-Offs Removed From House Budget Bill,' AccessFund, May 22, 2025
38. 'It Turns Out, Some Republicans In Congress Do Have A Red Line,' The New York Times, May 20, 2025
39. Michellenijhuis.com
40. Ibid.
41. 'Supreme Court Rejects Utah's Push To Wrest Control of Public Land,' Associated Press, January 14, 2025
42. Ibid.
43. 'Senate Proposes Millions of Acres of Public Lands Selloffs,' CalWild.org, June 12, 2025
44. 'Sen. Mike Lee Removes Public Land Provision from Trump's 'Big, Beautiful Bill,' CBS News, June 30, 2025
45. AAA Westways Reader Profile Study, 2019
46. 'In Pursuit of Awe: Discover How Travel Can Transform And Heal You,' Westways, Summer 2025
47. 'Planning A Hampton's Weekend? That's Rich,' The Wall Street Journal, June 2, 2025
48. Michele Soel, Instagram, April 2025
49. 'Summer Travel Slump?' The New York Times, May 19, 2025



Mark Cromer is a professional writer and researcher with more than three decades of experience as a working journalist and an investigator working in the field of business intelligence. His work on mass immigration and population growth issues has been published in major newspapers across the nation and internationally. Cromer was a senior staff investigator at Sapient Investigations, Inc., for more than a decade and he worked as a contract investigator for Kroll Associates, the global blue chip risk consulting and investigations firm.

NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.

**Negative Population Growth, Inc.**

2861 Duke Street, Suite 36
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone: (703) 370-9510

Fax: (703) 370-9514

Email: npg@npg.org

Board of Directors

June Bauernschmidt, *Chairman*
Josephine Lobretto,
Secretary/Treasurer
Frances Ferrara
Sharon Marks
Diane Saco

NPG Executive Office

Craig Lewis, *Executive Director*

**SIGN UP TODAY AT WWW.NPG.ORG
TO RECEIVE NPG COMMENTARY ONLINE!**