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Friday, November 23, 2007

Visitors to park increase in 2007

Weather blamed for low fall turnout at Shenandoah

By Robert King -- Daily Staff Writer

FRONT ROYAL — Shenandoah National Park visitation in October was down, but not enough to curb previous gains for the year.

The park had 208,000 visitors in October, off 11.6 percent from the same month a year ago. The month usually has high visitation due to sightseers in search of fall foliage.

Despite the decline for the typically busy month, park visitation has increased slightly this year.

"We are just over 1 percent up from last year for the year to date," said Karen Beck-Herzog, the park's management assistant. "We are certainly happy to know we are up a little bit and not declining."

Last year, 235,000 people visited the park in October.

Yet that figure was also below the 10-year average for October visitation, which is 250,000.

Beck-Herzog said the park was happy with the 2007 October figures, but "certainly we would prefer to have it mimic last year."

The main factor that could have affected visitation in October this year was bad weather, she said.

"You are going to have some ups and downs, and a lot of it can be generally attributed to weather," she said. "All you have to have is a rainy October and your visitation is going to be down."

The threat of bad weather can deter potential visitors, Beck-Herzog added.

The best time to view the foliage is around the second and third weekends in October, Beck-Herzog has said.

Another factor that may hurt visitation is that many people have a diminishing amount of free time. There are also more things to do in the park's area "and that does pull on people," Beck-Herzog said.

There are other factors that could be involved in lower visitation at Shenandoah and other national parks, Beck-Herzog said.

"There is that whole idea of nature deprivation, [which is] are our kids out and connected to nature as much as they should?" she said. "Those are some of the things we could probably attribute it to."

Much of the foliage along Skyline Drive was spared from a debilitating drought, Beck-Herzog said.

"There were a few places along Skyline where we did see some drought stress," she said.

Park officials are hoping November attendance will remain high, although many park facilities begin to close late in the month.

Visitation has been up and down the past few Novembers because of late fall foliage. Last year, the park attracted 67,681 visitors for the month, after a big jump in 2005, when 116,509 visitors were reported.

That figure was up from November 2004, when 67,691 people visited.

"Over the past few years, November has been a very strong month for us," Beck-Herzog said. "We see later peaks in our leaves, longer-lasting leaves



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and we will see where November goes to see our overall numbers. We definitely had a wonderful and very long fall."

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