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**The Best Friend of U.S. National Parks Is ... a Car Company?**

**Subaru’s pilot program has cut waste totals in half since 2015.**

Bloomberg Businessweek

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By Jennifer Flowers

It’s been a mostly sedentary year everywhere except in U.S. national parks. Typically quiet spots to escape the bustle of urban life, they’ve been teeming with activity during coronavirus lockdowns.

In September, Yellowstone National Park logged more than 800,000 visitors, a 21% increase in attendance from last year. In October, Grand Teton’s numbers were up 88%, to more than 351,000. And while some parks such as Denali in Alaska are difficult to reach without an airplane or a cruise ship, many are on track to exceed their already high visitation numbers from years past.

That should be good news, but the parks’ growing popularity, which predates the pandemic, has a downside: 70 million pounds of trash in 2019. (Figures for 2020 haven’t been released.)

Subaru of America Inc., the New Jersey-based subsidiary of Subaru Corp. of Japan, thinks it has a solution. The car company has only a 4.1% market share in the U.S. auto industry, but it’s built an outsize reputation among drivers who jones for the great outdoors.

In 2004 it turned its Lafayette, Ind., assembly facility into the country’s first zero-landfill auto plant by persuading suppliers to ship materials in Earth-friendly packaging and finding ways to recycle everything from Styrofoam to dinged bumpers.

Since 2015 the company has been applying what it learned from that effort to help the National Park Foundation manage its dirtiest problem. The program, Don’t Feed the Landfills, has so far reduced landfill waste by half through recycling, composting, and educational initiatives. It has successfully eliminated 16 million pounds of refuse across the three pilot locations in the Denali, Yosemite, and Grand Teton parks.

The initiative does more than dispatch trash pickers or write checks, though Subaru has given more than $35 million to the National Park Service’s charitable arm since 2013. Even Denise Coogan, Subaru’s manager of environmental partnerships and the initiative’s director, has rolled up her sleeves for “waste characterization studies”—dumpster dives, in other words.

Those first steps, she says, help identify the makeup of the trash that’s already there and seeing how much of it is plastic, food, cardboard, or paper to shape guidelines for each park.

On an early trip to Yosemite, Coogan recalls seeing 40-year-old trash bins that were so overfilled they were attracting bears and coyotes. Subaru has since added almost 1,000 animal-proof waste receptacles throughout its three pilot parks, along with clear signage that’s helped increase visitor recycling by 27%.

“The park service is thinking long term,” Coogan says. “They’re thinking about what happens when we install the wrong containers: Will it have an impact on the bears? Will it impact the noise when they’re emptying them?”

Diverting waste is also crucial. For that, Subaru has expanded composting facilities. It’s also advised on sustainable food packaging and reusable containers for concessionaires such as on-site restaurants or cruise lines that send guests into Denali with packed lunches.

In March, Don’t Feed the Landfills earned Subaru the Corporate Stewardship Award from the Public Lands Alliance; also this year it was recognized by Engage for Good with a 2020 Silver Halo Award for Best Sustainability Initiative. These successes are enabling the company to pivot from pilot programs to a national rollout, eventually to all 62 national parks.

“The purpose is to try to get the pilot parks to be zero-landfill,” says Tom Doll, Subaru of America chief executive officer and a self-professed parks enthusiast. “Once we get the processes all in place, we’ll be able to take those best practices around the country.”

Each park has its own mosaic of unique considerations, though, making it impossible to copy-paste solutions across the entire system. For instance, Grand Teton is so remote, the park had to get special permission to drive organic waste through Yellowstone to reach the nearest composting facility. Yellowstone deals with disproportionate peak-season crowds from May to September that create mountains of garbage in a short amount of time.

The advantages of untangling these dilemmas is economic as well as environmental. “Subaru has been helping us substantially reduce the operating costs of a park by reducing waste,” says Will Shafroth, president and CEO of the National Park Foundation. “That’s a good thing. It means those operating dollars are available for other purposes that actually benefit the visitor.”

If they succeed at scale, Shafroth says, the impact will outlast the current burst in demand as well. “We’re trying to help the park service prepare for the future,” he says.

**GET HANDS-ON**

The National Park Service offers volunteer opportunities across all of its parks, whether it’s managing wildlife traffic jams as part of Grand Teton’s Wildlife Brigade, restoring native plants in Yellowstone, or collecting grizzly bear scat for DNA researchers in Denali. nps.gov/volunteer

**PAY A VISIT**

Travel outfitters are increasingly supporting the national parks. They include DuVine Cycling + Adventure Co., which began a fundraising partnership this summer with Outdoor Afro, a nonprofit that connects Black Americans with the great outdoors. duvine.com

**Questions:**

* **What is the main idea of this article?**
* **Using evidence from the article, explain what Subaru is doing to help the National Park Service.**
* **Why do you think Subaru initiated its “Don’t Feed the Landfills” program?**
* **Using evidence from the article, explain what the author wants you to learn.**