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OPINION

## Guest Shot: Contemplating a tourism nightmare scenario

Guest Shot / By Robert Frodeman

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If you think crowds have been a problem in the past, just consider what may be coming.

Yellowstone sees more than 4 million visitors a year, the Tetons 3.5 million. Most of those people pass through Teton County. We're familiar with the effects: clogged streets, jammed trails, stressed wildlife and frayed nerves. Many of us have given up visiting the national parks in the summer, and the once quiet places in the national forests now attract multitudes.

Now for the bad news: The 2021 summer season is set to break all records. As of April 30 every room in every hotel and every site in every campground in Yellowstone is sold out until September. We complain about the traffic now, but for the nightmare version of our future, consider Venice, Italy: a city of 250,000 that receives 25 million annual visitors. Or Hallstatt, Austria. It has a population of 780 people and gets more than a million tourists a year.

We could be facing a similar situation. Europe hasn't opened up yet, and many of those vacationers will travel domestically. The challenges won't be limited to traffic. All of our public services will be stressed, police and fire and rangers in the national parks and forests. And with COVID-19 still around, how will our hospital cope?

Much of this is out of our hands. People have the right to travel here: Ninety-seven percent of Teton County is public land. And many of the basic conditions are beyond our control: 330 million Americans, an internet culture that means there are no more secret places, and COVID-inspired domestic travel. Americans also have a strong libertarian impulse, which means that many will reject any talk of setting limits to visiting.

Americans may oppose talk of limits, but "soft" limits are already in place. Restricting the number of parking spaces in town and in the parks means we've been drawing lines for some time now. The same is true with camping spots, the number and nature of available bathrooms and the size of our roads. (Roads are one of the places where we can affect things: As highway engineers know,

adding extra lanes encourages more traffic over the long haul.)

We need a community conversation about the future of tourism. But it's important that we frame the conversation in the right way. One option is to describe tourism in terms of sustainability. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem has natural limits; exceed these limits and the environment suffers. The natural environment already suffers from overuse. More people will mean more harassed animals, worse trails and stressed social services.

But the limits we're bumping into are not only scientific. They are also aesthetic and religious in nature. People come here because it's beautiful and to seek quiet and contemplative experiences. Traffic, crowds and noise are precisely the things they left the city to get away from. From this perspective, managing tourism helps visitors as well as locals.

So how should we proceed? First, let's set a baseline for our conversation. Nearly everyone believes there must be some limit placed on tourism. This is a consensus that we can work from. In his "Ethics," Aristotle argues that good outcomes come from finding the mean between the extremes of lack and excess. For instance, courage consists of a mean: Too little is cowardice, and too much is foolhardiness. Tourism presents a similar situation. We are aiming for a mean even as we disagree about where to draw the line.

Second, rather than getting dragged into philosophical debates over freedom, let's focus our conversations on practical steps we can take to better the situation. We can work on educating visitors on how they can lessen their impact — not only to respect the wildlife, but also eating at different times across the day, going on late afternoon hikes and redirecting people toward the less frequented trails. And to leave the car behind. Between July 14 and August 31, Yellowstone will offer electric bus transportation, shuttling people from visitor services to the amphitheater and campgrounds.

Third, let's institutionalize this conversation. A partnership of businesses, governmental agencies and nongovernmental organization needs to come together to discuss how to manage tourism. For instance, is it in anyone's interest for 60% of our lodging tax to go for advertising for still more tourists?

One occasion for this discussion will occur on May 12, when Jonathan Schechter's "22 in 21: Tourism 2021" event will focus on these questions. And since this is a systemic problem, let's network with other communities across the West.

In the short term, philosophical debates over freedom and liberty are unlikely to be productive. Eventually we will need to tackle the core issue: Our belief in endless growth and our dislike of limits. But let's start with what we can do now.

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