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Opinion: National Parks are kind of a big deal

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by Tricia King Mims

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Staff file photo/Robin Rudd / The rising sun catches the riderless horse on the monument to the 1st Wisconsin Cavalry in Chickamauga National Battlefield Park on Feb. 28, 2023.

(Editor's note: One in a series)

National parks are more popular than ever, and visitation is surging back to pre-pandemic levels. Around the 2016 centennial of the National Park Service, a free annual pass became available for every fourth grader in the country, and family vacations are often planned around national park sites. Filling up a park passport with stamps has become a life's mission for college students, retirees and all lifestyles in between.

Local evidence follows this trend as Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park consistently stewards more visitor experiences annually — more than 964,000 in 2022 — than any other tourist attraction in the Chattanooga area. The resulting economic impact totaled \$81 million that year, between visitor spending and the hundreds of private sector jobs supported by park

goers each year. Tennessee's own Great Smoky Mountains is the heavyweight among national parks, leading all others with a whopping 13 million visitors in 2022.

What drives these numbers? Show me landscapes and vistas I will not find anywhere else. Give me time and space to unplug and refresh. Tell me who lived here, who died here and how the land changed over time. We visit national parks because we are driven by discovery, connection, the quest for understanding.

When freed from the non-conforming uses of a mental health hospital and a police firing range, Moccasin Bend National Archeological District can welcome visitors into its landscape to explore their passion to know the past. The opportunity to experience how geological shifts impacted 12,000 years of human activity on the same land will draw people like a magnet, just as such places where the plains meet the river and the river meets the mountains have for millennia.

A new national park experience just a short drive to and from the Smokies will encourage travel in both directions and stimulate rural economic development along the way. The Tennessee Department of Tourism created the Tanasi Trail years ago, a natural connector between the two parks with Native American heritage attractions ranging from the birthplace of Sequoyah to the gravesite of Nancy Ward. Interest in Indigenous history is rising, and hidden gems like Red Clay State Park near Cleveland and the Cherokee Removal Memorial Park at Blythe Ferry offer valuable experiences that will entice travelers between the two national parks to take the scenic route.

The slogan of National Park Partners of Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Moccasin Bend is to respect the past, invest in the present and preserve for the future. In this endeavor, the quote of Sir Isaac Newton is entirely appropriate as we are certainly "standing on the shoulders of giants." A comprehensive list of those giants would take this entire page; one that readily comes to mind is the

founder of the Chattanooga Times, Adolph Ochs, who proposed a park on Moccasin Bend a century ago.

National Park Partners first formed in 1986 as the Friends of Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, and community leaders like Karen Diamond and Leonard Fant rallied millions of dollars in private funding to expand the visitor center at Chickamauga Battlefield. Coincidentally, National Historic Landmark designation for Moccasin Bend was awarded that same year based on evidence found through the highest level of archaeological surveys conducted across the peninsula by legends in the field like Lawrence Alexander.

The Friends of Moccasin Bend formed in 1994 through widespread community support for full national park status and protection of the Bend's significant historic and cultural assets. Shelley Andrews and her tireless board of directors made it happen within a decade, and nearly 800 acres on Moccasin Bend became the first and only National Archeological District designation in the country, to this day.

Congressman Zach Wamp wrote the legislation in 2003 and valiantly pushed it through during a moratorium on new national parks. His creative solution was to add Moccasin Bend National Archeological District as the sixth unit of Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park due the major role this strategic riverfront land played in the positioning of troops and movement of supplies during the Civil War. The National Park Service agreed to the deal, despite the presence of the mental hospital and the firing range, based on commitments by state and local officials to rebuild the aging facilities elsewhere when funding became available.

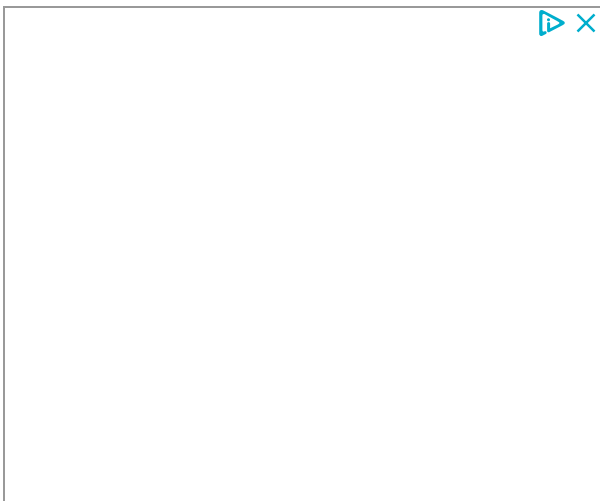
To instead proceed with the proposed new construction inside Moccasin Bend's approved national park boundary would be a massive missed economic opportunity for Tennessee. Based on the park's \$81 million in economic impact in 2022, conservative estimates of 25% more visitation from a fully intact National Archeological District — freed from nonconforming uses and offering

exciting new recreational and educational opportunities — means an additional \$20 million in annual economic benefit for the Chattanooga area.

Read that again — \$20 million more, every year, just in the Chattanooga area. Promote the connection between Moccasin Bend and the Smokies, and the impact will be felt in towns like Vonore and Madisonville and Tellico Plains as well.

Land use decisions made today will impact Tennessee's economy for generations to come. The tremendous synergy between Moccasin Bend and other local and regional tourist attractions must be considered in the state's analysis. Tennesseans and all Americans stand to benefit if we amplify our national park assets rather than further impair them.

Tricia King Mims is executive director of National Park Partners of Chickamauga, Chattanooga and Moccasin Bend. She serves on the inaugural board of the National Park Friends Alliance and is on the steering committees for the Chattanooga Parks and Outdoors Plan and the Plan Chattanooga/Plan Hamilton efforts.



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