

**The New York Times** | <https://nyti.ms/2RMiAie>

# Next to National Parks, a Winter of Worry

Towns like Estes Park, Colo., wonder how long they can survive the shutdown.

**By Kelly Cordes**

Mr. Cordes is a climber.

Jan. 15, 2019

ESTES PARK, Colo. — The winter winds roar off the Continental Divide in Rocky Mountain National Park relentlessly, blasting our little town with such ferocity that sometimes I fear we might blow away. It's as if the mountains are finally exhaling now that the peak of the tourist season has passed. For most of its history, Estes Park, the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, has been a ghost town in winter. Over the last several years, however, with the population boom along the Front Range of the Rockies and the growing popularity of our national parks, Estes has nudged itself toward a sustainable year-round economy. Barely. Precariously.

But now, with so many locals having banked on a small but steady stream of income tied in various ways to the park — the fourth most visited national park in 2017, with 4.4 million visitors — the government shutdown has upended the economy of this town and created apprehension and uncertainty.

"It's crazy that one guy gets to do this to us all," said Dustin Dyer, director and co-owner of Kent Mountain Adventure Center, a guide service that's been here for decades, referring to President Trump.

Although Rocky Mountain National Park officially remains open, its main roads had been closed until this week, because there wasn't enough money to run the snowplows. Well over half of Mr. Dyer's trips (he offers snowshoeing, backcountry ski touring, ice climbing and avalanche courses) had to be canceled, but he's trying to be optimistic. "We will survive, but it is crazy to be hit by the noise on the TV," he told me. "It is usually just noise."

On Monday, 24 days into the shutdown, the park announced that it would use recreation fees intended for park enhancements to plow some roads, clean restrooms and remove trash, though two of the three main visitors centers remain closed; the third is being staffed by the nonprofit Rocky Mountain Conservancy. But how long these patchwork solutions will work is unclear.

At the coffee shop, supermarket and restaurants I visited, people said they would weather the shutdown, no matter how tough it might become. Same with the park service employees who are either furloughed or being forced to work without pay. People here plan for winter, when work slows and they rely on their savings. But nobody planned for this, and as the shutdown drags on, the ripples spread far beyond the park's workers.

Rick Thompson, owner of BTEC Design Shop, a small shipping and printing company, told me that his business has dropped noticeably. The park service, it turns out, ships a lot of packages. His wife, Val Thompson, owns the nearby shop You Need Pie, which has taken a major hit. "People aren't coming to visit," Mr. Thompson said, exasperated. But he hasn't cut hours or laid off workers; he's absorbing the losses, as are other business owners I spoke with. They'll need their loyal employees once business resumes. Whenever that is.

“It isn’t their fault,” he said. “It’s not my fault, either — it’s the government’s fault. The ones I feel the worst for are the park employees who have to work but aren’t getting paid. People have bills to pay, families to feed.” His tone turned to frustration bordering on outrage. “How can you make people work but not pay them?” he asked.

Karla Mosier Dubois, the owner of Ed’s Cantina, said what she has most noticed has been the decline in traffic at the end of the day, when climbers, skiers and hikers normally congregate for food and drinks. There’s been a palpable feeling of disappointment from her customers who have found their vacation plans thwarted by locked gates. “Washington and politics feel so intrusive yet maniacally detached in times like this,” she said.

The trails mirror the streets and shops in their unusual quiet. For some residents, it’s reminiscent of winter 10 or 20 years ago, with less noise, fewer people and a feeling that borders on solitude. “Even though it’s a two-edged sword, I kind of like that side of it,” a friend who is a furloughed Park Service employee told me. But his enjoyment of the serenity can’t last much longer, because he’s running out of savings.

The accessible trailheads remain clean and well kept for now; perhaps the visitors who brave the wind and cold to come here have an innate, abiding respect for nature.

“Everyone’s out there with trash bags, they want to help, they want to clean bathrooms,” said another friend who works for the park. “Folks are definitely taking care of their land since the government can’t.”

And yet the shutdown continues, with local residents and local economies held hostage to something as puerile and idiotic as a temper tantrum over a wholly unrelated issue. The calm, the silence and even the damned wind here seems more profound and beautiful now, like a shining light against the chaos and dysfunction of Washington.

On Tuesday, the wind was but a faint breath. More of the roads are open now, with some park employees being paid and others left relying on the good faith of government I.O.U.s.

“I hope this blip of relief gives a moment to regroup, but it is indeed only a blip,” Ms. Mosier Dubois said. Maybe some adults will someday enter the halls in Washington, but nobody seems to be counting on it. “I’ll continue on carefully,” she said.

Kelly Cordes is a climber and author of “The Tower: A Chronicle of Climbing and Controversy on Cerro Torre.”

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.*