Rebuilding Responsibly: How the Blue Ridge Parkway Is Navigating Tourism, Recovery, and Sustainability

MEJO 531

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Part 1: Synopsis

Background

The Blue Ridge Parkway, known as “America’s Favorite Drive,” is one of the most visited units of the National Park Service. It winds 469 miles through North Carolina and Virginia, and was created to connect Shenandoah National Park to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with a scenic driving experience (National Park Service, 2016). The parkway not only serves as a roadway, but it also preserves diverse ecosystems, historic sites, and landscapes that reflect the region's culture and history.

In recent years, the Parkway has experienced high visitation, recording more than 16 million visits in 2023 (National Park Service, 2024). Peak seasons, especially during fall foliage, bring significant tourism, which supports local businesses but also contributes to overcrowding, traffic congestion, and environmental strain. These increased in 2024 when Hurricane Helene caused widespread damage across sections of the Parkway, resulting in closures, safety concerns, and a temporary decline in visitation.

As recovery efforts moved into 2025, sections of the Parkway gradually reopened, bringing back visitors and introducing heavier pressures on infrastructure and natural resources. This combination of high demand on the Parkway, along with post-hurricane recovery, has required the organization to balance promoting tourism and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Key Stakeholders

National Park Service

The National Park Service is the managing company of the Blue Ridge Parkway, responsible for maintaining its infrastructure, protecting natural and cultural resources, and overseeing visitor experience. It must balance multiple priorities, including preservation, public access, and safety. The organization is also responsible for shaping communication strategies, including website alerts, visitor guidelines, and educational messaging.

Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation

The Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation (BRPF) is the Parkway’s main nonprofit partner, supporting projects that the National Park Service cannot or does not fully fund on its own. The BRPF plays a key role in fundraising, community engagement, and preservation work, such as habitat restoration, infrastructure improvements, and educational programs (BRPF, 2025). Through partnerships with donors, businesses, and environmental organizations, the Foundation helps expand the Parkways’ reach and impact. In recovery and sustainability, the BRPF is important in getting resources and public support for restoration efforts after Hurricane Helene.

Visitors

Visitors are very influential, as their behavior directly impacts the Parkway's environment, infrastructure, and sustainability. This group includes everyone from first-time tourists to locals, all having different levels of familiarity and expectations. Visitors drive economic benefits associated with the Parkway, but they also contribute to challenges such as overcrowding, trail erosion, and environmental degradation if guidelines aren't followed or are not present. The visitor's role is to participate in preservation efforts through responsible behavior.

Mission

The Blue Ridge Parkway's mission is to preserve the natural and cultural resources of the Appalachian region while providing opportunities for public enjoyment. This is done through a scenic driving experience, with recreational areas. The Parkway is designed to connect Shenandoah National Park and Great Smoky Mountains National Park and stretches through parts of North Carolina and Virginia, offering diverse landscapes (National Park Service, 2020).

This mission is supported by a set of strategic priorities that the National Park Service created for the Parkway that guide decision-making and long-term planning. These priorities emphasize protecting the integrity of the Parkway, investing in new infrastructure, preserving natural habitats and park boundaries, and maintaining the cultural and historical significance of the region. The Parkway also prioritizes improving visitor experiences and inspiring new generations of park goers through education and engagement (National Park Service, 2020).

These priorities reflect the organization's commitment to resource preservation as well as public access, requiring the National Park Service to balance increasing visits with sustainability. This balance is especially important today, as ongoing recovery from environmental disruptions such as Hurricane Helene and rising tourism numbers demand more strategic thinking and decision-making.

Objectives and Publics

- First-Time Tourists: The Parkway attracts a high number of first-time visitors who are likely to be unfamiliar with park guidelines and the environmental impact of their behavior. The goal is to shape expectations before arrival by embedding responsible behavior tourism messaging into trip planning information and resources. This includes promoting behaviors such as staying on designated trails, disposing of waste properly, and respecting the environment. A key performance indicator for this group is reducing reported visitor violations, such as littering and off-trail walking, by 20% during peak season in 2 years, measured through National Park Service incident reports.
- Repeat Visitors: There is a high number of repeat visitors, specifically during peak fall foliage season. These people are familiar with the Parkway but can contribute disproportionately to overcrowding. The goal is to promote off-peak visitation, less popular destinations along the parkway, and participation in preservation efforts. Since a

lot of these visitors are not travelling from as far, the organization can invite them to visit when the Parkway is less crowded, and encourage them to advocate for responsible use. A key performance indicator for this group is increasing engagement with planning resources, such as the "Plan Your Visit" section on the website and the Parkway's app, by 25% within 12 months, measured by website and app usage data.

- Western North Carolina Locals: Residents who live near the Parkway experience tourism's negative impacts such as traffic congestion, environmental degradation and overcrowding. The goal is to rebuild trust with these people and show that the Parkway's management is responsive to the community's concerns. Positioning this group as co-creators of the visitor experience by involving them in storytelling and highlighting local voices in campaign messaging would strengthen the relationship with residents by ensuring that tourism management aligns with community well-being.
- Business owners: Local businesses rely heavily on Parkway visitation for revenue, especially during peak tourist seasons. The goal is to align economic incentives with sustainable tourism practices by encouraging businesses to promote responsible visitor behaviors. Integrating this campaign messaging into storefronts and customer interactions, and partnering with businesses, can allow businesses to benefit financially from the increased visitation while also supporting the Parkway in its goals.
- Environmental Organizations: Organizations focused on conservation play an important role in shaping public perception. The goal is to strengthen partnerships with these groups to enhance credibility, expand outreach, and support joint efforts. By collaborating with these groups, the campaign can amplify its messaging and secure additional resources.
- Post-Helene Visitors: A time-sensitive public is visitors returning (or coming for the first time) after the Parkway's recovery period. This group may be uncertain about access, safety, and the conditions of the Parkway. The goal is to reshape expectations by communicating that the Parkway is reopening, but usage requires more mindfulness and responsibility.

Ongoing Situation

In 2023, the Blue Ridge Parkway recorded more than 16 million recreational visits (National Park Service, 2024), continuing its position as one of the most visited sites in the National Park Service. The Parkway was visited the most during the Fall, which is the peak season due to the fall foliage. This led to traffic and increased strain on trails and natural resources. In September 2024, Hurricane Helene caused significant damage to sections of the Parkway, resulting in closures, safety concerns, and a decline in visitation that also impacted the local economy. As sections of the Parkway started to reopen in 2025, visitor numbers started to slowly increase, especially during peak tourism periods. Many of the same challenges have come back, including inconsistent visitor behavior and infrastructure overuse (Sonmez, 2025). This suggests that recovery for the Parkway is progressing, but communication strategies need to evolve to better support long-term sustainability.

Key Programming

To support sustainable tourism and visitor education, the Blue Ridge Parkway implemented several initiatives following Hurricane Helene. The first thing visitors see on the Parkway website is alerts about closures, with a "Plan Your Visit" section following that. This section highlights things to do, places to go, and tips on staying safe (National Park Service, 2016). The Parkway also offers a mobile planning app that helps visitors explore the Parkway by region, activity, or proximity to their location. The app provides detailed information for the parkway's four major regions: Ridge, Plateau, Highlands, and Pisgah. Additionally, the Parkway engages volunteers and environmental organizations in supporting restoration, habitat protection, and visitor education (BRPF, 2025). These efforts serve as a communication strategy to guide visitor behavior, reduce negative environmental impacts, and support sustainability on the Parkway. The organization's messaging should evolve to consistently center around responsible use of the Parkway, encouraging visitors to enjoy it while actively helping to preserve it.

Part II: Analysis

Main Point #1: Know Your Audience and Be Prepared

Understanding your audience is essential because it allows organizations to guide behavior in ways that align with their goals. When organizations anticipate how different audiences think and make decisions, they can deliver more relevant and timely information. This can be done by being proactive rather than reactive, ensuring that communication reaches audiences when and how it is most effective.

1a. Anticipate Visitor Needs and Behaviors

Organizations must proactively anticipate how audiences will behave in order to reduce confusion and guide decision-making. When organizations anticipate confusion, misuse, or risk, they can guide behavior in a way that provides what users/visitors need before issues arise

For the Blue Ridge Parkway, anticipating visitor needs is critical, especially given the mix of first-time tourists and post-Hurricane Helene visitors who might be unfamiliar with current conditions. The Parkway addresses this by using closure alerts and safety information as soon as users open the website, followed by a "Plan Your Visit" section that outlines places you can go, what to do, and how you can stay safe (National Park Service, 2016). This shows an understanding from the organization that visitors need clarity and reassurance before visiting the Parkway. Also, the Parkway's mobile app allows users to explore by region, activity, or proximity, even without cell service (Blue Ridge Parkway, 2025). By anticipating limited connectivity on the Parkway and potential confusion when navigating, the Parkway provides accessible information that helps visitors make informed decisions and behave responsibly. However, this approach focuses on providing information after visitors seek it out rather than

shaping behavior before decisions are made, so the organization should integrate the messaging earlier in the visitor journey to strengthen this.

A similar comparison can be seen in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. In the summer of 2014, three men living with ALS helped launch a global movement that inspired over 17 million people to pour ice water on their heads and donate to ALS research and care, raising $115 million (ALS Association, 2024). While the campaign did not predict how viral it would get, it succeeded because it aligned with how people were already behaving on social media. The challenge format anticipated that users would enjoy interactive participation and peer nomination, which created a cycle of engagement. The challenge also required minimal effort, making it easy for people to join quickly while feeling part of something bigger.

1b. Adapt Communication to the Segment

Being prepared means customizing messages for different publics to achieve specific objectives. Different audiences have different levels of knowledge, motivations, and relationships with an organization, so a single, generalized message might not be effective. By adapting communication to each segment, organizations can make their messaging more relevant, actionable, and impactful.

For the Blue Ridge Parkway, communication is adapted across key visitor groups, and could be strengthened through more targeted segmentation. First-time tourists are provided with clear, foundational messaging through trip-planning tools that emphasize safety, rules of the parkway, and responsible behavior (National Park Service, 2025). The Parkway demonstrates an understanding of different audiences, but its current messaging remains generalized and could be strengthened by specifically targeting different groups. Repeat visitors who are more familiar with the Parkway could be targeted with messaging that encourages behavior change, such as visiting during off-peak times or exploring less crowded areas. Local residents should be approached slightly differently, with communication that emphasizes community impact and involvement, positioning them as helping with the preservation rather than just visiting. This segmentation would allow the Parkway to meet each group where they are and guide them toward behaviors that support sustainability.

A strong comparison is in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, where the campaign reached different publics in distinct ways, allowing each group to engage based on their role and the influence they had. Celebrities helped increase awareness by sharing the challenge with large audiences, increasing visibility and credibility. Peer participants drove the campaign's spread through friend nominations, creating a chain reaction of engagement. Donors were encouraged to contribute financially, reinforcing the purpose behind the challenge and supporting ALS research and care. By allowing different publics to engage in different ways, the campaign effectively maximized participation and impact (ALS Association, 2024).

Main Point #2: Realize when the community will support the organization

Understanding when and how your audience is already supportive allows organizations to reduce resistance, strengthen loyalty, and amplify their messaging. This can be done by identifying already engaged audiences and creating structured opportunities for them to participate and amplify the organization's messaging.

2a. Audience support reduces resistance

Organizations don't always have to convince every audience from scratch. When an audience already aligns with the organization's mission or values, their support can help carry the message forward and reduce pushback. Leveraging these can be more effective than focusing on neutral audiences.

For the Blue Ridge Parkway, local residents, environmental organizations, and frequent visitors often already value sustainability and preservation. By recognizing this support, the Parkway can reduce resistance to new initiatives or goals, such as picnic area restorations, new visitor guidelines, or off-peak visitation campaigns (National Park Service, 2016). These audiences can act as advocates for the Parkway, reinforcing positive behaviors and encouraging new visitors to do the same, without the Parkway needing to convince them to do so from the ground up. To improve this, the Parkway should use ambassador-type programs or partnerships that encourage locals and repeat visitors to actively promote responsible behavior and sustainable practices.

Adobe's recognition of Black History Month campaign demonstrates how existing community support can be activated rather than built from the ground up. Employees and audiences who already value diversity and cultural recognition were naturally aligned with the campaign's theme of joy, community, and creativity. Instead of trying to convince people why the initiative mattered, Adobe created opportunities for participation through storytelling by using artist features and conversations with creators. These audiences then became active participants, sharing content, attending events, and amplifying the campaign's message (Robinson, 2020). By leaning into an already supportive community, Adobe reduced resistance and expanded the campaign's impact through authentic engagement.

2b. Visibility and Reinforcement Strengthen Loyalty

Supportive audiences need consistent messaging, and a single well-done campaign element can reinforce loyalty. When organizations repeatedly expose audiences to the same themes across multiple touchpoints, it strengthens recognition and deepens the emotional connection, making audiences more likely to stay engaged and advocate for the brand.

The Blue Ridge Parkway reinforces its sustainability messaging through multiple touchpoints, including website alerts, planning tools, and on-site information. Visitors are consistently exposed to guidance on safety and responsible behavior before and during their visit (Blue Ridge Parkway, 2025). This repeated exposure helps strengthen understanding and encourages those who already support the Parkway's mission to continue behaving responsibly,

however, to improve upon this, the organization should develop a cohesive campaign theme that is consistently reinforced across touchpoints, making it more memorable.

Adobe's Black History Month campaign demonstrates how visibility and reinforcement can strengthen audience loyalty. Through a combination of things, such as artist spotlights, social media storytelling, and content series, Adobe consistently emphasized its themes of joy, community, and creativity. Rather than relying on a single moment, the campaign maintained visibility throughout the month. This reinforced its message across multiple platforms and helped audiences feel more connected to the campaign, encouraging continued participation (Robinson, 2020). All together, this strengthens their loyalty to the initiative and the brand.

Main Point #3: Use Clear Messaging

Organizations must design clear, action-oriented messaging that tells audiences exactly what to do and when to do it. Simplicity and repetition make communication more effective. This works best when messaging is simplified into short and repeatable phrases that are delivered consistently across touchpoints.

3a. Simplicity Drives Action

Clear messaging simplifies information so audiences can quickly understand what is expected of them and how to act. The more complex a message is, the less likely people are to listen to it or change their behavior. Organizations should prioritize clear and actionable messaging rather than overloading audiences with information.

For the Blue Ridge Parkway, simplicity is important when communicating to a wide range of visitors. The Parkway's use of clear website alerts and visit planning materials helps break down important information into manageable pieces. These resources tell visitors where to go and how to stay safe. This approach reduces confusion, especially for new visitors, and the simple messaging makes it easy for them to follow guidelines (National Park Service, 2016). Moving forward, the Parkway could further strengthen this by using short and action-based messaging on their main website, such as "Stay on Trails" and "Know Before You Go", ensuring visitors can quickly understand and follow expectations. Although the Parkway provided clear information, a lot of it is informational rather than action-oriented, which might reduce effectiveness in behavior change. The organization should use more action-based language, such as short phrases that clearly tell visitors what to do at a certain moment.

The KFC Runs Out of Chicken apology Campaign worked because it used a simple and direct message that acknowledged the issue without overcomplicating it. The company faced a crisis and used a memorable message, spelling out "FCK" with the "KFC" letters to respond (BBC, 2018). This acknowledged the mistake and the simplicity of the response made it easy for audiences to understand the situation and appreciate the brand's transparency, which helped them quickly rebuild trust.

3b. Consistency Builds Understanding

Consistent messaging reinforces ideas over time, making it more likely that audiences will remember and act on them. When organizations repeat the same core message across multiple platforms and touchpoints, it strengthens audience understanding and reduces confusion. Consistency also builds credibility, as audiences begin to associate specific messages and values with the organization.

The Blue Ridge Parkway reinforces its messaging through repeated exposure across its website, app, and on-site communication. Visitors consistently encounter themes related to safety and environmental responsibility at different stages of their experience. Across platforms, similar messages are repeated, allowing visitors to see important communication. This repetition helps ensure that expectations are clearly understood and more likely to be followed (National Park Service, 2016). The Parkway could further strengthen this by using consistent phrasing and visuals, such as a brand kit, across all platforms, making its messaging more recognizable and easier for visitors to retain. This standardized visual identity would allow visitors to recognize the organization and strengthen the effectiveness of the Parkway's communication.

KFC's response to its UK chicken shortage also demonstrates the importance of consistency. The "FCK" ad was the most visible element of the response, but the company reinforced the same tone of honesty and accountability across its platforms, including social media updates and customer responses. The font and visual aspects remained consistent with the brand, as well as the tone. This consistency helped audiences clearly understand the situation and trust the brand's response. By maintaining the same voice, visuals, and messaging throughout the crisis, KFC avoided confusion and strengthened its credibility (BBC, 2018). This shows how consistency across platforms reinforces understanding and rebuilds trust.

Main Point #4: Use Communication to Influence Behavior

Effective communication does more than inform; it shapes behavior. By reaching audiences at the right moment and making desired actions easy to follow, organizations can guide audiences toward outcomes that support their goals. This works best when communication is integrated into real-time decision points where audiences are currently choosing how to behave.

4a. Meet Audiences Where They Are

Communication is most effective when it reaches people at the right time and place. When messaging is delivered in moments where decisions are being made, audiences are likely to engage with and act on that information.

For the Blue Ridge Parkway, communication is most impactful when it reaches visitors during key decision-making moments. The Parkway does this by placing alerts about closures and safety conditions at the top of its website, ensuring visitors see critical information before

planning their trip. The “Plan Your Visit” section and mobile app meet audiences where they are by providing location-based and activity-based guidance, helping users make informed decisions in real time (Blue Ridge Parkway, 2025). By delivering information at the moment visitors are planning or navigating their experience, the Parkway increases the likelihood that they will follow guidelines and make responsible choices. To expand its reach, the organization should extend its messaging into more digital platforms like Instagram and Google travel search results to meet audiences earlier in the decision-making process.

The Crock-Pot burns the house down case shows the importance of entering the conversation exactly where it is happening. After an episode of This Is Us linked a house fire to a slow cooker, public fear spread online. Instead of relying on traditional media, Crock-Pot responded directly on Twitter through the handle they made called “@CrockPotCares”, engaging with concerned viewers in real time. By addressing audiences in the same space where panic was forming, and doing so immediately after the episode aired, the brand was able to reassure consumers and correct misinformation before the situation escalated (Bystrova, 2019). This timely, platform-specific response helped prevent long-term damage to customer trust.

4b. Make Responsible Behavior the Easy Choice

People are more likely to behave correctly when communication simplifies decisions. When the “right” action is also the easiest action, behavior change becomes more achievable.

The Blue Ridge Parkway makes responsible behavior easier by organizing information in a way that guides decision-making. Website alerts immediately inform visitors about closures, while the “Plan Your Visit” section provides clear next steps, including where to go and how to stay safe. The mobile app simplifies trip planning by allowing users to explore region, activity, or proximity, reducing confusion and helping visitors make better choices without extra effort (Blue Ridge Parkway, 2025). By structuring information this way, the Parkway removes barriers and encourages sustainable behavior. The Parkway should further reduce friction by using real-time prompts and recommendations that make responsible behavior the most effortless choice.

Crock-Pot also made the desired behavior, continuing to use their product, the easy choice by directly addressing safety concerns with clear reassurance. Their messaging emphasized that their products had been safely used for decades and that the scenario in the show was entirely fictional and highly unlikely. Instead of requiring customers to research or question the situation themselves, the brand provided immediate clarity and confidence with their posts (Bystrova, 2019). The reduced uncertainty made it easier for consumers to continue trusting and using the product rather than not using it out of fear.

Overall, the Blue Ridge Parkway demonstrates a strong foundation in engaging its key publics through accessible tools and consistent messaging, but there are clear opportunities to deepen that engagement through more proactive and targeted communication strategies. By

evolving from informative communication to behavior-shaping strategies, the Parkway can better align the visitor experience with long-term sustainability goals.

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