

What Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Designation Could Mean for Macon

A Summary of Research on H.R. 9416, the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Redesignation Act

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Key Findings

Tourism Economics reviewed academic research, federal economic data, and real-world examples from recent National Park redesignations to assess the potential implications of H.R. 9416. This memo summarizes our key findings.

Key findings

- **The designation of Ocmulgee Mounds as a National Park represents a significant economic opportunity for Macon and the surrounding region.** We anticipate designation would bring an increase in visitation, spending, and associated economic impact activity, including additional jobs, wages, and tax revenue.
- **Research indicates that National Park designation typically increases visitation.** Research consistently finds that the National Park label functions as a nationally recognized tourism brand, drawing more visitors than other National Park Service designations. National Parks average approximately 1.4 million visitors per year, compared to approximately 500,000 for National Historical Parks like Ocmulgee today.
- **More visitors generate broader economic benefits.** Visitor spending flows into local hotels, restaurants, retail businesses, and recreation services. Research shows these benefits represent net additions to regional economic activity, not simply a redistribution of existing demand.
- **Two recent redesignations confirm these effects in practice.** New River Gorge (redesignated 2020) saw visitation grow 43 percent and visitor spending nearly double within three years. White Sands (redesignated 2019) saw consistent gains in both visitation and spending, closely matching pre-designation projections.
- **Ocmulgee Mounds is well positioned to benefit.** The park has nationally significant cultural resources, established visitor infrastructure, recreational assets, and strong community support — characteristics associated with stronger-than-average redesignation outcomes.
- **Previous analysis projects substantial economic gains for Middle Georgia.** Site-specific economic analysis projects that redesignation could add more than \$206 million in annual economic activity, over 2,800 new jobs, and nearly \$30 million in new annual tax revenue over a 15-year period.

Evidence from Recent Redesignations

Two recent redesignations provide the most directly comparable evidence for Ocmulgee. New River Gorge in West Virginia was redesignated from a National River to a National Park in December 2020. Before redesignation, it recorded approximately 1.20 million visits and \$47

million in annual visitor spending. By 2023, visitation had grown to 1.71 million — a 43 percent increase — and visitor spending had reached \$86 million. White Sands in New Mexico was redesignated from a National Monument in December 2019. Visitation grew from approximately 609,000 to 729,000, and visitor spending rose from \$32.7 million to \$44.5 million, supporting 595 local jobs. In both cases, the parks already had strong existing assets and established visitor bases before redesignation — much like Ocmulgee today.

Projected Economic Impact for Middle Georgia

Economists at the University of Tennessee conducted a detailed analysis specifically for the Ocmulgee proposal, projecting the following impacts over a 15-year period:

- An estimated \$206.7 million in additional annual economic activity for Middle Georgia
- \$76.5 million in additional annual labor income
- \$29.8 million in new annual tax revenue
- More than 2,800 additional jobs

The study projections were based on a 2017 baseline of approximately 200,000 annual visitors and it anticipated a six-fold increase in visitation with National Park designation to annual visitation of approximately 1.4 million. Even a more moderate impact with National Park designation would bring substantial economic benefits over time.

Why Ocmulgee Mounds Stands Out

- **Nationally significant resources.** The park documents 12,000 years of continuous human history and was the site of one of the largest archaeological investigations in American history, recovering 2.5 million artifacts.
- **Ready infrastructure.** Ocmulgee already has a visitor center, trails, and a professional NPS staff. Redesignation builds on what exists rather than starting from scratch.
- **A unique visitor narrative.** The Muscogee (Creek) Nation identifies Ocmulgee as its ancestral homeland and has acquired significant acreage surrounding the park, reflecting the Nation's continuing commitment to preserving and stewarding this culturally significant landscape.
- **Active destination marketing.** Visit Macon's existing infrastructure positions the region to convert National Park designation into increased bookings and arrivals.
- **Community investment already underway.** A new hotel occupation tax, effective January 2026, is projected to generate \$2.5 million annually for tourism infrastructure, funded by visitors rather than local taxpayers.

Key Considerations

Economic projections are estimates, not guarantees. Actual outcomes will depend on how the park is developed, the effectiveness of marketing, and broader travel conditions. Not every redesignated park has seen significant visitation increases. What the evidence consistently supports is that National Park designation tends to increase visitor interest, and that communities with strong existing assets — like Macon — are better positioned to capture those benefits. Realizing the full potential of redesignation will require continued investment and active community engagement.