

To the Office of Representative Jimmy Panetta:

On behalf of the interests of amateur astronomers in and near CA's 19th district, I am seeking your help in re-gaining public access to Pinnacles National Park (NP) west entrance parking lot after sunset.

BACKGROUND

Established in 1999, the National Park Service (NPS) has supported and encouraged the public to stargaze at national parks via its "Night Skies" initiatives (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nightskies/index.htm>). In support of this initiative, three night-sky monitors are located inside Pinnacles National Park. (Find them yourself on this map: <https://www.nps.gov/maps/full.html?mapId=4cfda76a-cc61-4113-8a00-44882918ba9a>.)

For as long as I can remember (decades?), Pinnacles National Park's west entrance parking lot has been a "Mecca" for many hundreds of local amateur astronomers from the SF south bay area to the central coast. This location provides a high-elevation, dark-sky, low-dust venue with the convenience of clean restrooms and the safety of an automated entrance gate that closes at sunset but opens for exit via a proximity sensor.

The unofficial agreement has been that astronomers must arrive prior to the automated gate being shut for the night, but that they may exit the park at anytime during the night, via the gate's proximity sensors that automatically open the gate when approached from within the park.

The tradition of cooperation between park staff and astronomers has been a model for other national parks. We pay the park entrance fee, we keep our equipment out of the right-of-way in the parking lot, and we respect the facilities available to us. That the automated gate closes at sunset but allows for automated opening upon exit has provided a level of security (no one can enter after sunset) and safety (anyone can leave at any time, such as in an emergency) that is unavailable on any other public land in coastal northern California that also has the dark skies that Pinnacles NP has.

Some of us who have used this location for stargazing have attended as part of local astronomy clubs, such as the The Monterey Institute for Research in Astronomy (<https://mira.org>), the MIRA Astronomy Club (<https://mira.org/club>) and the Santa Cruz Astronomy Club (<https://www.astronomy.santa-cruz.ca.us/>). But mostly, we are just a casually organized (via on-line forums) collection nature and science lovers. Many of us are deep-pocketed liberals. (OK, maybe that last statement is a stretch.)

Here are two photos from past gatherings of amateur astronomers at this location:





WHAT HAS CHANGED

As has been communicated on local on-line astronomy forums and among local astronomy clubs: sometime in the late autumn of 2025, someone on the staff of Pinnacles National Park decided to permanently lock the entrance gate every evening and unlock the next morning. Also, astronomers who have arrived prior to the locking of the gate have been required to leave the park. The word is that over the past year or more, vandals have broken the automated entrance/exit gate multiple times, causing unreasonable and repeated repair costs to that gate.

Some of us have tried to contact park management to discuss a possible solution, but our calls and voice mail messages have been unanswered. Thus, I am reaching out to your office for help.

WHAT WE ARE ASKING FOR

How can the public regain access to a uniquely desirable, convenient, and SAFE stargazing spot at Pinnacles National Park?

Our preference would be to have the park return to its historical policy: the automated entrance/exit gate at the park west entrance is closed at sunset (or 8pm) but allows for proximity-sensor-activated gate opening for exit throughout the night.

If this is not achievable, we would at least like to agree on one or two nights per month each year during which the public has access to the parking lot.

In the very least, we would appreciate having access to the west entrance parking lot for the night of March 21-22. This is the one night each year during which a special stargazing event occurs. (It is referred to as a “Messier Marathon”:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messier_marathon.)

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request for help.

Sincerely,

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