

A Brief History of the National Park Service

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fort Matanzas National Monument,
St. Augustine, Florida



Early Beginnings

The idea of preserving special natural and cultural places in public ownership ran contrary to the prevailing national mood during the 19th century. At that time, Americans saw nature as something to be subdued and were strongly influenced by the relationship humans had toward nature in the Old World. Nature was to be tamed and conquered and made to serve mankind. But as the wilderness receded and remnants of prehistoric civilization and revolutionary landmarks were lost, some saw the need to protect outstanding examples of the nation's heritage.

George Catlin, noted painter of the American Indian, first expressed the concept of the national park. On a trip to the Dakotas in 1831, Catlin became concerned about the westward movement's effects on Indian civilization, wildlife, and wilderness. He wrote of his dream that there might be "by some great protecting policy of the government preserved...in a magnificent park...a nation's park, containing man and beast, in all the wildness and freshness of their nature's beauty!"

The First Parks

In 1864, the Federal Government first moved to protect a grand natural landscape when it granted Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias to the state of California to be "held for public use, resort, and recreation...inalienable for time." Eight years later in 1872, following exploration of the Yellowstone region in Montana and Wyoming territories, Congress created Yellowstone National Park as "a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." Had those territories been states, the park might have been turned over to them for administration, like Yosemite. Instead, Yellowstone was to be cared for by the Department of the Interior as the world's first national park.

Four more national parks were created in the 1890s: Sequoia, General Grant (forerunner of King's Canyon), Yosemite, and Mount Rainier. Without funds or staff to manage the parks, the Secretary of the Interior arranged with the Secretary of War to have Army engineers and cavalry units develop and protect most of them.

Concern over looting and destruction of Indian ruins and artifacts in the southwest inspired a new category of protected areas after the turn of the century. With the Antiquities Act of 1906 Congress authorized the President independently to proclaim features of historic and scientific interest on public lands as national monuments thus preserving and protecting them in the public interest.

President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the first--Devil's Tower National Monument in Wyoming. (The Castillo de San Marcos and Fort Matanzas were proclaimed National Monuments by President Calvin Coolidge in 1924.)

The Park Ranger

Stephen T. Mather, the National Park Service's first director, inaugurated a range of policies and practices aimed at protecting the parks while promoting public enjoyment of the parks' resources. Chief among these was the creation of a specialized uniformed staff, the Park Rangers.

The first rangers worked in the great western wilderness parks. Their duties were varied and inherently hazardous and required a unique, skilled and earnest type of individual. In Mathers words, "Though small in number their influence is large. Many and long are the duties heaped upon their shoulders. If a trail is to be blazed. . . if an animal is floundering in the snow . . . if a bear is in the hotel, if a fire threatens the forest, if someone is to be saved, it is 'send a ranger.'" With the inclusion of other types of parks the background and resources of the Ranger corps broadened. Rangers today perform a wide range of services including wilderness management, preservation and restoration, historical interpretation, and administration.

National Park Rangers still wear their distinctive uniform, originally borrowed from the cavalry units that had formerly guarded the parks. The Ranger's recognizable headgear is a version of the traditional trooper's hat.

Growth of the Park System

Up to this time the young National Park Service dealt mostly with natural areas west of the Mississippi. Beginning in the 1890s, a number of historic battlefields and forts in the east had become national military parks and monuments; these had been placed under the supervision of the War Department. Other national monuments established in national forests fell under the management of the Department of Agriculture, while memorials and park lands of the nation's capital came under a separate office there. During the 1933 government reorganization, all of these areas were united under Park Service administration forming a single truly national park system.

A third variety of national park lands further enlarged the system in the 1930s--areas intended to serve mass recreation at least as much as to preserve natural or cultural features. For example, the Blue Ridge Parkway, begun as a Depression-era public works projects, were carefully landscaped for "recreational motoring" over scenic and historic terrain. The Park Service also began to build and administer recreational facilities on several major water impoundments, as at Lake Mead National Recreation Area behind Hoover Dam. Cape Hatteras National Seashore, authorized by Congress in 1937, was the first of several national seashores and lakeshores. More recently, beginning in 1972 with Gateway National Recreation Area in and around New York City and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the San Francisco vicinity, a number of parks, intended for large urban populations, joined the system.

Although new parks still arrive from time to time, the last major expansion of the system came in 1980 when Congress directed additions in Alaska totaling some 47 million acres. These spectacular national park lands more than doubled the acreage of the system.

A Legacy of Parks at Home and Abroad

Presently, the National Park System has grown to over 400 sites. But these are not the only manifestations of the national park idea. Under a movement promoted by Stephen T. Mather during the early years of the National Park Service in the 1930s, the states developed their own park systems. Internationally, Yellowstone served as a precedent for some 1,200 national parks and comparable preserves now maintained by more than 100 other nations around the world.

Concern for natural and cultural resources has also found expression in Park Service programs directed beyond parks. The Service's National Register of Historic Places is America's official list of cultural properties worthy of preservation, and its programs for designating and aiding national natural landmarks and national historic landmarks encourage the preservation of significant lands and features in both private and public ownership. In preserving America's special places for public enjoyment, national parks help maintain America's special identity for her citizens and for visitors from around the world.

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.