



A Brief History of the National Park Service



A visit to a national park inspires love of country; begets contentment; engenders pride of possession; contains the antidote for national restlessness.... He is a better citizen with a keener appreciation of the privilege of living here who has toured the national parks.

- Stephen T. Mather, first director of the National Park Service

From Yosemite to Yellowstone, Chamizal to Chickasaw, and Gettysburg to the Grand Canyon, the parks administered by the National Park Service (NPS) shine across the United States of America. Today, the NPS manages over 400 sites and employs more than 20,000 rangers at peak summer season. Yet, like the small seeds of a California Coastal Redwood that ultimately grow to a height of 350 feet or higher, the NPS has evolved and grown over a long period of time.

While living with American Indians of the Great Plains in 1832, artist George Catlin had an epiphany. He realized that “Indians, wildlife, and wilderness” could be preserved “by some great protecting policy of government... in a magnificent park... a nation’s park, containing man and beast.” With this statement, Catlin has been credited with initiating the national park idea.

Throughout the 19th century, vast tracts of land were exploited by the miner’s shovel, the farmer’s plow,

and the lumberman’s axe. But these natural resource users and over-users were not bad people. Many of them pursued the same aspirations as many of us do today: living a good life and making good profit. Fortunately, some citizens began to understand that nature was a necessity for the survival and wellbeing of the human race.

As a result of this new way of thinking, in 1864 the Yosemite Grant was set aside by the state of California. In 1872, Yellowstone became the world’s first national park. Sequoia, General Grant, and Yosemite followed suit in 1890. Although these first national parks continued to allow grazing and hunting, they did not allow wide-scale exploitation and development. This means that in reality, these were the first federal lands in the U.S.—indeed in the world—set aside for public enjoyment and preservation.

Slowly but steadily more national parks were established. From 1906 to 1909, President Theodore

Roosevelt began to proclaim national monuments. Whereas congress establishes national parks, the Antiquities Act of 1906 permits the president to proclaim national monuments. Roosevelt used the Antiquities Act of 1906 to establish 18 new monuments, including Mesa Verde and Gila Cliff Dwellings. These monuments were important because for the first time in U.S. history, American Indian cultural sites were being remembered and preserved rather than vandalized and looted.

For over 100 years, the National Park Service has preserved and protected America’s national treasures. With the beginning of this new century, the NPS has developed a goal to connect with and create the next generation of park visitors, supporters, and advocates. In this second century, the NPS must recommit to exemplary stewardship and public enjoyment of these places, allowing for the future generations to continue to cherish and safeguard this nation’s most valuable and unique resources.