



The National Park Service: Caring for the American Legacy

"...to promote and regulate the use of the...national parks...which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

-National Park Service Organic Act, 16 U.S.C.1.

The National Park Service Mission
The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.

On August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the act that created the National Park Service (NPS), a new federal bureau in the Department of the Interior responsible for protecting the 40 national parks and monuments then in existence and those yet to be established.

This "Organic Act" of August 25, 1916, states that "the Service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of Federal areas known as national parks, monuments and reservations . . . by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

The NPS still strives to meet those original goals, while filling many other roles as well: guardian of our diverse cultural and recreational resources; environmental advocate; world leader in the parks and preservation community; and pioneer in the drive to protect America's open space.

The National Park System of the United States comprises 384 areas covering more than 83 million acres in 49 States, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, Saipan, and the Virgin Islands. These areas are of such national significance as to justify special recognition and protection in accordance with various acts of Congress.

On March 1, 1872, congress established Yellowstone National Park in the territories of Montana and Wyoming "as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people" and placed it "under exclusive control of the Secretary of the Interior." The founding of Yellowstone National Park began a worldwide national park movement. Today more than 100 nations contain some 1,200 national parks or equivalent preserves.

In the years following the establishment of Yellowstone, the United States authorized additional national parks and monuments, most of them carved from the federal lands of the West. Some of these parks were

administered by the Department of the Interior, while other monuments and natural and historical areas were administered as separate units by the War Department and the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture. No single agency provided unified management of the varied federal parklands.

An Executive Order in 1933 transferred 63 national monuments and military sites from the Forest Service and the War Department to the NPS. This action was a major step in the development of today's truly national system of parks—a system that includes areas of historical as well as scenic and scientific importance. Congress declared in the General Authorities Act of 1970 "that the National Park System, which began with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, has since grown to include superlative natural, historic, and recreation areas in every region ... and that it is the purpose of this Act to include all such areas in the System..."

Additions to the National Park System are now generally made through acts of congress, and national parks can be created only through such acts. But the President has authority, under the Antiquities Act of 1906, to proclaim national monuments on lands already under federal jurisdiction. The Secretary of the Interior is usually asked by congress for recommendations on proposed additions to the System. The Secretary is counseled by the National Park System Advisory Board, composed of private citizens, which advises on possible additions to the System and policies for its management.

Following is a list of significant legislation which influenced the creation and growth of the National Park System.

Yellowstone National Park Act, 1872

The Yellowstone National Park Act of 1872 preserves the watershed of the Yellowstone River "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." For the first time, public lands were preserved for public enjoyment, to be administered by the federal government. Put under the "exclusive control of the Secretary of the Interior," the land was "reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground..."

National Park Service Organic Act, 1916

"There is created in the Department of the Interior a service to be called the National Park Service, which shall be under the charge of a director.... The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations hereinafter specified, except as are under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Army, as provided by law, by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment for the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

The National Park System encompasses approximately 83.6 million acres, of which more than 4.3 million acres remain in private ownership. The largest area is Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska. At 13,200,000 acres it is 16.3 percent of the entire system. The smallest unit in the system is Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial, Pennsylvania, at 0.02 of an acre.

Three of the first four directors of the National Park Service graduated from the University of California at Berkeley: Stephen T. Mather, Horace Albright, and Newton B. Drury. All three were California natives. George Wright, one of the park service's first biologists/naturalists, was also a graduate of Berkeley.

General Authorities Act, 1970

The purpose of this act is to include all areas administered by the National Park Service in one National Park System and to clarify the authorities applicable to the system. Areas of the National Park System, the act states, "though distinct in character, are united through their inter-related purposes and resources into one national park system as cumulative expressions of a single national heritage; that, individually and collectively, these areas derive increased national dignity and recognition of their superb environmental quality through their inclusion jointly with each other in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all people of the United States..."

Redwoods Act, as amended, 1978

This act reasserted the system-wide standard of protection prescribed by congress in the original Organic Act. It states, "Congress further reaffirms, declares, and directs the promotion and regulation of the various areas of the National Park System...shall be consistent with and founded in the purpose established by the first section of the Act of August 25, 1916, to the common benefit of all the people of the United States. The authorization of activities shall be construed and the protection, management, and administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the National Park System and shall not be exercised in derogation of the values and purposes for which these various areas have been established, except as may have been or shall be directly and specifically provided by congress."

Designation of National Park System Units

The numerous designations within the National Park System sometime confuse visitors. The names are created in the Congressional legislation authorizing the sites or by the president, who proclaims "national monuments" under the Antiquities Act of 1906. Many names are descriptive —lakeshores, seashores, battlefields—but others cannot be neatly categorized because of the diversity of resources within them. In 1970, Congress elaborated on the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act, saying all units of the system have equal legal standing in a national system.

National Park

These are generally large natural places having a wide variety of attributes, at times including significant historic assets. Hunting, mining and consumptive activities are not authorized.

National Monument

The Antiquities Act of 1906 authorized the President to declare by public proclamation landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest situated on lands owned or controlled by the government to be national monuments.

National Preserve

National preserves are areas having characteristics associated with national parks, but in which congress has permitted continued public hunting, trapping, oil/gas exploration and extraction. Many existing national preserves, without sport hunting, would qualify for national park designation.

National Historic Site

Usually, a national historic site contains a single historical feature that was directly associated with its subject. Derived from the Historic

Sites Act of 1935, a number of historic sites were established by secretaries of the Interior, but most have been authorized by acts of congress.

National Historical Park
This designation generally applies to historic parks that extend beyond single properties or buildings.

National Memorial
A national memorial is commemorative of a historic person or episode; it need not occupy a site historically connected with its subject.

National Battlefield
This general title includes national battlefield, national battlefield park, national battlefield site, and national military park. In 1958, an NPS committee recommended national battlefield as the single title for all such park lands.

National Cemetery
There are presently 14 national cemeteries in the National Park System, all of which are administered in conjunction with an associated unit and are not accounted for separately.

National Recreation Area (NRA)
Twelve NRAs in the system are centered on large reservoirs and emphasize water-based recreation. Five other NRAs are located near major population centers. Such urban parks combine scarce open spaces with the preservation of significant historic resources and important natural areas in location that can provide outdoor recreation for large numbers of people.

National Seashore
Ten national seashores have been established on the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific coasts; some are developed and some relatively primitive. Hunting is allowed at many of these sites.

National Lakeshore
National lakeshores, all on the Great Lakes, closely parallel the seashores in character and use.

National River
There are several variations to this category: national river and recreation area, national scenic river, wild river, etc. The first was authorized in 1964 and others were established following passage of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968.

National Parkway
The title parkway refers to a roadway and the parkland paralleling the roadway. All were intended for scenic motoring along a protected corridor and often connect cultural sites.

National Trail
National scenic trails and national historic trails are the titles given to these linear parklands (over 3,600 miles) authorized under the National Trails System Act of 1968.

Affiliated Areas
In an Act of August 18, 1970, the National Park System was defined in law as, "any area of land and water now or hereafter administered by the Secretary of the Interior through the National Park Service for park, monument, historic, parkway, recreational or other purposes." The affiliated areas comprise a variety of locations in the United States and Canada that preserve significant properties outside the National Park System. Some of these have been recognized by Acts of Congress, others have been designated national historic sites by the Secretary of the Interior under authority of the Historic Sites Act of 1935. All draw on technical or financial aid from the National Park Service.

Other Designations
Some units of the National Park System bear unique titles or combinations of titles, like the White House and Prince William Forest Park.

Text Sources:

www.nps.gov/legacy/mission.html

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