1 From National Parks to a National Park System

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As America finds its way through the 21st century, the national parks serve as increasingly important guideposts. The national park system reflects much of our country’s remarkable natural and cultural heritage and the distinctive character of its landscapes and people. Here you will encounter the stories of nature and the primal forces that shaped the lands and waters we call home. There are also stories that tell of human endeavor—the hopes, challenges, and accomplishments of many people and cultures.

We treasure our national parks for the enjoyment they offer us, but they also represent an expanding set of values and issues—biodiversity, history, science, education, social justice, sustainability, and much more. In fact, we believe the national park system has become a remarkable, even indispensable resource—a one-of-a-kind collection of places that can help us learn how America came to be and to decide what we want it to become. The national park system is a foundational expression of American democracy, designed to be accessible to all for the benefit of all. This is why conservationist and historian Wallace Stegner called national parks “America’s best idea.”

This book is for thinking people—people like you—who visit national parks in search of inspiration, wisdom, and an opportunity to enjoy some of the best that life has to offer. As a thinking person, you want to find out more about the parks you visit; you are curious about their backstory. The first time you look out from the rim of the Grand Canyon—perhaps every time—your heart leaps, but you also want to know how nature carved such an awe-inspiring view. When you visit Gettysburg to experience firsthand the site of a terrible struggle that continues to influence our lives today, you find yourself wanting to understand why the war was fought and how it forever changed America.

Given the popularity of national parks, the large number of guidebooks to choose from is not surprising. You can find photographic and literary celebrations, accounts of personal journeys, and of course many sightseeing books offering detailed logistics for visiting the national parks. Our book is different—very different. We’ve designed this guide to satisfy your interest and curiosity

facing page: President Lincoln’s grant of the Yosemite Valley to the state of California was the beginning of America’s national park system.
about national parks, broaden your understanding and appreciation of important issues facing the national park system, and invite you to help conserve these special places.

We’ve chosen to focus on overarching themes—the big ideas—that bind the national parks into a national park system. Indeed, the book is about the national park system as much as it is about national parks. Individual parks are like the warp of a weaving, while the diverse themes and ideas represented in the parks—human history, natural history, culture, science, social justice, for example—are like the weft that binds the parks together. The resulting tapestry is a rich, aesthetic, and revealing picture of the national park system, a system that is part of the very foundation of our country and society. With this guide in hand, you’ll experience national parks where:

- Much of the nation’s biological and cultural diversity is represented and protected;
- The complex and dynamic relationship between humans and nature continuously shapes and reshapes the landscape;
- Ideas such as freedom, civil rights, and conservation were conceived and advanced in the face of adversity;
• Diverse cultural landscapes preserve the distinctive character, sense of place, and stories of America;
• Vast wilderness preserves offer opportunities for solitude and reflection;
• Urban parks enhance the vitality of the nation’s growing and increasingly diverse cities;
• The inherent and often contentious balance between recreation and preservation has been tested and retested; and
• Innovations in technology, sustainability, and stewardship offer us a sense of purpose and hope.

We also address major challenges facing the national park system, such as keeping national parks relevant to a growing diversity of Americans, conducting conservation on a larger landscape scale, engaging a wide variety of partners to
help conduct the work of national parks, and adapting to a changing climate that threatens the integrity of the national park system.

This book emphasizes the powerful synergy of a unified national park system in which the whole is far greater than the sum of its individual parks. The distinctive places that make up the national park system have a bewildering array of formal names and categories, such as “National Park,” “National Monument,” “National Historical Park,” “National Historic Site,” “National Seashore,” and “National Recreation Area.” We use these formal names in the book where needed for identification, but we consider and write about them all as “national parks” because each constitutes a vital component of our diverse national park system.

Individual national parks tell important stories, though these stories can be better understood when told in the context of the larger themes the national park system embraces.

For example, the hardship endured by General Washington’s soldiers who overwintered at Valley Forge (now a National Historical Park) and the bravery of nine students at Little Rock’s Central High School (now a National Historic Site) who stood up to segregation represent two very compelling, but seemingly different stories, each a product of its own time and place. But we can come to understand these stories in a new and deeper way when we see them both as acts of courage by ordinary citizens fighting for freedom. Freedom is just one example of a big idea or theme that traces through many of the special places that make up the national park system. Once you start making connections like this, your journey through the parks will surely lead to some unexpected and exciting destinations—both on the ground and in your mind.

With this guide in hand, you’ll see and experience the national park system in a new and more expansive way, and your national park experiences are sure to be more meaningful and memorable.
In preparing this book, we’ve asked people with deep personal connections to the national parks to share their insights on an idea represented in the national park system that they believe is vital to its future. Chapters begin with a personal story of how the authors first connected to national parks and developed their passion for them. Drawing on their years of experience, the authors then discuss their topic, including the greatest challenges facing the national parks and important new directions for the national parks in the 21st century. Chapters close with the authors’ recommendations for parks and related areas where you can experience the main ideas in their chapter first-hand. An index at the end of the book gives the names and locations of all parks mentioned.

AN EVOLVING SYSTEM OF NATIONAL PARKS

Today, the national park system is closer than ever to being as diverse as America itself—encompassing large natural areas such as Yellowstone National Park, Yosemite National Park, and Grand Canyon National Park; urban parks such as Gateway National Recreation Area, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the National Mall and Memorial Parks; historic sites and memorials such as Independence National Historical Park and Statue of Liberty National Monument; national battlefields such as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Gettysburg National Military Park; and cultural areas such as Mesa Verde National Park, Women’s Rights National Historical Park, and Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site.

The over 400 national parks in the national park system span the nation, located in every state and several islands in the Caribbean and Pacific. While most of the acreage of the national park system is in the western states, particularly Alaska, the greatest number of parks are primarily about American history and culture, and you can find these parks in any part of the country. A substantial number of parks are situated in metropolitan areas. The statistics are impressive: the national park system includes 84 million acres of land, 85,000 miles of rivers and streams, 43,000 miles of shoreline, 12,000 miles of trails, 8,000 miles of roads, 68,000 archeological sites, 27,000 historic structures, and over 150 million objects and artifacts in museum collections. The national parks draw

Shoreline parks are now an important part of the national park system: Female Kemp’s ridley sea turtle returns to the Gulf of Mexico after nesting, Padre Island National Seashore (Texas).
hundreds of millions of visits annually, a clear indication of their importance to Americans and to a substantial number of international visitors as well.

Through a broad portfolio of community programs administered by the National Park Service, the national park system’s influence extends well beyond park boundaries. These programs include the National Historic Landmarks Program, National Natural Landmarks Program, National Register of Historic Places, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The National Park Service also administers tax incentives for rehabilitating historic properties, and it offers funding and technical assistance to local communities for conservation and recreation. In addition, the National Park Service participates in technical assistance and international exchange programs through which employees of park systems in other parts of the world spend time at American national parks, and National Park Service employees travel abroad to learn from their counterparts in other countries.

Of course, the national park system did not emerge in its current form; it evolved over time, and its development reflects the history of the nation. Nascent expressions of interest in creating national parks began to appear in the 19th century. In 1832, ethnographer and painter George Catlin called for the establishment of a “nation’s Park” to protect Native Americans, who depended on rapidly
diminishing herds of bison. In his 1862 essay *Walking*, writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau “wished to speak a word for Nature” and later asked, “Why should not . . . we have our national preserves?”

In 1864, in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation granting Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias to the state of California for the benefit of the nation, “inalienable for all time.” Framing the intellectual foundation for what became the world’s first system of national parks, Frederick Law Olmsted, the great landscape architect and visionary of New York City’s Central Park, asserted that “establishment by government of great public grounds,” such as Yosemite, “for the free enjoyment of the people” is an essential responsibility of a democracy. Olmsted went on to argue that this historic step was consistent with Lincoln’s efforts to redefine and expand American freedom and the rewards of citizenship. Eight years later, in 1872, Congress acted yet again to preserve another remarkable American landscape “for the benefit of all the people.” This time, the government set aside over two million acres of public land to create Yellowstone National Park, generally recognized as the first national park both in the United States and the world.

Countering the growing materialism of late 19th-century America, conservationist and national park crusader John Muir wrote, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in.” Muir vigorously campaigned for establishment of Yosemite National Park, which involved incorporating the relatively small but spectacular Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove, granted to the state of California by Lincoln, into a much larger national park. Muir’s eloquent and persuasive writing and speaking on behalf of national parks has inspired generations of park enthusiasts. Building on the example of Yellowstone, he added his powerful voice to a growing number of national park advocates who successfully persuaded Congress, in the last decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th, to establish some of the large national parks in the West, including Glacier National Park, Mount Rainier National Park, Rocky Mountain National Park, Sequoia National Park, and Wind Cave National Park. The federal government established these parks primarily for their monumental landscapes and remarkable scenery and as expressions of national pride.

Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the country became more conscious of its remarkable antiquities,
particularly Native American sites in the Southwest. To protect these areas from
looting and vandalism, Congress passed the Antiquities Act in 1906, authorizing
the president to create national monuments on public lands to safeguard their
outstanding archeological, scientific, and related values. President Theodore
Roosevelt took an especially active role in establishing a number of national mon-
uments under the provisions of this legislation, and many monuments such as
Grand Canyon and Mesa Verde later received recognition by Congress as national
parks. Today, American presidents continue to create national monuments
through the Antiquities Act.

By the second decade of the 20th century, the army was protecting the dozen
or so national parks against timber poachers and hunters, and not until 1916 did
Congress see the need to create the National Park Service, a federal agency tasked
to manage the national parks. Stephen Mather, the first director of the National
Park Service, along with his deputy and eventual successor, Horace Albright, led
the fledgling agency for its first 17 years. Mather had made a fortune in busi-
ness, and he used his entrepreneurial skills to market the national parks to the
American people. Working with the railroad and automobile industries, Mather

*The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Washington Monument, both part of the National Mall and Memorial
Parks (Washington, D.C.), are among the many urban parklands, historic sites, monuments, and greenways
the National Park Service is responsible for in and around the capital.*
and Albright greatly expanded public access to the national park system in order to build a strong constituency for national parks across the United States.

During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed the footprint and mission of the national park system. Roosevelt was the first president to use the National Park Service outside the boundaries of national parks to supervise public works and conservation projects and plan for the nation’s long-term recreation needs. Civilian Conservation Corps crews, directed by the National Park Service, developed new roads, trails, campsites, and other park facilities in over 700 state parks. They also built extensive recreation facilities in the national parks, many of which remain in use today. In 1933, Roosevelt transferred the War Department’s historic military sites, such as Gettysburg, to the National Park Service along with monuments in Washington, D.C., such as the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, substantially enlarging and diversifying the national park system. Emphasis on historic sites, structures, and cultural objects of national significance grew noticeably over succeeding decades. As part of the New Deal, the National Park Service conducted comprehensive nationwide surveys of scenic road corridors and coastlines, recommending greater public access to these vital resources. New categories of parkways and

![Image of Fort Pulaski National Monument (Georgia).](image1)

The history of military technology is traced at Fort Pulaski National Monument (Georgia).

![Image of Lincoln Bridge, Chickasaw National Recreation Area (Oklahoma).](image2)

Superb examples of craftsmanship can be found in many national parks: Lincoln Bridge, Chickasaw National Recreation Area (Oklahoma).
shoreline parks were added to the national park system, beginning with Blue Ridge Parkway and Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

In 1947, the national park system expanded in still another direction with establishment of Everglades National Park. While many national parks contained important natural resources, the government initially set aside these places for their scenic beauty, not for purposes of environmental protection. Everglades was different. The scenery it offered was generally not appreciated at the time, but Everglades represented an important type of ecological system: swamps and wetlands and the particular species of birds and other animals that dwell in these habitats. Everglades was the first of many national parks established explicitly to protect important ecological regions and biodiversity.
Though recreation in the national parks was important from the very beginning, it got a boost immediately after World War II. Demand to visit the national parks soared, exceeding the capacity of facilities and services. In 1956, the National Park Service began Mission 66, a 10-year program to expand and upgrade visitor facilities in the national parks, timed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the agency in 1966. Based on earlier shoreline recreation studies, the government established a series of national seashores and lakeshores in the 1960s, several within easy driving distance of major metropolitan areas. These include Cape Cod National Seashore, Fire Island National Seashore, Padre Island National Seashore, Point Reyes National Seashore, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, and Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, among others.

While the environmental movement of the 1960s helped rally popular support for expanding the national park system overall, National Park Service programs focused greater attention on the nation’s largest cities during this time, with the goal of enhancing open space, recreation opportunities, and quality of life for the growing majority of Americans living in urban areas. The nation’s largest and most ambitious urban national recreation areas resulted from this new focus: Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City and New Jersey, and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the San Francisco Bay area, both established in 1972.

By far the largest expansion of the national park system occurred in 1978 when President Jimmy Carter, in a sweeping declaration, used the Antiquities Act to proclaim a large number of national monuments in Alaska, most of which fell under the auspices of the National Park Service. His action helped bring closure to a longstanding debate dating to Alaska’s statehood in 1959 over what to do with the state’s extensive public lands. In 1980, Congress resolved the argument by passing a law incorporating 47 million acres into the national park system, more than doubling its size. Some previously existing national parks as well as some of the new national monuments received the title “National Park and Preserve,” including Wrangell–St. Elias (at 13.2 million acres, the largest national park), Denali, Glacier Bay, Gates of the Arctic, and Lake Clark. The new “Preserve” designation acknowledges the subsistence rights of Alaska Natives to hunt, fish, and gather—vital elements of their traditional way of life.
Over the past few decades, Congress has added new national parks and affiliated places to the national park system in order to tell a more complete and inclusive American narrative. As a result, the national park system has become more relevant and accessible to our increasingly diverse society. More and more national parks are collaborating with a wide array of partners, for example Redwood National and State Parks, where the National Park Service and the state of California jointly manage old-growth redwood groves in consultation with American Indian tribes who have lived in the North Coast region for thousands of years. Partnerships are also key to the success of National Heritage Areas—large, nationally important lived-in landscapes governed by representatives from the region that can call on the National Park Service for advice and technical assistance. Another collaborative model is the Presidio Trust, which works in close partnership with Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy to oversee the park’s transformation from a former army base in San Francisco into a vibrant urban national park. These and other types of partnerships invigorate the national park system by expanding the role of volunteers, citizen scientists, youth crews, and friends groups, ultimately cultivating a greater sense of ownership and stewardship of our national parks.

The national park system is clearly not static, but has evolved and expanded over space and time. Historically, Americans valued parks primarily for their monumental landscapes, especially in the American West, but today we also value them as ecological reserves and reservoirs of biodiversity; as places of history, public memory, and cultural traditions; as outdoor classrooms and laboratories; as models of sustainability; and for their contributions to local economies. Behind each national park is a story—often many stories—that help bind us together as
a nation and society. But these stories are not fully written, and they never will be. As we add new voices to our national narrative, the national park system will continue to evolve in ways that respond to a changing environment and society.

**USING THIS GUIDE**

We hope this book will help you enjoy and appreciate what our national park system has to offer and that you’ll use this guide to learn more about some of your favorite national parks as well as parks you may not yet know about. We encourage you to visit some of the parks our contributing authors recommend; some may surprise you with the stories they tell, and you may find yourself looking at parks you already know in new and different ways.

As you read the following chapters, and as you visit the parks they discuss, think about the new initiatives and innovations that are underway and the challenges facing the national park system that still remain. You may want to talk about these issues with park rangers and other park visitors as well as your family, friends, and colleagues. If you’d like to learn more about the national park system’s current challenges and initiatives, sample the “Sources and Resources” section at the end of the book. Here, we’ve gathered information on books, papers, reports, films, apps, and websites you may wish to explore.

There are many ways you can experience our national park system—on vacations, on weekend excursions, or even on a daily basis for many of you who live near a national park. You might connect with the national park system through school and community programs, websites and social media, or park volunteer programs. We invite you not only to read about national parks and visit them, but to consider how you can contribute to them as well. We’ll return to this topic in the last chapter of the book. However you engage with the national park system, we encourage you to be curious, to question, and to explore. Seek out visitor centers and ranger-led activities, and don’t hesitate to ask park staff or volunteers for help when you have questions or would like to learn more. As President Harry Truman said, “These are the people’s parks.” We have prepared this book for people like you who share a love for the American landscape and a curiosity about our national heritage and a commitment to its stewardship. We wish you a lifetime of discovery in America’s national park system.