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Beyond the scenery: Parks as giant living classrooms

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PSF

PARKS STEWARDSHIP FORUM

# AMERICA'S LARGEST CLASSROOM

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF  
EDUCATION IN OUR PARKS

CITATION

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THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S FRAME

# BEYOND THE SCENERY

*parks as giant living classrooms*

Gary E. Davis & Dorothy Ann Davis





## INTRODUCTION

Parks possess values beyond being places of beauty, solitude, and inspiration. They are also the last, best places for people to learn how systems of nature work—and how parks are essential for resolving existential threats to human prosperity.

One of the four critical pillars of park stewardship connects people to special protected areas. Park stewards must know and understand parks. They must also protect parks and restore impaired park integrity and authenticity. Above all, they must educate people about the myriad values of parks to assure that these special places are understood and remain relevant to society.

Park stewards need to communicate the reasons everyone should care about protected areas such as national parks. We all depend on nature's systems for life and well-being, including clean air, safe water, nutritious food, and a habitable climate. Parks also serve as environmental baselines and help us to remember the past.

However, the bonds between humans and nature are withering in the increasingly urbanized, industrialized, and mechanized world in which we live. Since parks sustain memories and enhance human well-being, helping parks also helps people.

Park educational values may be obscured by the scenery and immense scale of wild landscapes. These values will be diminished or lost if society is left unaware of history or we become oblivious to our surroundings.

When people connect intangible ideas, like “wild,” “impairment,” and “enjoyment” with tangible places and objects in parks, they can create powerful, enduring, transformative experiences.

Science, like education, is more than a collection of data and facts. It is a process for learning, and a way of knowing how nature's systems work. Science provides raw materials for stories that can profoundly connect people to nature and to history. Education forges bonds between these stories and human needs and concerns, which highlights the relevancy of protected areas.

Interpretive storytelling engages people beyond facts and figures, leading to transformative experiences that create curiosity and understanding. Perhaps the greatest values parks provide are the transformational experiences that ignite educational fires in young and old alike. As the 1st-century Greek philosopher and Delphi priest, Plutarch, expressed it, “The mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting.”



# PLACES TO LEARN HOW NATURE WORKS



Among the most often photographed landscapes in the US National Park System, Goose Island in Saint Mary Lake offers both human and natural history stories. Glacier National Park (Montana)



# CONNECTING PEOPLE TO PARKS



One of four core competencies of park stewardship: a classic ranger talk, Grand Canyon National Park (Arizona)



# WHY EVERYONE SHOULD CARE ABOUT NATIONAL PARKS



Because everyone, like ancient cliff dwellers, depends on nature and needs to remember the past.  
Mesa Verde National Park (Colorado)



# MOST OF US LIVE IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS, WHICH WEAKENS OUR BOND WITH NATURE



Parks sustain human well-being, which includes our memories. Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Washington, DC)



# VALUES OF PARKS HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT



Wild life discovered in national park hydrothermal pools enables modern forensic DNA analysis.  
Yellowstone National Park (Wyoming, Montana, Idaho)



# PARKS CONNECT IDEAS TO PLACES



America's concept of westward Manifest Destiny comes alive here. Gateway Arch National Park (formerly Jefferson National Expansion Memorial; Missouri)



# SCIENCE AS A WAY OF KNOWING



Tidepool monitoring yields source material to tell nature's stories. Cabrillo National Monument (California)



# INTERPRETIVE STORYTELLING REVEALS THE TRUTHS BEHIND THE APPEARANCES



Park Ranger Mike Ryan reveals life in 19th-century Fort Jefferson. Dry Tortugas National Park (Florida)



# TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES



Parks stimulate imagination and inspire junior rangers. Rocky Mountain National Park (Colorado)



EDUCATION IS NOT THE FILLING OF A PAIL,  
BUT THE LIGHTING OF A FIRE



Family surprise discovering new life forms in wild, unimpaired tide pools. Cabrillo National Monument (California)