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THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S FRAME



THE SAGA TO REINVIGORATE THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE *Gary E. Davis and Dorothy A. Davis*

After a century, America's national parks have become so popular that they are in danger of being smothered by affection. Many people struggle to visit a national park without making heroic planning efforts, booking reservations many months in advance, and incurring significant travel costs. How can we save wildlife and historical treasures in parks struggling to survive onslaughts? This saga has the makings of a classic story arc — *Good Deed* → *Collapse* → *Escalation* — but only if we can reinvigorate National Park System stewardship to ensure humanity's heritage survives unimpaired in parks as intended by our ancestors.

↑ Visitors on boardwalk trail at Old Faithful Inn viewed from Geyser Hill

Our ancestors bequeathed us an awe-inspiring *Good Deed!*



The US National Park System was created over a century ago. It matured as a virtual network of over 400 parks, monuments, and other sites in its first 100 years. In 2016, this system hosted over 330 million visits when the entire US population was only 320 million. Americans explicitly reinvigorated their park system three times in its first century: with infrastructure constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s, facilities modernized during the post-war boom of the 1950s and '60s with Mission 66, and investment in science-based stewardship to ward off growing environmental stresses with the Natural Resource Challenge in the 1990s. America's National Park System was a global beacon of hope for humanity as the 21st century dawned and Earth's human population exceeded 6 billion souls.

↑ Tunnel View, Yosemite Valley



In the beginning:

Amid the existential threat of civil war, Americans birthed a unique idea to set aside wild land for the use of all people. President Abraham Lincoln established by federal law a park “for public use, resort, and recreation” in the incredible Yosemite Valley and the nearby Mariposa Grove of ancient, giant Sequoia trees in California’s Sierra Range. A few years later, in 1872, Civil War hero President Ulysses S. Grant escalated Lincoln’s Yosemite designation by signing a congressional act to create the world’s first national park. In a vast region of the northern Rocky Mountains, Yellowstone National Park became a “pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people” designed by federal law for “the preservation, from injury or spoliation of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities or wonders within said park and their retention in their natural condition.”



↑ Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon

Roosevelt Arch, Yellowstone NP ↓

A space of National Park designations:



The US and Canada launched a period of escalating national park growth. Following Canada's 1911 establishment of its national park system, in 1916 America created a National Park Service bureau in the US Department of the Interior and, with it, a National Park System of 37 sites that would become known as one of the country's "best ideas." At the time of the National Park Service 2016 centennial celebration, the US National Park System included over 400 parks, including national parks, monuments, lakeshores and seashores, recreation areas, battlefields, memorials, and historical parks, with some two dozen categories of sites in all.

↑ Crown of the Continent Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in Alberta, Canada, and Montana, USA



Park wildlife populations began faltering in the mid-20th century. Attempts to meet visitor expectations for the pleasures of convenient wildlife viewing competed with assuring nature's integrity and health in parks. This raised difficult questions about the core purposes of national parks: were

they meant to perpetually ensure national heritage conservation or provide immediate entertainment for current visitors? Repeatedly, scientific advice indicated that both were possible with adequate knowledge of park environments. The caveat is that acquiring such knowledge requires increased sustained investments in study and monitoring to guide stewardship and adaptive management. In the early 21st century, excessive park popularity caused crowding and stressed inadequate facilities for visitors' transportation, water treatment, overnight accommodations, and waste disposal. In response, National Park Service staff narrowed their focus to satisfy these demands for daily visitor recreation. The bureau's mission-related training program was another early casualty of stressed budgets. Gradually, many park rangers and other professionals seemed to view the agency's primary responsibilities as keeping visitors safe, enforcing regulations, and ensuring the flag was properly flown at ranger stations. Park goals of heritage conservation thus became more aspirational than operational as visitor services and recreational entertainment grew to dominate daily activities.

↑ Rocky Mountain elk

American bison ↓

Squeaky wheels:



As visitors clamored for more park facilities and public services, park leaders were distracted, and the agency's political survival became threatened; the National Park Service's shared sense of common purpose and conservation mission faded from memory. Eventually, the workforce lost hope, the general public and park visitors lost trust, and conservation partners lost faith. With no relief in sight, the worst features of an ambivalent, dystopian government bureaucracy manifested themselves, and park values eroded in the face of relentless global environmental alterations, threatening the irretrievable loss of the nation's essential history and natural legacy. Today's US National Park Service is underfunded, parks are overcrowded, climate everywhere continues to change beyond millennial records, and humanity's capacity to discern truth and relate to nature and history is rapidly fading.

Escalation—History’s epitaph, “Learn it or repeat it.”



Philosopher George Santayana (1863–1952) famously observed, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Therefore, like the four manic, flailing salesmen in David Mamet’s 1984 Pulitzer Prize-winning stage play “Glengarry Glen Ross,” each generation of National Park Service professionals must strive to “Always Be Closing” the national park deal to convince novice park staff, park partners, and the public that it’s critical to advance the agency’s mission and realize its *raison d’être* to perpetuate the nation’s natural and cultural heritage for future generations. Successful citizenship in a democracy requires it! There are no guarantees that national parks will continue to exist without citizen advocates to avert social disaster, and the best way to create such advocates is to ensure people enjoy meaningful, high-quality personal experiences in parks.

↑ Visitor “in line” at FDR Memorial Bread Line Statue, Washington, DC

Reignite the passion:



The National Park Service strives to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. Even before essential quotidian matters such as staffing levels and affordable housing are addressed, leadership with integrity, vision, empathy, confidence, and communication skills must be restored and sustained. Park stewards need professional training to rededicate themselves to a unified goal emphasizing hope, mission, and camaraderie. Only then may the next cycle of National Park System restoration and escalation begin. Public pride and support will return only when recommitment to the National Park System's mission and values reveals and instills common causes and promises renewed hope in the body politic.

↑ Child at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC

Define a common purpose:



Irish writer William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) elegantly reminds us, “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.” Accordingly, the National Park Service’s mission must focus on more than raising and lowering parks’ visitor center flags daily: it must also include igniting fires of pride in every park employee and of enjoyment and wonder in all park visitors. A shared search for meaning by park visitors and employees afforded by the National Park Service mission gives human lives purpose, passion, and the desire to protect, not destroy. In parks, we reflect on ourselves at our best rather than our acrimonious worst and find cause for intentional civic engagement. Park Service employee “training” must facilitate intergenerational sharing of agency culture and promote dignity in a shared mission beyond simply transferring information or instructions for daily tasks.

↑ Flag at Canyon Visitor Center, Yellowstone NP

H orace M. Albright's prescient vision:



As the first civilian Yellowstone National Park superintendent, second National Park Service director, and National Park System co-founder with American industrialist Stephen Tyng Mather, Albright seemed to understand with exceptional clarity the challenge of sustaining mission passion. In 1933, as he moved on from the directorship of the National Park Service into private business, he challenged his former government colleagues with this charge: “Do not let the service [NPS] become ‘just another Government bureau’; keep it youthful, vigorous, clean, and strong. We are not here to simply protect what we have been given so far; we are here to try to be the future guardians of those areas as well as to sweep our protective arms around the vast lands which may well need us as man and his industrial world expand and encroach on the last bastions of wilderness.”

↑ Winter visitors awed by an Old Faithful Geyser eruption



Humanity's industry threatens to obliterate history with continuous renewal and improvements and has already expanded and encroached on nature; the last bastions of wild places on land and in the sea are within sight today. It is high time to reinvigorate America's National Park System yet again. This time, we must begin by renewing public conservation partnerships and reviving the National Park Service agency that together produced America's "best idea," as articulated in 1983 by writer and historian Wallace Stegner, who famously called national parks "the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst." Now, inspired by labor leader and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta's rallying cry "Sí, se puede," which means "Yes, it is possible" in Spanish and adapted by President Barack Obama as "Yes we can," reinvigorating the National Park Service can escalate America's best idea to new heights for all Americans through the 21st century and beyond.

↑ Three 21st-century riders in the Grand Canyon