



## 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 almost 400 sites and employs more than 30,000 rangers at peak summer season. Yet like the small seeds of a California Coastal Redwood that ultimately grows 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.

The early national parks and monuments were not all gold and glory. Specifically, there were three big problems. First, congress gave meager appropriations to the parks. This meant that the parks remained underfunded, understaffed, and under-appreciated by the public. Second, the parks were administered not by one government agency but by three. Third, the parks were exploited. A prime example of this came in 1913 when the Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park became Hetch Hetchy Reservoir to serve the water needs of the San Francisco Bay area.

Due to these reasons and more, a wealthy Chicago philanthropist by the name of Stephen Mather was disgusted with the way the national parks were being managed. Mather wrote to Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane in 1914 stating just this. The Secretary wrote back, "Dear Mr. Mather. If you do not like the way the parks are run then come on down to Washington and run them yourself." And so he did! Early the next year, Mather and a young man by the name of Horace Albright became a team at Interior.

The two men worked indefatigably to promote the national parks and monuments and bring the NPS to fruition. As a result of their hard work, on August 16, 1916 the National Park Service was established "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."

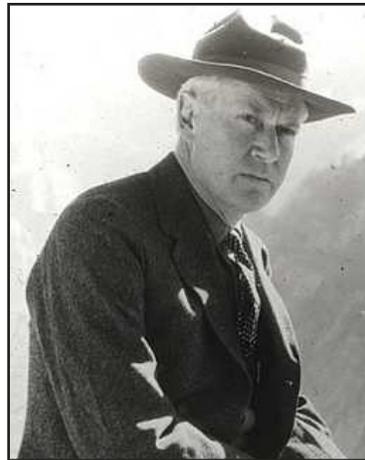
Mather was the service's first director, serving from 1917 until 1929. Under Mather's leadership, the field of interpretation was initiated; lodging facilities and roads improved dramatically; appropriations increased; a wide-scale system of state parks was initiated; and new national parks such as Zion, Bryce Canyon, Haleakala, and Denali were established.

Following Mather, Albright directed the National Park Service from 1929 until 1933. Albright was a history buff and this showed during his directorship. Albright discussed the possibility of adding historic parks to the park system with FDR. The president liked the idea, and in 1933 he signed the Reorganization Act, giving the NPS the national capitol parks, national battlefields

and cemeteries that were previously managed by the Department of War, and most of the Forest Service's national monuments. By adding parks like Gettysburg, Antietam, and Lincoln Memorial, the park system became a truly national system, geographically speaking.

Albright was also instrumental in getting FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) involved in the parks. Throughout the 1930s, the CCC planted trees and constructed trails, campgrounds, and ranger stations throughout the various units of the NPS.

During World War II, when Protector-of-the-Redwoods Newton B. Drury was director, the parks received minimal appropriations due to increased war funding. As a result, when the postwar boom of visitors



*'Distance in his eyes.'* As the first director of the National Park Service, Stephen Mather was one of its most influential leaders.  
NPS Photo

came to the national parks, facilities were in poor condition. However, the next key park service director had just the idea. In 1956, Conrad Wirth announced Mission 66, a decade-long, billion dollar program that upgraded facilities and management throughout the system in time for its 50th anniversary in 1966.

In the 1960s, dozens of parks came into the system thanks in part to the NPS' chain of commanders: Director George Hartzog, Jr., Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, and Presidents JFK and LBJ. These new parks included Guadalupe Mountains and Redwood national parks, Nez Perce and Saint-Gaudens national historic sites, Delaware Water Gap and Bighorn Canyon national recreation areas, and of course, Chamizal National Memorial. The following decade, President Jimmy Carter used the Antiquities Act of 1906 to establish millions of acres of national monuments in Alaska.

Even with the continued expansion of the National Park System, not until fairly recently has the NPS largely expanded its preservationist, scientific stance. In the first several decades of its existence for example, there were zoos inside some parks, forest fires were suppressed, and it was considered normal practice for rangers and visitors to feed wildlife. However, like many, the NPS has learned from its past mistakes. Many national parks now have biologists, ecologists, and natural resource specialists that study park flora and fauna and tackle environmental problems.

As the NPS closes in on its century mark in 2016, problems and prospects loom on the horizon. In an age of cell phones, computers, and video games, how can the NPS get kids outdoors? How can it promote environmental stewardship and combat global warming? How can it find money to upgrade its deteriorating museums and visitor centers? The road ahead will be difficult and long, but one thing is certain: if the national parks and monuments have as rich a future as their past, then they will continue to be regarded as "America's best idea" for a long time yet to come.

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*The battle to "save" national parks is never won. The park idea itself will persist in this country only if each generation renews its commitments to this special plan of land stewardship.*

-Stewart Udall