





# idea

AMERICA'S BEST

MUSINGS ON NATIONAL PARKS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE, INSPIRED BY THE NEW FILM FROM KEN BURNS

a conversation with national parks scholar **ethan carr**, yellowstone national park superintendent **suzanne lewis**, former national park service deputy director **john reynolds**, and lowell national historical park ranger **duey kohl** moderated by **lucy lawliss** george washington birthplace national monument/thomas stone national historic site superintendent **and tim davis** national park service historian

**“One learns that the world, though made, is yet being made. That this is still the morning of creation,”** says John Muir to commence the magnificent *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. The same may be said of the National Park Service itself, as this group of commentators looks at its past as prelude: Ethan Carr, professor of landscape architecture at the University of Virginia and author of *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* and *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*; Suzanne Lewis, superintendent of Yellowstone, featured in the film; John Reynolds, consultant to the National Parks Second Century Commission, talking about its upcoming report; and Duey Kohl, a Cambodian-American ranger at Lowell National Historical Park, which is trying to stay key in revitalizing the former industrial city while being relevant to a burgeoning southeast Asian community.

**LEFT: DRY TORTUGAS NATIONAL PARK** “Fort Jefferson is the largest brick structure in the western hemisphere,” says photographer Q. T. Luong, who has made a career of photographing the national parks. “What I found striking was the continuity between the ocean and the walls.” A French citizen of Vietnamese descent, Luong started out photographing the Alps, and his curiosity became a passion with the American landscape, his work featured in the new Ken Burns film.

**LUCY:** What were your impressions of the film? Suzanne?

**SUZANNE:** I was mesmerized. Ken Burns is an extremely talented storyteller who just happens to have this other side of his brain that is really connected to media. A point of pride for me was seeing Gerard Baker, an American Indian with his braids, in a park ranger uniform.

**DUEY:** The film seemed so lofty. It was great to see the complete picture of our system, but when you work in a place like Lowell, the big grand parks out west have little to do with us on a day-to-day basis. How do we connect those parks with people coming to urban sites like ours? I grew up in the city my whole life and went camping this summer and hated it.

**JOHN:** In one episode, Nevada Barr—who worked at Yosemite—compares coming back to going home. That was resonant for me. My wife was born in Yosemite Valley, where her folks worked for the concession, so our entire lives have been entwined with the Park System. We can all go home to what our nation is made of—what it has gone through and is going through—by way of the parks. The Lincoln Memorial segments illustrate that well. In 1939, Marian Anderson—a celebrated

**ETHAN:** The amazing thing is that Burns and writer Dayton Duncan managed to pull it together. It's such a complex history, a whole bunch of different histories, really, because the Park System is so complex.

**TIM:** It's impressive how they bring it down to the individual level, with the photo albums and the home movies of visitors. The albums of the couple from Nebraska, that's an emotional highlight.

**JOHN:** And the story of the Japanese painter of Yosemite. During World War II, after he's taken away to an internment camp, his wife reminds him how he feels about the sequoias, to give him strength. And today the Manzanar camp is a national park—equal to Yellowstone and Yosemite. Not just as land we own, but as ethics we own. That's what this film is about. Not the national parks, but the national parks idea. It's about this complex heritage, some of it land, but not all of it.

**ETHAN:** That the National Park System embodies not just biology, not just history, but the idea of a national identity infused in these landscapes.

**LUCY:** Burns has said that history “is an inclusion of myth as well as fact because myth tells you much more than fact about a people.” Suzanne,



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African American singer—performs for 75,000 people, invited by Interior Secretary Ickes after the Daughters of the American Revolution barred her performance at Constitution Hall. Not many years later, Martin Luther King makes his “I Have a Dream” speech. And Park Service Director George Hartzog recalls bringing his father, who was from South Carolina and undoubtedly a post-Confederate. George almost cries recalling what his father says after reading what’s inscribed there—something like “now I understand.”

**ABOVE: OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK** “A remarkable place,” says photographer Luong. “The trees are so laden with moss it gives you a feeling like you’re in a forest imagined by Tolkien.” **RIGHT: YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK** Luong’s camera catches sweep and detail alike. “The grass in the stream made an interesting pattern, and the stream was so clear you could see the same pattern underwater.”





as superintendent of such an iconic place, what are your thoughts about the myth of the national parks—and those who made them?

**SUZANNE:** I think of it as individual threads that make up a tapestry. In a tapestry there are always flaws. There's one thread that got a little wiggly, that got a little out of play. The weave wasn't tight, or the weave was too tight. And myth and fact, too, are a lot like a weaving. You have to have both to give the broadest view. Some people don't like history because facts don't appeal to them, but the combination of personal stories and impressions, blended with facts, gives you a true connection. And this film does a great job of blending the two. Beyond merely reciting the history, it creates a sense of heritage.

**LUCY:** How did you feel watching as superintendent of a featured park?

**SUZANNE:** It was a little overwhelming, a little gulp. I had a real sense of the honor that comes with the responsibility of how my decisions will lead, like another piece of yarn in the tapestry.

**TIM:** The film does a very good job of exploring the tension, or paradox, between preserving places and promoting access to them, exemplified

the '30s to backpacking in the '60s and '70s. And it not only changes, it's additive, bringing in sites like Lowell, whose preservation as a historic place is every bit as much about restoring its health as bringing back the wolf at Yellowstone, conceptually no different. Lowell is a social ecosystem in the same way that Yellowstone is an ecological one.

**TIM:** The film begins with Muir and ends with the wolf, and in between has endless wonderful scenery of the crown jewel natural parks. How will this emphasis affect the conception of what the Park Service is and does? How do scenery and wildlife relate to an increasingly urban and diverse society?

**JOHN:** Burns and Duncan chose to talk about what they wanted to talk about—how the national park idea evolved up to 1980. It worries me tremendously that we're going to leave everybody thinking about just the grand parks and not connecting them to the rest. The Second Century Commission began by suffering through the same dilemma, growing its understanding. The country has no comprehension of how the park idea has evolved to embrace other kinds of places.

**LUCY:** Duey, what does your park mean to the Cambodian community?

**DUHEY:** Being Cambodian myself, I identify with the immigrant experience, and try to work toward building an inclusive, multicultural city. It's about involving the park in the life of the people. Promoting community dialogue can be a powerful first step in changing the dynamic. If you listen to all the voices, you find innovative ways to approach audiences, like our southeast Asian water festival.

**JOHN:** If the Park Service does not have a primary objective of connecting to the diversity of the population, it's likely to become an anachronism.

**SUZANNE:** Sometimes, especially with places like Yellowstone, we want to tell ourselves there will be no change, but that's a falsehood. A recent example is visitors wanting wireless service. Half do, and half don't. So what's acceptable? I'm a visitor standing on the boardwalk waiting for Old Faithful to go off. I don't want to hear the person next to me on their cell. Yet that person feels such a deep connection they call a friend or family member and say, "Get on the live stream. Look with me." Young people have a total expectation to be connected while they're on the



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by Director Stephen Mather's "deal with the devil," the automobile, in the early 20th century. Throughout history, visitors and managers have had to continuously re-think what the parks are for. What do you think audiences will take away from this?

**JOHN:** Mather had to get the people to believe there was something real in the parks. So he encouraged them to come by car, and their personal ties translated to political power, which is how our nation works. The environmental movement strengthened that dynamic. How we manage the parks always reflects how they are supported by the people and therefore by the political process. The film shows their social usefulness changing through time, from things like golf and tennis in parks of

**LEFT: WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE** *The abandoned Kennecott copper mill. The landscape's connection to human history can be subtle or pronounced. "I try to invite the viewer to consider the space as if they were standing there themselves," photographer Luong says. "My goal has always been to bring back the wonders I've seen to people who can't get there."* **ABOVE: DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK** *Death Valley, the final resting place for an old sedan.*

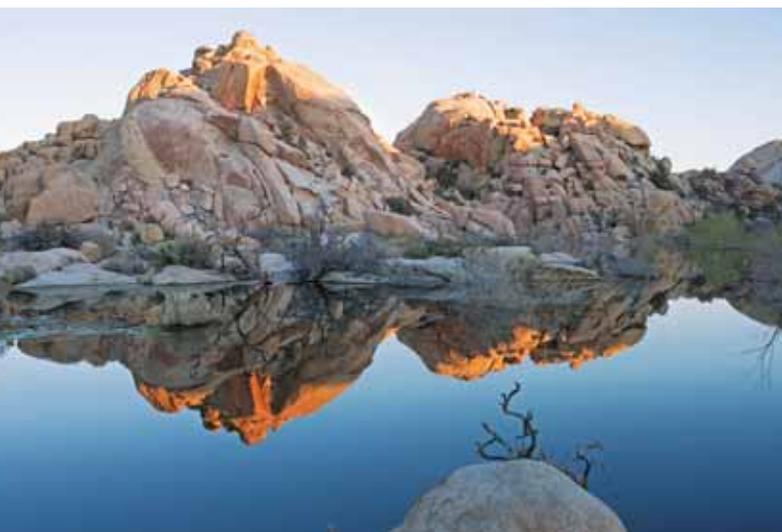
road. We have to find a way to recognize all sides, rather than making binary decisions of yes/no, right/wrong, stop/go.

**LUCY:** With the audience shifts, how do you keep your finger on the pulse?

**SUZANNE:** I would tell you that we don't even have our finger on the pulse in the first place. As a Service, we're woefully inadequate on social science to help in our decision-making.

**TIM:** Ethan, given the changing demographics, if your landscape architecture students were to design a national park now, what would it look like?

**ETHAN:** Something that comes through in the film is that the ideology of public parks remains very powerful. And part of my answer is, what did parks look like in the past? How well did they work? What has changed in society? Are the underlying assumptions the same? There have been some influential design competitions lately, most for parks in places like Los Angeles and New York, and one recently for Gateway National Recreation Area. The designs pay close attention to ecology and process in the shaping of the landscape, and the experience is a far



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less structured one. The cultural associations are constantly changing, not fixed, with multiple narratives. But these designs are often difficult to implement. How many can I point to and say, "That's what a park should look like today." Very few.

**DUHEY:** That's the thing. The parks were created at a moment when they reflected a certain vision of American society. Some of us don't share that history. It's good to think about it, but how do we make the Park Service a contemporary teacher of American citizens? How do we engage a multi-cultural society? I live in the city and I can see our park as a gateway to some of the amazing places out West that helped define this nation.

**JOHN:** This is a critical comment. We've got to drop out of what's comfortable without losing sight of what's good. Connecting people does not

start at the park, it starts by going to the people. That's what Mather did in a different time. The staff at the Santa Monica Mountains park went into east L.A.'s Hispanic community, and even though they were nervous, maybe scared, they were welcomed. People were curious about the park, and wondered if they could have a role in it.

**LUCY:** To a degree we've seen the parks as islands. Suzanne, when I first met you, I was inspired by your earlier work as superintendent at Florida's Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve.

**SUZANNE:** It's one of the "new" partnership parks owned only in part by the Park Service, originally established as Fort Caroline National Memorial, a scale model of a French colonial fortification. Today, it not only tells the colonial story, but is a place of multiple experiences embracing 6,000 years of human history and millions of years of nature—managed by dynamic partners working to convey the multi-layered stories to the public.

**LUCY:** Not a place of boundaries—political, social, or legal—but a place of relationships. Not so much a place as experiences that change people's lives. And with Burns inspiring a new wave of visitors, where can they find these experiences? All the parks can be gateways to other places.

**ETHAN:** What I'm hearing is that bold responses are needed in park development, not just a parking overlook or a visitor center, which tends to be a monolithic approach of interpreting dispersed landscapes that have multiple narratives. People point to the promise of technology—handheld GPS devices that could give you different layers and interpretations to carry with you. Transportation is another issue. You don't experience places standing still, you experience them in motion. Stop thinking of transportation as infrastructure and more as a mode for interpreting experience. There are dramatic new ways of thinking about parks, called for in part because of changes in society and technology. We just don't know what they look like yet.

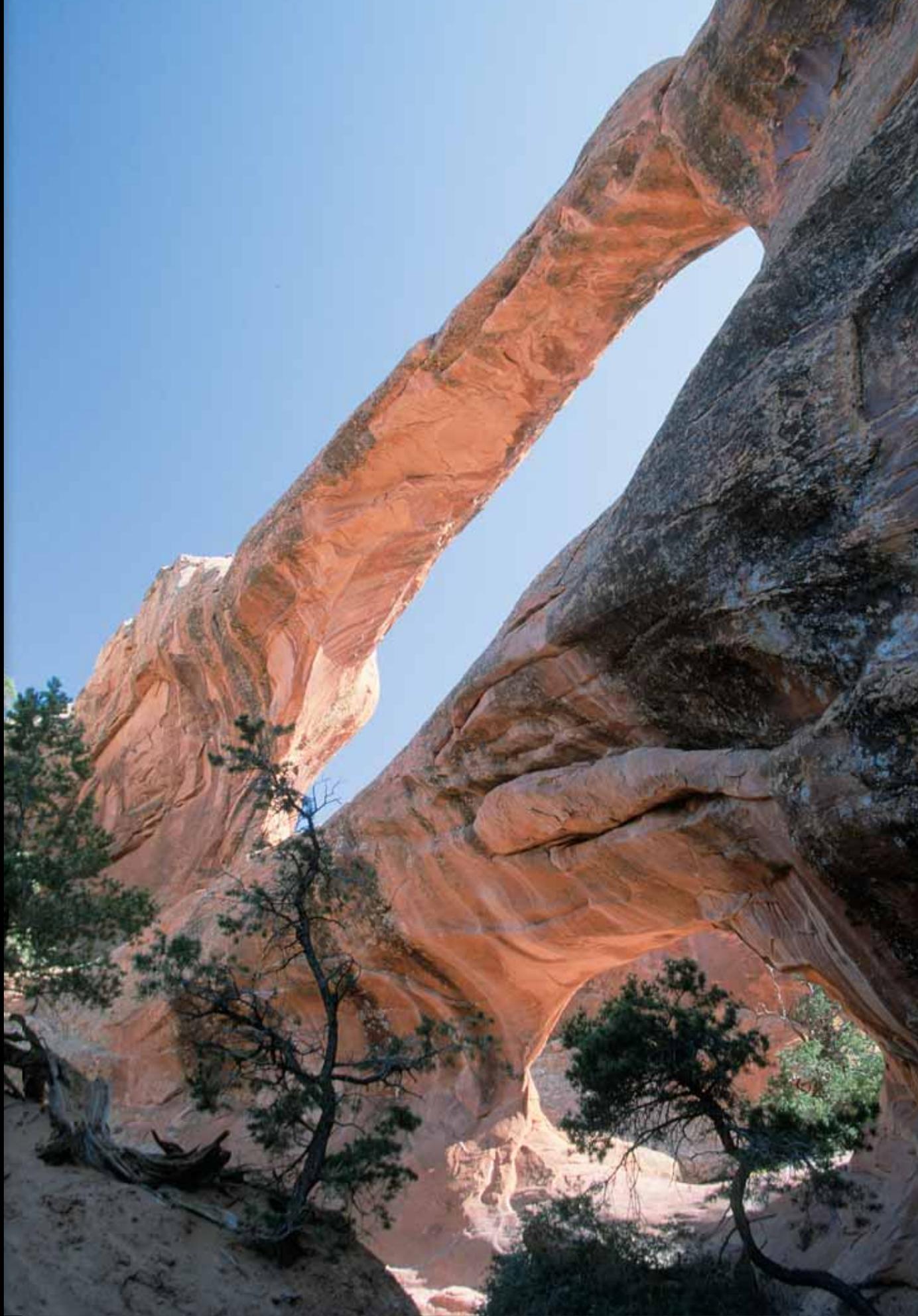
**JOHN:** But the National Park Service can't just rely on the rangers anymore. Soon people will be able to communicate all the information instantly to each other. Where's the park interpreter on the iPhone?

**ETHAN:** That's what I meant about looking back at what was successful.

The campfire and the ranger are not going to be surpassed by a handheld.

**LUCY:** Most visitors don't get away from the visitor center because they don't know how to encounter the place surrounding it. Visiting a park has always been to some degree a guided experience. We need to reinvigorate and reinvent the guided side.

**ABOVE: JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK** *A reservoir reflects the arid rock.*  
**RIGHT: ARCHES NATIONAL PARK** *Eons of erosion at work.*





**TIM:** Burns spotlights larger-than-life figures like Muir and Teddy Roosevelt. Is there something in us that longs for visionaries and men of action? Do we need another FDR?

**ETHAN:** They would never be able to accomplish the same things because we're a different world today. The parks are so diverse and decentralized, dependent on partnerships, local organizations, volunteers. The way the government works is profoundly different. You really can't have FDR anymore. That's not the America we live in.

**JOHN:** You accomplish things not by fiat but with dynamic leaders who can work in today's milieu.

**DUHEY:** What's troubling for me is that there's a gap sometimes between the magnitude of the challenge and the smallness of a system where we're easily distracted by everyday things. I guess being young I'm impatient to see change. Here in Lowell, 1980—when the film ends—is when the most recent wave of immigration came, southeast Asian refugees who left their homelands reluctantly and can't return for fear of government persecution. We need to figure out how to embrace groups for whom participation in public processes doesn't come naturally.

**JOHN:** Right. It's not up to the community to say, "How can we help make you better?" It's up to the parks to say, "How can we be a part of you?"

**TIM:** It's instructive to consider the Park Service was founded in the aftermath of a similar immigration-fueled change in society, when culturally different groups and the poor were "Americanized" through schools, settlement houses, Scouts, and the parks. Now we seem to be saying that we want to become more like you, rather than wanting you to become like us.

**JOHN:** I wouldn't say it that way. The parks themselves don't change. One of the things in the film was how, through the CCC, the parks were so socially useful in the Depression. What is our usefulness to society today? The Second Century Commission discussed that a lot.

**LUCY:** Tim, do parks of the past show shifts in our ideological compass?

**TIM:** The interpretation at the first wave of historical parks, beginning with George Washington's birthplace in the 1930s, focused on romantic sagas of quaint colonists and stalwart revolutionaries, followed a little later by sites where log cabins and sturdy pioneers joined the clapboard

**DUHEY:** To be right with yourself, to do right by others, to lend meaning to a community's experiences, requires real commitment. I stay grounded knowing that my park's investment in the community is strong.

**JOHN:** Political constituency is the most vital issue in the commission's report. One has to prove one's usefulness to society through all times forever, and the Congress is changing because the people are changing.

**ETHAN:** With the centennial of the Park Service approaching, it's a wonderful thing that great popular attention is being brought to how important parks have been at such a crucial moment in their history.

**SUZANNE:** I'm a born optimist, so with this film, new leaders, and the centennial, I'm hoping to see this huge uplifting of the National Park Service, almost like watching the ground move up, and that moving up makes room for new ways of approaching our issues, new people feeling connections to the parks, and new energy in our workforce. And this will only happen if we are all part of that lifting up, and understand that conflict is now more the norm than less. It's not a black/white, yes/no world anymore. It's something much more sophisticated. But



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mansions of the Founding Fathers. But the underlying story was the same: how northern Europeans settled the continent and forged the nation. Visitors to these "schools for Americanism" were expected to emulate the noble demonstrations of pioneer fortitude, selflessness, and cooperative spirit. And for an increasingly heterogeneous society, suffering through the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, the vision of a strong populace united by a shared destiny offered a respite from the anxieties of the time. Today, of course, the Park Service promotes a more inclusive view. So for me, one of the film's most important points is that, at any given time, the parks reflect how we see ourselves as a society—not just who we were, but who we are and want to be.

**LUCY:** We've covered a lot of territory. Closing thoughts?

there's no better time for the Park Service to stand very, very tall about who we are and what we do. Not in an arrogant way, but in a sense of service to our mission, and our history.

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**LEFT: HOT SPRINGS NATIONAL PARK** Over time, ornate bathhouses like this one were built around the springs, whose waters are believed to have therapeutic powers. **ABOVE: THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK** A study in contrasts. "You see in the background those badlands formations," says photographer Luong. "And then you see in the foreground a concretion—very large, about four feet across. I had not seen any such formation anywhere in the other parks."