



## Explore. Learn. Protect. A Super Junior Ranger's Story



*The visitor center bustled with people from all over the United States and the world. It was April 2012, approaching our busiest season at White Sands National Monument in Alamogordo, New Mexico. I stood at my post, the park ranger in charge of meeting and greeting our visitors. Some visitors were taking advantage of the feature film about the White Sands, while others were absorbing the larger-than-life displays about the animals, plants, and geology of the captivating sand dunes. At the sandbox, children were busy making animal tracks of a lizard or roadrunner.*

That morning, eight-year-old Natalie Koch, a second grader from Louisville, Kentucky, and her dad Bill, and mom Michele, walked into the visitor center. They came to explore Natalie's 177th national park. Natalie's hat, sporting many Junior Ranger badges that she had earned, compelled me to ask how many parks she had visited.

When she told me the total—176 U.S. National Parks—I was temporarily speechless! In my 20-odd years experience as a Park Ranger, I had never met anyone who had visited that many parks. Visiting so many would be a challenge since the National Park Service has 357 parks in the contiguous U.S., 23 parks in Alaska, seven in Hawaii, six in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, one in American Samoa, and one in Guam.

Natalie's passion has been to visit each of the U.S. national parks and to complete the Junior Ranger program. At White Sands, Natalie hiked part of the sand dunes on a guided sunset

walk and learned enough facts about desert safety, why a lizard suns itself, and identifying cactus plants. This in-depth exploration allowed her to complete an activity book and earn her Junior Dunes Ranger badge.

Her dad, Bill, and her mom, Michele, started taking Natalie to the U.S. national parks when she was five years old. "We love all she is learning and discovering through this journey and her passion gives a wonderful excuse to visit places we wanted to visit for years," said Michele.

Just think, Natalie has visited and learned about over half of the National Park Service sites during her years of "junior rangers!" She has a great background from which to launch a full-time career as a NPS Ranger. In the meantime, Natalie and her family will continue to vacation in the National Parks. Natalie dubbed White Sands as one of her "Top 5". She summed it up best when she said, "I love the National Parks and I love the rangers and all that they do!"

You, too, may be able to explore and learn about each national park site you visit. Ask the information desk for a Junior Ranger activity booklet when you visit White Sands. Even if you are not visiting, you may still access our Junior Ranger activity booklet by downloading a copy on our website!

—Kathy Denton, Education Specialist



Ranger Kathy Denton and  
Junior Ranger Natalie