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Commentary: Are National Parks Still Relevant?

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Commentary: Are National Parks Still Relevant?

Abstract

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Famously christened as America's "best idea" by writer Wallace Stegner and reaffirmed in Ken Burns' 2009 PBS documentary, it seems brazen, if not blasphemous, to pose the question. [*excerpt*]

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By Randall Wilson



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American bison forage for food at
Yellowstone National Park.

On the occasion of the National Parks centennial comes an irreverent question: Are the parks still relevant?

Famously christened as America's "best idea" by writer Wallace Stegner and reaffirmed in Ken Burns' 2009 PBS documentary, it seems brazen, if not blasphemous, to pose the question.

Over the last century, the national park system has grown from one comprising Yellowstone and a handful of parks on the West Coast to include 59 parks and 352 other units covering more than 84 million acres. Park visits swelled from 326,000 in 1916 to a record 307 million in 2015. It would seem that the parks are a robust national institution with a solid foundation and a healthy future.

But a closer look reveals some cracks and fissures in this assumption.

Until 2014, parks across the nation had shown a relative decline in visitation since 1987. Perennial worries over budgetary issues, maintenance backlogs, and degradation from visitors "loving the parks to death" have been joined by concerns triggered by extra-local forces. Chief among these are the impacts of climate change, raising previously unimaginable questions. Can there be a Sequoia National Park without sequoias? Or a Joshua Tree National Park devoid of Joshua trees?

Then, of course, there are the glaciers. Scientists predict that in as little as 15 years, Glacier National Park may be without. And while factions in Congress push for park privatization, perhaps the most troublesome trend on the horizon is the widening disjuncture between the demographics of American society and park visitors. With data showing most to be older, whiter,

and more affluent than the rest of society, one wonders how important the parks will be to the next generation of Americans.

All of these concerns take us back to the original question. Do the parks still matter in American society? Or are they merely a relic of some antiquated 19th-century notion that has run its course?

To find an answer, it is helpful to take a look back at the 1916 creation of the National Park Service.

The law signed 100 years ago, on Aug. 25 by President Woodrow Wilson, created the National Park Service to replace the U.S. Cavalry as de facto park managers. It tied together the disparate patchwork of parks set aside for protection since 1872 into a coherent system. Most importantly, it established the purpose of the national parks: to preserve the lands in "unimpaired" form for future generations, while also promoting them as sites for public use. This famous "contradictory mandate" presented a monumental challenge to NPS officials, who quickly found themselves caught between the opposing goals of preservation and recreation.

In terms of encouraging public recreation, the fledgling Park Service enjoyed early and consistent success. In one of his first actions, NPS director Stephen Mather partnered with the railroad industry in the See America First campaign, an initiative designed to lure Eastern vacationers away from European destinations and toward the Western parks on newly constructed branch lines.

The Park Service worked with the budding automobile industry to promote the Park-To-Park Highway, an early 1930s motorists' route connecting 13 national parks. Decades later, the Mission 66 Campaign further expanded automobile access, including the construction of visitor centers, campgrounds and lodges, and auto tours. Visitation campaigns have remained a priority for the Park Service to this day.

In contrast, fulfilling the preservation side of the mandate has been nothing short of daunting. This is due in no small part to the success of attracting visitors, leading to congested roadways and campgrounds, fragmented habitat, harassed wildlife, air and noise pollution, and the degradation of trails and special sites, such as the thermal features of Yellowstone.

However, the greatest challenge can be found in the legacy of even older ideas woven into the 1916 Act.

In the 19th century, society tended to view nature as static and controllable. Little if any attention was given to thinking about nature as a system: as a watershed or food web. Believing that to establish and police boundaries was enough to preserve the flora and fauna within, we drew park borders according to convenient political or economic interests, rather than ecological realities. The relatively square outline of Yellowstone raised few eyebrows in the 1870s, but over the years such neat geometric demarcations have proven problematic.

Park managers quickly realized the folly of attempting to protect half a watershed, with no control over the quality or quantity of water and resources flowing in. Or how caring for migratory wildlife that spent half of their lives beyond park boundaries could be a recipe for disaster. The big lesson was that changes taking place beyond park boundaries could render tremendous impacts on preservation efforts within the parks.

By the 1960s, the NPS began adopting ecosystem management principles, but the challenge of mitigating external threats beyond park boundaries - whether at the regional-scale of ecosystems or the global-scale of climate change - remains.

Now, all of this may sound quite dire, but all is not doom and gloom. Clearly, the legacy of the 1916 Act contributed much to challenges facing the national park system today. But it also charts a path forward, presenting an opportunity for the park system to truly shine as it enters the next century.

The parks' success in fulfilling the 1916 "recreation mandate" has always translated into a powerful public education opportunity. Now, as the NPS attempts to fulfill its "preservation mandate" by looking beyond park boundaries, park managers can underscore for visitors the critical importance of environmental conservation in all realms of life.

In many parts of the country, national parks are working collaboratively with other federal, state, and local land agencies and private organizations to better coordinate their management actions across ecosystems. Outreach to private land owners in nearby towns and communities is also paramount, as NPS officials work to identify strategies for resource use and economic development that can complement conservation goals. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration effort are perhaps the two most well-known examples of such efforts.

At the global level, as noted earlier, the parks can provide striking examples of the impacts of climate change. But they can also use this information to spur societal action on the issue. For example, the Green Parks Plan combines ecological insights with more mundane lessons in recycling, renewable energy, and green infrastructure used by visitors. Such lessons teach the value of resource conservation while offering practical methods of reducing carbon footprints. In the Zero Waste initiative, three iconic parks (Yosemite, Grand Teton and Denali) have partnered with the auto maker, Subaru, to work with visitors to eliminate landfill waste.

The next century threatens to present humankind with the most daunting environmental challenges in modern history. While the parks themselves will not be enough to serve as a bulwark against the rising tides of climate change, habitat loss, species extinction, and resource depletion, the lessons they teach us may be the very thing we need to spur society to action.

And this makes them more relevant than ever.

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