

Celebrating the National Park Service's Centennial: 100 Years of Environmental Education

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*The national parks belong to all of us.
Each park includes the special parts of that state's land, water,
plants, and animals.
And they will be here forever so I can visit all of them throughout my life.*

These insightful and inspirational comments were made by fifth-graders after completing a research project as part of a social studies unit on the national parks. The teacher engaged the students in research that culminated in presentations emphasizing environmental education issues relating to U.S. national parks (**Sidebar A**, page 28). The students' comments reflect the feelings that people of all ages across the country have about these publicly accessible living museums of land, air, and sky. Babies in backpacks, fourth-graders on field trips, young adventurers in kayaks, family picnickers, two-week hiking sojourners, and grandparents in bouncy walking shoes can all enjoy these treasured spaces.

A Brief History of the U.S. National Parks

The concept for the creation of national parks is attributed to George Catlin (1796-1872), the American painter, traveler, and author. While traveling across the Dakotas in 1832, Catlin shared his concern about the impact of western civilization on Native Americans, wildlife, and the wilderness. He called for the United States to establish a national park as a sanctuary for both bison and the American Indians he encountered on the plains.¹

In 1855, a homesteader in California came across the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias and fought to protect them from loggers. His efforts were rewarded in 1864 when Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant to protect Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias. (At first, these areas were placed under the care of the State of California, but they soon became part of Yosemite National Park). The struggle to protect western lands from expansion was taken up by Sierra Club founder John Muir, who became one of America's most famous and influential naturalists and conservationists. Together with Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of *Century*

Magazine, Muir launched a successful campaign that resulted in the creation of Yosemite National Park.²

In 1872, Congress established Yellowstone National Park in the territories of Montana and Wyoming. During the 1890s and early 1900s, other lands were designated as National Parks, including King's Canyon and Sequoia in California (1890), Mount Rainier in Washington (1899), Crater Lake in Oregon (1902), and Glacier in Montana (1910).

Considered the "conservationist president," Theodore Roosevelt signed the 1906 American Antiquities Act, protecting approximately 230 acres of public land.³ This law gave the president discretion to "declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic and scientific interest... to be National Monuments."⁴ Roosevelt made the most of this authority, establishing 150 national forests, 51 federal bird reserves, national game preserves, 18 national monuments, and (jointly with the U.S. Congress) several national parks. Today, there are six national park sites dedicated to President Theodore Roosevelt. When Roosevelt said, "We have fallen heirs to the most glorious heritage a people ever received, and each one must do his [sic] part if we wish to show that the nation is worthy of its good fortune," he was expressing his view that the American people were responsible for protecting the nation's resources.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson approved legislation to establish the National Park Service (NPS) as part of the U.S. Department of the Interior. It was charged with protecting and managing the 35 National Parks and monuments in the country. One hundred years later, in 2016, the NPS protects and manages more than 400 parks located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and in five of the nine U.S. territories, including American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The NPS encompasses over 84 million acres and employs more than 20,000 people in various capacities.

The Mission of NPS

NPS is charged to "preserve and protect the natural and cultural resources for future generations; provide opportuni-

SIDEBAR A

Research, Discussion, and Action: Creating a PSA about National Parks

Research

Location (state and region of the country), map of park, size of the park (acres or square miles), date of establishment, history of development, changes in landscape over time, climate, landforms, water features, vegetation, wildlife, famous landmarks and sites, activities and trails, accommodations, access for people with disabilities.

Discussion Questions

- What are the two most beautiful parts of the national park you researched? What is unique about the national park you researched? (Include photos.)
- How do the vegetation, landscape, and animals reflect the climate and geography of the area?
- Who works to maintain the national park you researched? What are their responsibilities? What challenges do they face in carrying out their responsibilities?
- Who owns the national parks? How are national parks funded? Include a chart or graph that shows how funding has changed over time.
- What are some of the challenges faced by the national park you researched? Are there common challenges facing all national parks? What are some possible ways to address those challenges?
- Is the national park that you researched overcrowded? What are the dangers of too many people visiting the national parks? How much development (hotels, campgrounds, roads, etc.) is appropriate in a national park? Should we limit the number of people who can go to national parks?
- How important is it to you to protect America's national parks?
- Do you think the national parks will be around for your great grandchildren? Why or why not?

Assessment/Action

Create a public service announcement (PSA) that illustrates both the beauty of and challenges facing national parks, as well as strategies for addressing those challenges.

ties to experience, understand, and enjoy the park consistent with the preservation of resources in a state of nature; and to celebrate the ongoing peace, friendship, and goodwill among nations, recognizing the need for cooperation in a world of shared resources.”⁵ Yet, the National Parks face threats on many fronts, including lack of funding to save spaces, habitats, and species.⁶ Making the general public and young learners aware of these threats is a first step toward taking informed action to protect our national treasures. To that end, as NPS embarks upon its second century, it has initiated a “Call to Action” to “connect with and create the next generation of park visitors, supporters, and advocates.”⁷

Environmental Education at NPS

Environmental education “teaches children and adults how to learn about and investigate their environment and to make intelligent, informed decisions about how they can take care

SIDEBAR B

Every Kid in a Park Initiative

*“As a **fourth-grade educator**, you can download an activity and print paper National Park passes for each of your students.*

This program only provides passes for fourth graders!”

Every Kid in a Park is a program created in 2015 especially for the nation's fourth graders. They, and their families and teachers, can obtain free park passes, good for a year. Visit the user-friendly and kid-friendly website at www.everykidinapark.gov. “No matter where you live in the United States, you are within two hours of an included site.”

The initiative builds on a wide range of educational programs and tools that the federal land management agencies already use. For example, the National Park Service (NPS) has re-launched a website with over 1,000 materials developed for K-12 teachers, including science labs, lesson plans, and field trip guides. Visit www.nps.gov/history/teachers.htm.

The president's 2016 budget proposal would provide \$20 million specifically to NPS for youth activities, including bringing one million fourth-grade children from low-income areas to national parks. This increase would also fund dedicated youth coordinators to help enrich children and family learning experiences at parks and online.

Sources: The White House, Fact Sheet, February 19, 2015, and Press Release, September 1, 2015, www.whitehouse.gov; Every Kid in a Park, www.everykidinapark.gov/get-your-pass/educator.

of it,” according to the North American Association for Environmental Education.⁸ NAAEE defines environmentally literate people as those who “know that their daily choices affect the environment, how those choices can help or harm the environment, and what they need to do—individually or as part of a community—to keep the environment healthy and sustain its resources, so that people enjoy a good quality of life for themselves and their children.”⁹ NPS lesson plans and programs help students develop an appreciation for the diversity of National Parks and foster a commitment to protecting them (**Sidebar B**).

Educational materials about the national parks can be found on the NPS Teachers Webpage at www.nps.gov/history/teachers.htm.

In addition to lessons about the natural sciences, teaching resources that focus on history and geography are featured, along with resources related to civics and economics. The culminating project for the students mentioned above—to create a Public Service Announcement (PSA)—is aligned with the C3 Framework goal to have students take informed action as a way of demonstrating what they have learned (see **Sidebar A**).¹⁰

Together with young learners, we can visit the national parks, virtually and in person, and continue to celebrate environmental education for another 100 years. ●

Notes

1. Barry McIntosh, “The National Historic Preservation Act and the National Park Service,” 1986, www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/mackintosh5.pdf; “George Catlin’s American Buffalo,” (Smithsonian American Art Museum, http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2012/catlin_buffalo).
2. “Yosemite National Park. Cultural History,” www.yosemitepark.com/cultural-history.aspx.
3. National Park Service History, “Theodore Roosevelt and Conservation,” www.nps.gov/thro/learn/historyculture/theodore-roosevelt-and-conservation.htm.
4. NPS History.
5. Glacier National Park. Purposes of the Parks, www.nps.gov/glac/learn/news/purpose-and-significance-statements.htm
6. Betty Weiler, Susan A. Moore, and Brent D. Moyle, “Building and Sustaining Support for National Parks in the 21st Century: Why and How to Save the National Park Experience from Extinction,” *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 31, no 2 (Summer 2013): 115-131.
7. National Park Service, “A Call to Action. Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement,” www.nps.gov/calltoaction.
8. North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), “Environmental Education: What Is It?,” www.naaee.net/what-is-ee.
9. NAAEE, “Developing a Framework for Assessing Environmental Literacy,” www.naaee.net/framework.
10. NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3.

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Children participate in urban volunteer work in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, DC.

Credit: NPS/Groundwork Anacostia River Project photo by Chestnut

Key Websites of Interest to K-6 Teachers

National Park Foundation, “Find a Park,” www.nationalparks.org/explore-parks/find-park

Compare the URL above with www.nps.gov/findapark/index.htm. Ask your students: Which online tool is easiest user-friendly for finding the national park closest to you?

National Park Service, “Teachers Webpage,” www.nps.gov/history/teachers.htm

Teaching with Museum Collections; Teaching with Historic Places; African American Heritage and Ethnography; and Teacher Resources for Archaeology—these are some of the teaching resources offered by the National Park Service. See also “Every Kid in a Park,” www.everykidinapark.gov, featured in the sidebar on page 28.

National Park Trust, “Youth Programs,” www.parktrust.org/youthprograms

Buddy Bison and National Kids to Park Day are K-6 friendly programs of the NP Trust.

U.S. Mint, “America the Beautiful Quarters (National Parks),” www.usmint.gov/kids/teachers/lessonPlans/coin-program/america-the-beautiful-quarters.cfm

K-6 detailed lesson plans at this website cover topics such as “Beautiful Bayou,” “A Homegrown Budget,” “Scenes from a Salt Marsh,” and “Who’s Who?” in the Battles of Saratoga.

Other Websites of Interest

MapQuest, "National Parks," parks.mapquest.com/national-parks.

PBS, "Lesson Plans for the Ken Burns film *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*," www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/lesson-plans

U.S. Geological Society: "Geology of National Parks," 3dparks.wr.usgs.gov.

U.S. Department of Energy, "Clean Cities National Park Initiative," www1.eere.energy.gov/cleancities/national_parks.html#seashore.

U.S. National Patonal Parks Service, "Climate Change," www.nps.gov/subjects/climatechange/index.htm.

Middle Level Learning

Number 55, January/February 2016

"Benjamin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson," by John A. Moore

"Next Door to 'Old Smokey'" by Bertha Vazquez, Hilary Landorf, and L. Bahia Simons-Lane



Online Now for Members at:

www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml

Books for Students about National Parks

Bauer, Marion Dane. *Wonders of America* (Ready-to-Read Value Pack). New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

Newbery Medal Honor recipient Bauer has authored six ready-to-read books about six famous sites: Grand Canyon National Park, Niagara Falls N.Y. State Park, Rocky Mountains N.P, Mount Rushmore National Memorial, The Statue of Liberty National Monument, and Yellowstone N.P. Ideal for emerging readers, these books are illustrated by John Wallace, who brings a sense of fun with an introduction to the facts appropriate for young children.

Compton, Don, Dave Ember, and Bruce Foster. *America's National Parks: A Pop-Up Book*. Helena, MT: Farcountry Press, 2013.

This is a great read-aloud book, or it could be carefully handled by one student at a time. The book features 18 of the nation's most visited national parks, six as double-page pop-ups: Everglades, Great Smoky Mountains, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Glacier, and Yosemite. Pop-up paper engineering was created by Bruce Foster, designer of 40 pop-up books. Illustrations in the style of 1930 WPA posters by Dave Ember are supplemented with some of the original historical art.

Lienard, Maud. *Search and Find National Parks*. Paris, FR: Auzou, 2014.

This activity book contains illustrations, featuring 12 North American national parks, in which children have to search for hidden objects, meanwhile discovering different animals, plants, and landscapes. On each page, an intruder has escaped from the park and sneaked his way into the picture. Combining education and entertainment, this book includes quirky and colorful illustrations that capture young readers' attention.

McHugh, Erin. *National Parks: A Kid's Guide to America's Parks, Monuments and Landmarks*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2014.

A combination guidebook and historical account of U.S. parks, monuments, and landmarks, this book offers young readers with opportunities to learn details about spaces categorized by the 50 U.S. states. As a bonus, the book includes sleeves for collecting state and national park quarters. Author Erin McHugh and illustrator Neal Aspinall provide useful information and keen insights appropriate for the whole family.

National Geographic Kids. *National Parks Guide U.S.A. The Most Amazing Sights, Sciences, and Cool Activities from Coast to Coast*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2012.

For elementary school students ages 7–9, this book overflows with photographs, facts, and fun. Divided into regions, it incorporates maps, plants, animals, history, and other special features that excite readers about traveling with friends and family as well as learning more about the natural wonders awaiting them in the U.S. national parks.

Rosenstock, Barb. *The Camping Trip that Changed America*. New York: Dial Books, 2012.

After reading naturalist John Muir's book on the Sierra Nevada, President Theodore Roosevelt went camping with Muir in Yosemite, California, in 1903. This book retells Roosevelt's decision to pass laws that started the national parks system. Illustrations by Caldecott medal recipient Mordicai Gerstein accent the story with colorful portrayals of these two notable Americans.