

Recreation has been a central activity in national parks from the very beginning. Lassen Volcanic National Park (California).



The National Park Service's founding Organic Act stipulates that the agency must preserve nature and the cultural features of parks, but at the same time "provide for the enjoyment" of the people — a dual mandate that has sometimes been troublesome to fulfill. Lake Mead National Recreation Area (Arizona / Nevada).



Some parks created primarily to preserve historic sites and areas have proven to be very popular sites for recreation, both by tourists and local people. The historic towpath at Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park (Maryland / Washington DC / West Virginia) is extensively used by walkers and bikers.



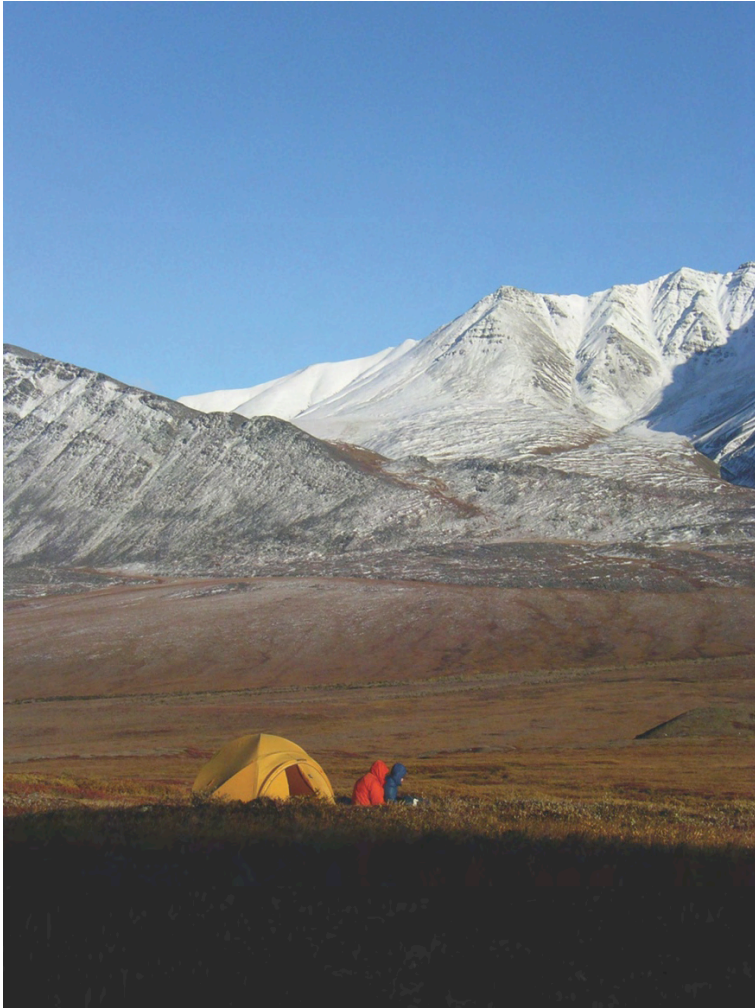
The parks have been oriented toward automobile-based tourism for over a century. A classic example of National Park Service road design: Colonial Parkway connects the Jamestown and Yorktown units of Colonial National Historical Park (Virginia) with Colonial Williamsburg.



A guided snowmobile tour, Yellowstone National Park (Idaho / Wyoming / Montana). Legal debates over what constitutes allowable “winter use” at Yellowstone went on for years, and the matter is still controversial today.



Wild and Scenic Rivers, an important part of the national park system, are also managed by other federal agencies and states. (clockwise) Bluestone National Scenic River (West Virginia); Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River in Big Bend National Park (Texas); Niobrara National Scenic River (Nebraska); Cache La Poudre Wild and Scenic River (Colorado).



Anyone and everyone can enjoy recreation in the national parks. Your activity can be remote and rugged, such as camping in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (Alaska), or contemplative and close to home, such as enjoying a trail in Cuyahoga Valley National Park (Ohio), an urban park near Cleveland.



Some of the nation's most unforgettable and iconic natural wonders can be reached by a national park trail. Delicate Arch in Arches National Park (Utah).





Some national parks, mostly but not all in the West, have historic hotels, many of which are architectural landmarks. Ahwahnee Hotel, Yosemite National Park (California).



Whether a day hike or a week-long backpacking trip, some of the country's best opportunities for walking in nature are found in national parks. Mount Rainier National Park (Washington).



Each year, millions of visitors use park campgrounds as their base to explore the parks. Capitol Reef National Park (Utah): campground (left) and Cathedral Valley (right).



For many, challenging one's self with an outdoor adventure is an integral part of the national park experience. Floating the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park (Wyoming).