

# The Relevance of National Parks

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IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT THE BEGINNING OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM COINCIDES with the waning days of the Western frontier. It seemed like America could sense the force of its own ambition and realized it needed to step back, think, and set aside a portion of its natural character and its cultural memory before it was too late. When you think of the passion it took to create the national parks—not to mention the vision—it’s a bit sobering that we’re here tonight to talk about their relevance. The fact that we are, is testament to a changing world. I believe that relevance is so important that I established it as one of my four top priorities as Director, along with stewardship, workforce and education.

I would be preaching to the choir to say that our natural and cultural legacy is eternally relevant. We know this is true. But the reality is that we have to *prove* our relevance in the twenty-first century. There are times when it seems as if the national parks have never been more passé than in the age of the iPhone. The parks must compete with high speed, high resolution entertainment, with instant access to seemingly everything in the blink of an eye. Young people—and many older people as well—are technologically attuned, but more separated from the natural world than perhaps any generation before them. Many immigrants come from places that have no history of parks, and they arrive with no cultural connection to places like Yellowstone or Gettysburg or Independence Hall. The national parks risk obsolescence in the eyes of an increasingly diverse and distracted demographic.

It is a common perception that the national parks are about the past, and that is true, to an extent, but they are also very much about the future. We face unprecedented social and environmental challenges. We struggle to achieve sustainability in the way we live and work and do business. We grapple with issues of public health and producing a citizenry that is informed and engaged. Not only are the national parks relevant to all of these issues, they offer solutions. The moniker “America’s best idea” seems to be on the verge of becoming a cliché. But the bothersome thing about clichés is they can’t really be dismissed, because they are often true.

It’s my opinion that climate change is one of the most pressing challenges we face today, and where the national parks are perhaps uniquely relevant. We manage the most intact ecosystems in North America, an oasis of biodiversity in a fragmented landscape. The parks are home to a multitude of endangered species and hold a hidden wealth of life that is as yet undocumented. For some of these forms of life, the parks are a last refuge. For these reasons, they are critical to the

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health of the planet, not only in terms of biodiversity, but in restoring compromised ecosystems elsewhere. They are also the source of hope and optimism in these turbulent times.

We hear trendy buzz words like “green” and “eco-friendly” and it would be easy to dismiss this as a fad except that it signals a growing awareness of the natural world. National parks are not just relevant to this discussion but *critically* relevant, and we should take advantage of this trend to educate the public about the role parks can play in preserving critical systems like the hurricane-absorbing cypress swamps that once protected New Orleans.

The parks should be used both as classrooms and as research laboratories, as places where the effects of climate change can be observed, and as testing grounds for new green technologies and innovative ways to reduce our carbon footprint. We have enlisted the public in our stewardship mission through programs like the BioBlitz, which brings students and volunteers into the parks to work with our scientists and specialists to assess the condition of our natural resources, and the International Volunteers in the Parks program, which is training a new cadre of young scientists to deal with these issues in their own countries. Through these and a number of other initiatives, we educate people, winning advocates for the environment while fulfilling actual needs in the parks.

As climate change and other threats to the environment make themselves felt more acutely, the parks’ relevance—both as laboratories and as biological treasures—should also gain wider recognition.

Without education, there can be no discussion of relevance. Without education, the parks’ long-term viability is in doubt. Our parks contain not only the vast natural history of the nation, but the incredible narrative of its people. If one thinks of them as classrooms, of the national park system as one sprawling and vibrant American curriculum, its educational value is astounding. The lands in our care comprise everything from the physical sciences to the humanities. They contain not only all manner of natural processes and living things, they hold the places that are sacred to us as a people. They tell the American story in words no textbook can equal: those of the eyewitness. Our national parks are the tangible manifestations of these things. They represent one of the most powerful—and underutilized—educational resources in the country.

We know some intriguing things about the way kids react to the national parks when they’re used as a teaching aid. Place-based learning has been shown to provide benefits that conventional teaching cannot match. Students are more motivated, have higher marks, and a better retention rate when participating in lessons at a park or historic site. Through our Teacher-Ranger-Teacher program, teachers spend a summer as park rangers, developing curriculum to take back into their classrooms. We have found that these teachers are re-invigorated by the real world manifestations of their subject matter, and they bring the amazing world of the national parks to their students. Young people may value what is virtual over what is real and true, mostly because technology has limited their experience of the authentic. The national parks change this perception.

We reach young people through a number of other mechanisms as well, such as the online Teaching with Historic Places, and the Junior Ranger program. Recently, the Secretary of the Interior announced a youth initiative, intended to help not only young people, but all Americans connect with the outdoors and, by default, culture and history.

We are currently examining ways to strengthen our educational role because we believe that the nature of the resources in our care make us uniquely suited to be a force in shaping the minds of coming generations. We have had discussions with the secretary of education and are exploring ways—through partnerships with government and the private sector—to fully realize our potential in this field. I have recently established the first position in my Washington Directorate solely devoted to interpretation and public education, not only in the parks themselves, but in classrooms across the country, and through the power of the internet.

Education is rapidly changing. The conventional learning environment of a generation ago is disappearing. Education today is less defined by the classroom and more by places like parks and museums. We are well-situated to take advantage of this change. What better places to form more civic-conscious, environmentally-aware Americans than where our highest ideals and our greatest treasures are commemorated and preserved? In these powerful settings, we can ask them, “Can you imagine being so moved by an idea that you would make the kinds of sacrifices these people did? Can you see the fragility of life on this planet and your responsibility to care for it?”

Economic relevance is an aspect of our national parks that probably doesn’t get enough attention. Gateway communities—those cities and towns at the outskirts of the parks—benefit tremendously from park visitation. Some, in fact, depend on it. The money generated by the national parks has a more direct effect than any federal program could, since the funds go straight into the local community, where the benefit is immediate and tangible.

Urban parks, like New Bedford Whaling and Lowell, have helped revitalize cities whose traditional economies died long ago, leaving an empty urban core. And there is an antidote to the phenomenon of the shrinking, post-industrial American city in the ethos of the park idea itself. When manufacturing declined, cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore emptied out as the jobs evaporated. With the plants and factories shut down, some cities found their historic fabric to be essential to a vital new identity. They discovered that the alternative to a bleak future was the past.

Historic districts, historic buildings, and the allure of the past have revitalized old downtowns and have made them economically viable. More developers understand that the cost of rehabilitating old buildings is actually an investment in the future, when these structures could be the showpieces of a revitalized city. The NPS administers the largest urban reinvestment tax credit program in the United States, bringing the values of the NPS right into many neighborhoods.

Whether this happens in the context of urban national parks or with local and private incentive, it is a hopeful trend. A public that embraces its built environment will understand the relevance of the national parks because there is a common sensibility at work, one that understands the value of preservation and heritage.

The parks have a role in our political and social discourse. They go to the heart of the American experience and American identity in all its diverse forms. When I served as liaison to the Second Century Commission, which was formed to draw out a vision for the National Park Service’s next hundred years, a number of the country’s best and brightest spent some time getting to know the parks and what they represent. One of them, former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, wrote, “There’s no better route to civic understanding than visiting our national parks. They’re who we are and where we’ve been.”

As many of you know, there has been a major change in the way the National Park Service tells the American story. We know that it is not one narrative, but many, and we have worked to tell the stories of those who have been ignored in the celebration of our past, of the once-disenfranchised, and the once-voiceless. We tell these stories at places like Manzanar with the Japanese-Americans who were denied their civil rights, at Cane River where we help keep the Creole culture alive, at Sand Creek where we tell of the massacre of native people, at Port Chicago where military racial discrimination came to an explosive end, and at Rosie the Riveter where women helped win the war. These stories reflect a more inclusive and more honest look at our history. At Civil War battlefields, the focus has shifted from maneuvers and tactics to the social, political, and economic conditions—such as slavery—that brought war in the first place.

These sites are powerfully symbolic, and they embody issues that are very much relevant to today: immigration, tolerance, the meaning of the Constitution, civil rights, war, labor, the environment. As such, they are critical to the nation’s civic education and must be used in this way.

We're already doing that with place-based learning and lesson plans, such as Teaching with Historic Places. But the richness of the parks can be tapped a great deal more.

To emphasize the role parks in our society, we now regularly host citizenship ceremonies in partnership with the US Citizenship and Immigration Service, welcoming new Americans to their country and their national parks.

The social challenges we face as a nation will require the action of informed, engaged, open-minded adults. For instruction and inspiration, they can look to our national parks, where America's highest ideals are enshrined. Here, they learn about democracy, sacrifice, heroism, and hope, not just in the abstract, but in the very places where those concepts shaped our history. It would be difficult to come up with more relevant issues than these.

We are connected to our parks and public lands in ways that go beyond aesthetics and cultural meaning. Our national parks have always been loved for their symbolism and scenery, but their power to act as medicine and therapy is just beginning to be understood.

Our communities are built with convenience in mind: oriented to the automobile, the elimination of effort, and an abundance of high-calorie food. Obesity, heart disease, emphysema, diabetes, and cancer are the cost of sedentary modern living, of our increasing alienation from nature and the outdoors.

But what we are beginning to understand is how the outdoors can act as an antidote to the ills of modern living. More research is being done on how we respond to the natural world and on the surprisingly broad benefits of exercise outside.

Free of the limits of formal exercise routines, outside activity tends to be more varied and prolonged. By its nature, the outdoors encourages physical activity, and this is true especially for young people. The psychological benefit of natural light is well-known and there are indications that the outdoors can have positive effects on everything from stress to attention disorders to rates of healing.

I believe that our parks are a great untapped source of public health and that their benefits could be enormous. This is a critical point of relevance concerning the national parks that should be communicated to the public as often as possible. In fact, we are in the midst of promoting this new role for our public lands.

We recently established the National Park Service's Health Promotion Initiative, a broad effort to move public lands to the forefront of the discussion about public health and to bring lasting change in Americans' lifestyle choices, their nutrition, and their relationship with the outdoors. This is part of much broader movement, led by President Obama's America's Great Outdoors, and the First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move Outside, a multi-agency effort aimed at helping to conserve open space and reconnecting Americans, especially youth, to nature.

We are now working with health care providers to incorporate public lands into the treatments they prescribe for their patients. Under the Park Prescriptions program, physicians actually send patients to public lands for hikes, tours, and other forms of exercise. And of course, our longstanding Rivers, Trails, and Conservation partnership has been working for years to connect communities to their natural surroundings. Next month we will be participating in the Healthy Parks, Healthy People conference, part of a worldwide movement to link public health with public lands.

Given the unprecedented environmental challenges we're facing, the future will demand not only a new way of looking at the natural world and our place in it, but an understanding of how our physical well-being is tied to that of the environment. The national parks are going to be a critical factor in this equation.

While we are promoting healthy activity outdoors, we are also stressing that the outdoors itself must be cared for. We neglect the natural world at our own peril. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that human health is linked to the health of our natural world. In encour-

aging people to get outside, two objectives are often achieved. People are not only healthier, but they can also begin to conceive of a natural order that is threatened. Through this realization, they might understand nature as an essential force that is part of being human, that we cannot exist in the absence of a healthy natural world.

Americans have always loved the parks. They might not always be able to tell you why this is, but the national parks have enjoyed an exalted status in the American mind, as if they were among the holy places of the nation. While this is no doubt a blessing, it is not one we should take for granted. A public that is unaware is indifferent, and an indifferent public will not support the parks in their time of need.

Relevance—and therefore, survival—means convincing the public that the national parks represent far more than an assembly of antique buildings and natural curiosities. They are national heirlooms that continue to teach us, which speak with the wisdom of the past, and can guide us through trials both present and future. They will be critical in helping us meet the critical needs of the future:

- A civil, informed social discourse and building a national community.
- An understanding of our vulnerable natural world and what we must do to maintain it.
- A model of sustainability where commerce and heritage are not mutually exclusive.
- An unparalleled, 85-million-acre national university that contains a wealth of teachable moments in every discipline from astronomy to literature.

We know that the relevance of the national parks is profound, that they hold limitless promise for our society, for our health, and for our planet. We in the National Park Service understand that it is our mission to communicate this to the world. We also know—and we're grateful for the fact—that the parks have a devoted constituency.

I look out at this audience and it's striking, the talent, the intellect, the innovation, and dedication that are represented in this society's members. In a word, the relevance of the national parks is transcendent. I am grateful to have you as allies in our effort to create a world where this is understood, embraced, and acted upon.