



In the past 20 years or so, the National Park Service has begun to pay attention to “new” park resources that had never been considered before: things like the value of being able to view dark night skies without the glow of artificial lights, or being in a landscape where you can hear natural sounds or experience quiet. (Above) Star trails and (below) aurora borealis (northern lights) in Denali National Park and Preserve (Alaska).



These resources aren't really new, of course. It's just that they are now under threat from new development near the national parks. In many parks, the night sky is disappearing—or more accurately, disappearing from view—due primarily to light pollution, which reduces the brightness of the stars and other celestial entities and prevents our eyes from fully adapting to natural darkness. Constellations over Owachomo Bridge, Natural Bridges National Monument (Utah).



To increase the appreciation of dark night skies and stargazing, the Park Service now organizes “star parties” in many parks. Here are telescopes being readied for a star party at Sunset Crater National Monument (Arizona).



Dark night skies are an important part of understanding the worlds inhabited by ancient peoples in North America. Preservation of one of the greatest prehistoric complexes in the country, at Chaco Culture National Historical Park (New Mexico), would be woefully incomplete if the dark skies the Chacoans knew were to be polluted by modern artificial lights. Pictured: A shooting star over Fajada Butte at the park.



Scientists and park managers now regularly monitor levels of noise in national parks. The overall range of sounds, whether natural or human-caused, is called the park's "soundscape." Olympic National Park (Washington) is one of the few large national parks not bisected by a road or underneath a busy flight corridor. That helps make the park's Hoh Rainforest one of the quietest places in the United States.



On the other hand, in some national parks it is critical to be able to hear certain human-made sounds without interference from modern background noise. An integral part of the historic soundscape at Gettysburg National Military Park (Pennsylvania) is the sound of cannons being fired off by re-enactors.



Another newly recognized resource in national parks are the “ecosystem services” provided by nature. These are the benefits natural systems provide to humans. For example, national parks protect water quality: (left) Salt marshes, such as this one at Davis Bayou, Gulf Islands National Seashore (Florida, Mississippi), filter pollutants out of the water; (right) Intact forests in Mount Rainier National Park (Washington) help safeguard clean streams.



Forests in national parks perform a valuable service by absorbing and storing carbon: City of Rocks National Reserve (Idaho).





The forests around the Clingmans Dome observation tower in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Tennessee/North Carolina), also store atmospheric carbon, thus helping to stabilize the climate. Unfortunately, the warming climate is accelerating an insect infestation that is killing the park's hemlock trees.



A different kind of nature-based service is the overall health effects that parks can provide people. It has been documented that being in nature benefits people's physical and mental health. Many national parks explicitly recognize this connection, and some actively promote it by holding health-related active events, such as this fun run in Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.