



It has been said that “The national parks are the American experience expressed in place.” Their impact on our lives can be powerful and transformative. They remind us of our human connections to the past, as in these marks of human passage at three places in New Mexico: (top left) Chaco Culture National Historical Park, (top right) El Morro National Monument, (bottom) Petroglyph National Monument.



They can speak of remarkable individual lives that helped shape the country: Reading room, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site (Virginia).



They provide unparalleled opportunities for challenging ourselves: (left) Death Valley National Park (California, Nevada); (right) Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve (Idaho).



They teach us about the deeper values of the natural world, for as the national park idea has matured, appreciation of the ecological value of these places has as well: snorkeler with brain coral, Virgin Islands National Park (U.S. Virgin Islands).



They bring us together to share unforgettable experiences: (top) Pausing to reflect at the end of a day in the backcountry: Island in the Sky, Canyonlands National Park (Utah). (bottom) For many, a treasured memory of the national parks includes camping by a mountain lake: Ross Lake National Recreation Area (Washington).



They remind us of both good and bad events that have shaped the country's history:
Monuments to heroes of battle: (left) George Rogers Clark National Historical Park (Indiana);
(right) Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial (Ohio).



They serve as shrines to the ideals of valor and patriotism: (above) USS Arizona Memorial, World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument (Hawai'i, Alaska, California); (below) Mount Rushmore National Memorial (South Dakota).



They preserve ecosystems as different as the mountains and deserts of the Southwest and the great northern lakes and forests: (left) Guadalupe Mountains National Park (Texas); (right) Voyageurs National Park (Minnesota).



They tell us of people's impact on the land, no matter how remote: Isle Royale (Menagerie Island) Lighthouse, Isle Royale National Park (Michigan).



They remind us that all people, regardless of their abilities, deserve to be able to experience the national heritage preserved in the national parks. Many recreational sites in the parks are accessible to people with mobility or other impairments: Canaveral National Seashore (Florida).



As we look to the future, without question the greatest challenge to the national parks is climate change. Nowhere is the effect of climate change on the parks more vividly at hand than in Glacier National Park (Montana), where scientists measure receding ice fields; here, by doing repeat photography at Iceberg Lake.



The National Park Service is already grappling with complex questions about how to preserve wildlife in an unprecedented time of change: (above) Bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain National Park (Colorado); (below) Collared pika, Denali National Park and Preserve (Alaska).



It's not only about nature. Climate change will force the National Park Service to make hard choices about historic structures in coastal areas: (above) Cape Hatteras Lighthouse at Cape Hatteras National Seashore (North Carolina) was moved 2,900 feet inland from its original location (foreground) to avoid sea level rise, but that option is not available for other buildings, such as (below) historic Fort Jefferson in Dry Tortugas National Park (Florida).





Despite these challenges, there is reason for optimism when we consider the next generations of Americans. Embracing new technology helps connect the parks with youth who will, it is hoped, grow up to be supporters of the national park system. Valley Forge National Historical Park (Pennsylvania).



The future of America's national park system lies in the hands of young people who represent a more diverse citizenry: participants in a National Park Service Academy course, Grand Teton National Park (Wyoming).



Some have suggested that we need to stop creating new national parks. In fact, the national park system will never be “complete” and should continue to grow if the system is to reflect the evolving American experience: Two of the newest additions to the system, (left) Valles Caldera National Preserve (New Mexico); (right) Pullman National Monument (Illinois).



The parks have many meanings, not just one, and each of us ultimately chooses exactly which lessons, what kind of inspiration, we take from the national parks. But there is one message that applies to us all: No matter how daunting the challenges facing the parks may appear, you can make a positive difference in their future. In fact, ordinary people are making a difference in the parks every day: (clockwise from left) Ice Age National Scenic Trail (Wisconsin); Congaree National Park (South Carolina); San Juan Island National Historical Park (Washington); Golden Gate National Recreation Area (California).



The astonishing diversity of the national park system is its greatest strength, as Congress recognized when describing the parks as the “cumulative expressions of a single national heritage”: (top, left to right) Ocmulgee National Monument (Georgia); Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (Colorado); Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site (Montana, North Dakota); Noatak National Preserve (Alaska); (middle): Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site (New York); (bottom, left to right): Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine (Maryland); Saguaro National Park (Arizona).



Perhaps more than anything else, America's national park system offers endless opportunities for discovery: Statue of Liberty National Monument (New York, New Jersey).