



National Parks: Our National Treasures

by Carlos M. Spinoza

Where can you go to experience the great outdoors as it was 200 years ago? Fresh air, sparkling lakes, untouched land, and breathtaking scenery are all there for you to enjoy in this country's national parks. There are almost 400 national parks in the United States. One of them may be near your home town. Each park is special, and each park has a story. Where did the idea to protect special parkland originate? It all started with Yellowstone National Park.

Yellowstone National Park

Trappers who had been out West told stories about bubbling mud and steamy springs that gushed hot water and steam. In the East these stories sparked people's

interests. Adventurers set out to find the places that inspired such stories. In 1871 one such adventurer, Ferdinand Hayden, led a group to explore the area that would become Yellowstone National Park. Thomas Moran and William H. Jackson also joined this group. Moran was an artist and Jackson was a photographer. When they arrived they found land that had been formed by a volcano. The volcano had erupted more than 640,000 years earlier. The ash covered the western United States and some of the Midwest and Mexico. Old Faithful and other hot springs amazed the visitors. The stories they had heard seemed to be true!

Moran and Jackson captured the beauty of Yellowstone in paint and on film. Moran became so well known for his watercolor sketches of Yellowstone that people started calling him Thomas “Yellowstone” Moran. Along with Jackson’s black-and-white photographs, Moran’s watercolor paintings were later used to persuade Congress that Yellowstone needed protection.



Thomas Moran,
*Grand Canyon of the
Yellowstone Park, 1872*

The National Park Service

President Ulysses S. Grant thought that protecting natural areas was such a good idea that in 1872 he made Yellowstone the first national park.

He said that Yellowstone would be “set apart as a public park . . . for the benefit and enjoyment of people.”

Yellowstone paved the way for the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS began in 1916. Writer Wallace Stegner said, “National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American . . . they reflect us at our best . . .” Congress asked the NPS to conserve national treasures “for the enjoyment of future generations.” The NPS now takes care of more than 84 million acres of land in the United States.

Stephen T. Mather was the NPS director from 1917 to 1929. He said:

The parks do not belong to one state or to one section . . . The Yosemite, the Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon are national properties in which every citizen has a vested interest; they belong as much to the man of Massachusetts, of Michigan, of Florida, as they do to the people of California, of Wyoming, and of Arizona.

The Antiquities Act

In 1906 the Antiquities Act gave the President the power to grant further protection to national parks and other special places. These areas may be valuable because of their beauty or because they are important to history or science. They might contain structures or lands that should be left untouched. The number of places protected by the Antiquities Act has increased over the years. Now these areas can be found on public or private land. Congress also provides for such things as national lakeshores and rivers.

The National Parks and You

Visiting a national park is like traveling back in time. You can view land that looks much as it did when the United States established itself as a nation. You can see natural waterfalls in Yosemite National Park. You can gaze at the sculpted rock of Grand Canyon National Park. You can learn how animals and plants live together in their natural environment at Joshua Tree National Park. If history is your passion, you can explore important events in America's past by visiting Gettysburg National Military Park. Similarly, by visiting the Clara Barton or Frederick Douglass National Historic Sites, you can learn about people who helped make this country great.

These places, events, and people helped write the American story. By learning about them, you can begin to understand and appreciate your own special place in this country's continuing story.

Arches National Park, Utah

Tip

You have to think about the entire selection to choose the best answer.

Directions: Answer the questions.**1. Why are parks called national treasures?**

- A They were found by accident.
- B They are operated by the President.
- C They contribute to the nation's economy.
- D They preserve untouched natural areas for all people to enjoy.

2. What is the BEST reason for learning about national parks?

- A to help plan a career
- B to see where artists painted famous pictures
- C they will all be gone one day
- D to find out about the nation's history and natural wonders

3. Why might the National Park Service want photographers and artists to visit their parks?

- A to create postcards
- B to develop on-site art schools
- C to show why we need to continue to protect the parks
- D to compare their work with that of writers

4. How is visiting a national park like traveling back in time?**5. Do you agree with Wallace Stegner that the national parks are a great idea? Should national parks be protected? Use details from the selection to support your response.****Writing Prompt**

Your friend is coming to visit. Write directions for your friend on how to get from school to your home. Include details such as landmarks and street signs.

