

## CONSERVATION, PRESERVATION, AND THE NATIONAL PARKS

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U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt (left) and naturalist John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, stand on Glacier Point, Calif. Yosemite Falls is on the left.

### THE ENVIRONMENT

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* focuses on the environment. The first article examines how the national park system developed in the United States. The second article profiles Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring*, and explores her influence on the modern environmental movement.

**U.S. History:** Conservation, Preservation, and the National Parks

**U.S. History:** Rachel Carson and the Modern Environmental Movement

THE U.S. NATIONAL PARKS SYSTEM BEGAN IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY. OVER TIME, THE RATIONALE FOR NATIONAL PARKS HAS EXPANDED FROM SIMPLY MAINTAINING SCENERY FOR TOURISTS TO RESTORING ORIGINAL ECOSYSTEMS.

The Eastern United States shares with Canada one of the world's most spectacular places in nature: Niagara Falls. By the 1830s, most of the land next to the falls on the American side was privately owned and fenced. Tourists crowded into commercial viewing areas and souvenir shops. Those disheartened by the spoiling of this natural wonder referred to it as "the shame of Niagara Falls."

By the mid-1800s, most of the land in the Eastern U.S. was in private hands. But in the West, the federal government owned vast stretches of land. There the idea of national parks took root.

### First National Parks

The beauty of California's Yosemite Valley stunned early visitors to the area. They saw massive cliffs, a rock dome sheared in half, and one waterfall plunging 2,245 feet, the highest in North America.

When settlers began claiming land in Yosemite Valley, a public outcry arose to protect it and also to preserve a nearby grove of giant sequoia trees threatened by loggers. Many feared a repeat of the shame of Niagara. In 1864, Congress and

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President Abraham Lincoln enacted a law that handed Yosemite over to California to manage as a state park for “public use, resort, and recreation.”

In 1868, John Muir arrived in California. An expert on plants who had hiked many wilderness areas in the U.S., he discovered the wonders of Yosemite. Muir published articles on his spiritual experiences in the wilderness and also wrote scientific papers. Contradicting most geologists, he argued correctly that glaciers had formed the Yosemite Valley. His fame as a naturalist spread throughout the U.S.

Yosemite did not become America’s first national park. That honor went to Yellowstone, located mainly in northwest Wyoming.

Reports of Yellowstone’s regularly erupting water geysers, steaming rivers, and bubbling mud pools had been dismissed as “Yellowstone hallucinations” for many years. Finally, a U.S. government expedition led by geologist Ferdinand Hayden in 1871 documented these fantastic features and more.

Hayden became the leading advocate for Congress to preserve Yellowstone as a national park. He warned against business interests planning to enter Yellowstone “to fence in these rare wonders so as to charge visitors a fee as is now done at Niagara Falls.”

During the debate in Congress over creating Yellowstone National Park, many had to be convinced that the federal public land involved was useless for homesteading, farming, ranching, mining, lumbering, or other economic purposes. For them, public lands were meant to be sold or leased for settlement and their resources. Hayden argued that Yellowstone’s high altitude, harsh climate, and poor soil made it “worthless lands” except for their scenery and natural wonders.

In 1872, Congress and President Ulysses Grant made Yellowstone the first national park — not only in the U.S., but in the world. The law set aside 3,500 square miles of federal land as “a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”

Meanwhile, John Muir was lobbying for Yosemite to be returned to federal control and made a national park. He made the same “worthless lands” argument that Hayden had used for Yellowstone.

In 1890, Congress created three California national parks. The Sequoia and General Grant (later King’s Canyon) parks protected groves of giant redwoods. Yosemite National Park included mountain and forest areas but *not* the spectacular Yosemite Valley or nearby Mariposa Grove of sequoias. They remained in California’s hands. Disappointed, Muir founded the Sierra Club, in part to work toward including these jewels of nature within the park.

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In 1887, Theodore Roosevelt, then a federal civil servant, helped organize the Boone and Crockett Club. Originally for rich big game hunters, the club supported the creation of national parks as essential refuges for endangered wildlife. The club took up the cause of saving a small herd of the vanishing buffalo in Yellowstone National Park.

Roosevelt lobbied Congress to pass the Yellowstone Game Protection Act of 1894, which strengthened enforcement of laws against illegal hunting in the park. This expanded the rationale for national parks beyond protecting scenery to also protecting wildlife.

### **Saving the Wilderness**

Theodore Roosevelt had been a sickly child, but had relied on willpower to force himself to become, in his word, “manly.” He hunted, fished, hiked, and embraced the outdoor life. After graduating from Harvard, he traveled throughout the West and started a ranch in North Dakota.

In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau announced the West had been largely settled and the frontier had come to an end. This got Roosevelt thinking about the importance of holding on to what was left of America’s wilderness.

When President William McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Vice President Roosevelt moved into the White House. His top wilderness priority was to make Arizona’s Grand Canyon a national park. But fierce opposition from local miners, ranchers, loggers, and tourist businesses killed his proposal in Congress.

In 1903, Roosevelt toured the West by train. At the Grand Canyon, he pleaded with Arizonans to “keep this great wonder of nature as it now is.” He then visited California and joined John Muir in a campout under the stars at Yosemite. Muir spent his time with Roosevelt arguing for the return of the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove of giant trees to federal control as part of Yosemite National Park.

In 1906, Roosevelt persuaded Congress to include the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove within park boundaries. But he grew frustrated

by how long it took Congress to act and to approve new national parks he wanted like Grand Canyon.

Congressman John F. Lacy (R-Iowa) became an ally of Roosevelt. A supporter of protecting cliff dwellings and other ruins of the ancient southwest pueblo people, he designed a bill modeled after an 1871 law that had given the president the power to create national forests on his own. The Antiquities Act of 1906 gave the president the authority to protect “historic landmarks, historic preservation structures, and other objects of scientific interest” on public land as national monuments.

The Antiquities Act proved to be just the legal tool Roosevelt needed to bypass Congress and speed up the protection of America’s natural and man-made heritage. Within a year, he created seven national monuments by executive order such as New Mexico’s Chaco Canyon, the largest U.S. archaeological site of ancient pueblo ruins.

Then, in 1908, Roosevelt declared Grand Canyon an “object of unusual scientific interest” and made it a national monument. Shortly after he did this, Roosevelt appealed to Americans that places like Grand Canyon should be “preserved for their children and their children’s children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred.”

Before Congress realized it, Roosevelt was using the Antiquities Act to protect natural and historic sites from private exploitation while awaiting full national park protection. Under the Antiquities Act, the rationale for national parks again expanded to include protection for places with historic and scientific importance.

In the last months of his second term, Roosevelt went on a frenzy, using his executive powers to create



A park ranger atop his car, c. 1935, keeps an eye on a herd of bison.

National Park Service

or expand national monuments, national forests, game preserves, and bird reservations. Altogether, he left an astounding legacy: five national parks, 18 national monuments, 150 national forests (created or enlarged), 51 bird reservations, and four national game preserves.

### Conservation vs. Preservation

In 1905, President Roosevelt had put Gifford Pinchot in charge of the new U.S. Forest Service, which took over management of the national forests. Pinchot had studied forestry at Yale and in Europe and was America’s first professional forest expert.

In 1907, Pinchot proposed the word “conservation” to describe Roosevelt’s wilderness protection campaign. Pinchot believed, and Roosevelt agreed, that federal lands, even national parks, should be useful by giving up valuable resources when needed. In fact, this had always been the prevailing view in Congress when national parks were proposed.

Preservationists like John Muir, however, thought that mountains, forests, and other wild places should be left alone. He defended the usefulness of national parks in a different way:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going

home, that wildness is a necessity, and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

Pinchot and Muir became friends and allies during numerous trips in the West. But they clashed bitterly when San Francisco proposed to dam the river running through the Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park in order to create a city water reservoir.

Preservationists like Muir described Hetch Hetchy as almost a twin to the magnificent Yosemite Valley. But unlike it, Hetch Hetchy was a truly wild place not yet spoiled by tourism. Preservationists feared that if the Hetch Hetchy dam was built, all the national parks could be threatened by demands for their resources.

Conservationist Pinchot backed San Francisco, arguing that national parks should be used to benefit the people. Many asked why scenery should be more important than the growing needs of a city.

Both sides appealed to President Roosevelt. In the end, he supported his trusted adviser Pinchot over his friend Muir. The fight dragged on until 1913 when President Woodrow Wilson signed the law that approved construction of the dam. ▶





Visitors to Cuyahoga Valley National Park (in Ohio) learn from a park ranger.

## The National Park Service

Well into the 20th century, the national parks had no single federal agency to manage them. Responsibility was split among the Department of the Interior, the Forest Service, and the War Department, which sent cavalry units to build roads and guard against illegal hunting.

After their Hetch Hetchy defeat, preservationists began to lobby for a new government agency dedicated to protecting and promoting the national parks. The preservationists gained an unexpected ally in politically powerful railroads that wanted to transport tourists to the parks.

In 1916, Congress established the National Park Service (NPS). Its mission was to maintain the national parks for the “enjoyment” of the people while leaving the parks “unimpaired” for future generations. But how could the NPS both cater to tourist enjoyment and keep the parks unimpaired and natural?

Stephen Mather, the first NPS director, adopted policies heavily on the enjoyment side. He worked to make the national

parks self-supporting by promoting tourism. He encouraged park hotels built by the railroads, roads for automobile access, and private concessions like restaurants and tourist cabins. He supported park tourist attractions like the giant sequoia with a car tunnel, bear feeding shows, and Yosemite’s “firefall” where a stream of burning embers were dropped at night from Glacier Point to the valley far below.

Mather also introduced park rangers and championed new national parks such as Alaska’s Mount McKinley, Hawaii Volcanoes, and Acadia in Maine, the first park created east of the Mississippi. In 1919, he helped get Congress to finally upgrade Grand Canyon to a national park.

In the late 1920s, George Wright, a young naturalist at Yosemite National Park, began to publicly question NPS policies that mainly focused on tourism. He pointed to the other NPS mission to leave the parks unimpaired for future generations.

Wright conducted studies that contradicted long-held NPS ideas

about such things as fighting all fires in the parks and removing predators like wolves. He concluded that park environments and wildlife should be largely left alone to take their natural course without interference from humans.

In 1933, Wright was appointed to head a new NPS wildlife division. He immediately began to hire biologists to work on habitat protection. Tragically, he was killed in an auto crash two years later, and the NPS lost interest in his ideas.

## Restoring Ecosystems

After World War II, with the dramatic expansion of the national highway system, national parks became more popular than ever. Overcrowding led to demands for more roads and visitor facilities. But preservationists began to argue as George Wright did that healthy park ecosystems were more important than additional parking lots.

In 1963, a team of scientists studied NPS wildlife management policies. The scientists recommended restoring park ecosystems as much as possible back to their original natural condition. Congress responded to this new thinking by passing the Wilderness Act of 1964. Wilderness areas established within national parks and other protected areas were to remain wild without roads or motorized vehicles.

Following Alaska statehood in 1959, a major battle erupted among the state’s residents, native peoples, commercial interests, and preservationists over the distribution of millions of acres of federal land. Much of it was untouched by humans and teeming with wildlife. The preservationists saw Alaska as their last chance to get wilderness protection right. Others saw it as a storehouse of natural resources like oil to be tapped.

After a decade of debate, Congress passed a compromise act that President Jimmy Carter signed in

1980. The law created new national forests, wildlife refuges, wilderness preserves, and seven new national parks. This was the single largest expansion of protected land in world history. It more than doubled the national park system.

The current rationale for national parks has expanded again. It now includes restoring, where possible, original ecosystems. In 1967, the NPS reversed its long-held policy of suppressing all fires in the parks because natural fires are necessary to clear space for new growth and for certain tree seeds to germinate. In 1995, wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone to restore nature's way of weeding out weak animals and reducing overpopulated elk herds.

For nearly 150 years, the rationale for national parks expanded from simply preserving scenery to protecting wildlife, objects of historical and scientific value, endangered environments, and wilderness areas. Today, the rationale goes beyond protection to restoration of original park ecosystems.

The national park system now includes 59 national parks and 76 national monuments. The NPS also manages or helps to administer 263 historic parks and sites, battlefields, wildlife refuges, seashores, lake shores, wild rivers, trails, and other special places.

President Theodore Roosevelt declared Pinnacles, an area of unusual rock formations in central California, a national monument in 1908. More than 100 years later, President Barack Obama signed the law making it the newest national park in 2013.

Writer and environmentalist Wallace Stegner once said, "National parks are the best idea we ever had." Evidence of this is that more than 100 nations have copied our national park idea to establish some 1,200 parks and preserves of their own.

## For Further Reading

Duncan, Dayton. *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. [This is the companion book to Ken Burns's television series of the same title.]

Runte, Alfred. *National Parks: The American Experience*. 4th ed. Lanham, Md.: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010.

## DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What is the difference between "conservation" and "preservation" as championed by Gifford Pinchot and John Muir? Whose view do you agree with more? Why?

2. Do you agree with President Theodore Roosevelt's decision to back the building of a dam in Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley? Explain.
3. The National Park Service has two somewhat contradictory missions: to provide for the people's "enjoyment" of the national parks and to leave them "unimpaired." Which mission do you think is more important? Why?



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## ACTIVITY

### National Park System Dilemmas

Much controversy surrounds today's national park system policies on preserving and restoring original ecosystem conditions. Form small groups. Each group should discuss and decide one of the following dilemmas. Each group will then report and defend its decision.

1. Lightning has ignited a forest in Yosemite National Park. Some want to let the fire naturally burn itself out. But this will scar the scenery for a decade or more, destroy many animals, and possibly threaten communities outside the park. What should park authorities do?
2. Wolves have been reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park. The state of Wyoming has set a limit on the number of wolves hunters may kill outside the park each year. After the limit is reached, should ranchers near the park be allowed to kill a wolf that is threatening livestock?
3. An elk has broken through the ice on a lake in Grand Teton National Park. The elk is weakening and will soon drown. Nearby is an NPS ranger with his vehicle that has a winch and rope. What should the ranger do?
4. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge along Alaska's northern coast is the largest protected wilderness in the U.S. Congress delayed deciding whether to permit oil drilling in Area 1002, making up less than 10 percent of the refuge. Supporters say drilling is needed to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil and keep gas prices from going too high. Opponents say that drilling sites, roads, pipelines and possible oil spills will harm the primitive ecosystem of Area 1002, which includes a birthing ground for caribou. What should Congress do?
5. In 2010, Congress and President Obama lifted the federal ban on visitors carrying concealed and loaded guns into the national parks. Those in favor cited the need for self-defense and Second Amendment rights. Those against warned about shooting at wildlife, illegal hunting, and park vandalism. As potential visitors to national parks, what is your view?

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## Standards Addressed

### National Parks

**National High School U.S. History Standard 20:** Understands how Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption. (2) Understands major social and political issues of the Progressive era (e.g., . . . the Hetch Hetchy controversy).

**National High School Civics Standard 23:** Understands the impact of significant political and nonpolitical developments on the United States and other nations. (5) Understands historical and contemporary responses of the American government to demographic and environmental changes that affect the United States.

**California History /Social Science Standard 11.2:** Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large-scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. (9) Understand the effect of political programs and activities of the Progressives (e.g., federal regulation of railroad transport, Children’s Bureau, the Sixteenth Amendment, Theodore Roosevelt, Hiram Johnson).

**California History /Social Science Standard 11.11** Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society. (5) Trace the impact of, need for, and controversies associated with environmental conservation, expansion of the national park system . . .

**California History /Social Science Standard 12.7:** Students analyze and compare the powers and procedures of the national, state, tribal, and local governments. (5) Explain how public policy is formed, including the setting of the public agenda and implementation of it through regulations and executive orders.

**Common Core Standard SL.11-12.4:** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

### Rachel Carson

**National High School U.S. History Standard 26:** Understands the economic boom and social transformation of post- World War II United States. (1) Understands scientific and technological developments in America after World War II . . .

**National High School U.S. History Standard 30:** Understands developments in foreign policy and domestic politics between the Nixon and Clinton presidencies. (1) Understands how the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations dealt with major domestic issues . . .

**California History /Social Science Standard 11.8:** Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post-World War II America. (6) Discuss the diverse environmental regions of North America, their relationship to local economies, and the origins and prospects of environmental problems in those regions.

**California History /Social Science Standard 11.11:** Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American Society. (2) Discuss the significant domestic policy speeches of [presidents] (e.g., with regard to . . . environmental policy). (5) Trace the impact of, need for, and controversies associated with environmental conservation, . . . and the development of environmental protection laws . . .

**Common Core Standard SL.11-12.4:** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

**Common Core Standard W.11-12.9:** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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