

Understand Yosemite, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

THE PARKS TODAY200

Can the parks be loved *too* much? Hear about new plans to balance visitation with wilderness preservation.

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Read about who and what has shaped the parks, from the Ahwahneechee to John Muir to the NPS centennial.

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Mountains don't just pop up overnight, you know. Find out about how the Sierra Nevada range formed and keeps shifting.

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A primer on the Sierra Nevada's water wars, preserving forests and meadows, and problems of air pollution and drought.

The Parks Today

California's extended drought has stressed natural resources and altered the rhythm of the seasons in an unprecedented way. Without a robust snowpack, the Sierra Nevada has experienced extraordinary conditions that have left forests vulnerable to fire, and caused wildlife to alter their habitat. Yosemite has made progress on plans to restore its river corridors and forests, kicking off major projects to preserve Mariposa Grove and the Merced and Tuolumne river areas.

Best in Print

Off the Wall: Death in Yosemite

(Michael Ghiglieri and Butch Farabee; 2007) A cautionary compendium of fatalities and daring search and rescue operations.

The Wild Muir: Twenty-Two of John Muir's Greatest Adventures (2013)

An essential collection of Muir's writings on Yosemite and the Sierra.

An Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks (Bill Tweed; 2010)

A retired Sequoia park planner hikes and ponders park management in an era of climate change.

A Way Across the Mountain: Joseph Walker's 1833 Trans-Sierran Passage and the Myth of Yosemite's

Discovery (Scott Stine; 2015) A reevaluation of how white explorers first encountered Yosemite.

Best on Film

Valley Uprising (2014) Fast-paced documentary on Yosemite's Camp 4 rock-climbing revolution.

The National Parks: America's Best Idea (2009) Documentary series on US park history.

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier

(1989) Captain Kirk does El Capitan.

Yosemite (2015) Meditative coming-of-age film with park scenes, starring James Franco.

Parched Parks

The 2013 Rim Fire scorched 402 sq miles of the Stanislaus National Forest and the northwestern periphery of Yosemite. The largest recorded wildfire in the Sierra Nevada (and the third largest in California history), many viewed its rapid acceleration as an unsettling portent. If severe climate change became the new normal for California, would drought convert its forests to kindling stockpiles?

Other shifts reinforce these concerns. Small, upper-elevation mammals such as the beloved little pika (a tiny relative of the rabbit) have moved to higher, previously uninhabitable elevations and abandoned their lower stomping grounds. Remaining glaciers such as the Lyell Glacier are rapidly receding as temperatures rise. In 2013 scientists determined that it had thinned to the extent that it had become stagnant, a clear indicator of climate change.

Visitors are more likely to notice something's amiss when ski resorts are grassy in mid-winter and waterfalls turn off the taps in early spring. In 2015 Yosemite's April snowpack was measured to be a mere 7% of its historical average and the Mariposa Grove road hadn't closed in winter for four years.

Rivers & Resources

The parks continue to dance the tricky footwork of facilitating preservation while accommodating high levels of tourism. After considerable public comment – and an equal amount of litigation – Yosemite has begun to carry out comprehensive management plans along the Tuolumne and Merced River corridors. Tuolumne Meadows will see the curtailment of its development footprint, with the closure of the gas station and stables, as well as a reconfiguration of parking areas and the res-