

Understand USA's National Parks

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With Yellowstone the world's first national park, the foresight of a few individuals has created a legacy for millions to enjoy.

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Safeguarding the the parks' treasures has always been a struggle, and today conservationists are facing new challenges.

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There's more to the national parks than spectacular hiking. Wildly diverse landscapes offer activities to suit every taste.

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Glaciers and lava flows, fossils and hot springs: America's parks are a testament to its violent and spectacular geological history.

History

Few things are as quintessentially American as national parks. As writer Wallace Stegner famously put it, they are 'the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic.' A handful of people once had the foresight to pull in the reins on rampant hunting, logging, mining and tourist development, so that we might save at least some of our most magnificent treasures for future generations – their actions constitute one of the greatest chapters in US history.

A Magnificent Park

American portrait artist George Catlin (1796–1872) is credited with being the first person to conceptualize a 'nation's park.' He envisioned a 'magnificent park' to protect the country's remaining indigenous people, buffalo and wilderness from the onslaught of western expansion. But more than three decades would pass before anything remotely resembling that vision existed.

In 1851, members of an armed militia accidentally rode into a massive granite valley in the Sierra Nevada and decided to call it 'Yosemity,' possibly a corruption of the Miwok word *Oo-hoo'-ma-te* or *uzumatel*, meaning 'grizzly bear.' The name stuck, and soon word of the valley and its waterfalls got out. Within no time, entrepreneurs were divvying up the land in hopes of profiting from tourists.

Thanks to a handful of outspoken writers, artists, naturalists and – most importantly – the efforts of the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Yosemite Valley was spared privatization. In 1864 President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill into law that put Yosemite Valley, and the nearby Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias, under the control of California. Although it wasn't a national park, it was the first time *any* government had mandated the protection of a natural area for public use.

Birth of a National Park

Four years later, a group of men bankrolled by Northern Pacific Railroad headed into the Wyoming wilderness to investigate reports of thermal pools and geysers. Among their discoveries were the Great Fountain

TIMELINE

1864

President Lincoln designates Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove a protected state park.

1872

President Ulysses S Grant designates Yellowstone the world's first national park.

1890

Yosemite National Park is established, but the state of California retains control of Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove.