Geographies of Wonder

Evolution of the National Park Idea, 1933–2016

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Library, West Hall
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
When the federal government established the National Park Service in 1916, the idea that scenic wonders should be preserved as well as enjoyed became a permanent feature of American national life. As national parks and monuments proliferated during the 1920s and 1930s, the public's enthusiasm for visiting them grew almost without pause until domestic travel ceased during World War II. Confronted by soaring numbers of vacationers during the 1950s and 1960s, the Park Service struggled to accommodate them.

To manage the increasing public appetite for park spaces, the Park Service established new parks, facilities, and programs. At the same time, an escalating popular awareness of new environmental challenges influenced the Park Service's planning for the future. In keeping with its legislative mandate, the Park Service undertook new initiatives to make its lands available for public enjoyment while, at the same time, ensuring their conservation unimpaired for future generations. “Geographies of Wonder: Evolution of the National Park Idea, 1933-2016”—the second of two consecutive exhibitions celebrating the centennial of the National Park Service—draws on nearly 100 items gathered from The Huntington's library holdings, as well as from various private collections. The exhibition examines how the ongoing tension between use and conservation has shaped the evolution of the national park idea since 1933.

Increasing the number of national parks and monuments during the 1930s represented only one aspect of the great changes that befell the Park Service during the Great Depression. Among many efforts to promote economic recovery during those years, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs made significant investments in America’s national parks. Such public works projects as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Park Service’s Recreational Demonstration Areas put thousands of Americans to work restor-
ing or expanding scenic and historic landscapes for public use. At the same time, tourists continued to flock to national parks, perhaps finding in these alluring spaces some solace from the nation’s economic woes. A lifelong conservationist, Roosevelt also supported proposals for new parks and monuments encompassing landscapes that ranged from the vast Everglades wetlands in Florida and the Cape Hatteras seashore in North Carolina to the Big Bend of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Other sites were established to document aspects of the nation’s history, such as the life and career of scientist George Washington Carver, the first African American so recognized by the National Park Service.

World War II, with its countrywide rationing of gasoline and rubber, brought recreational automobile travel to a full stop and shut down nearly all uses of national parks “for the duration.” Only in the post-World War II years did Americans, powered by widespread prosperity, return to pursuing recreation with great enthusiasm. By 1949, 32 million vacationers visited the national parks, an increase of 50 percent from 1941’s total of 21 million. The surge in visitation reflected in those numbers, however, exerted ever greater pressure on natural habitats and aging park facilities. Historian and conservationist Bernard DeVoto, writing in the March 1949 issue of Harper’s Monthly, spoke for many critics of the federal government when he denounced its failure to adequately fund the National Park Service: “the situation is shocking; it is becoming critical.”
By the middle of the 20th century, national parks encountered not only the challenge of soaring visitation, but also other daunting new threats. In particular, proposals to dam the Green River in northwestern Colorado and submerge the adjacent Dinosaur National Monument stirred up vehement national opposition. Although such plans eventually went down to defeat, the leadership of the National Park Service set out to bolster the bureau’s standing with the public. In 1956, the Park Service launched its 10-year Mission 66 project. With the support of hefty new appropriations from Congress, Park Service administrators set out to overhaul facilities and services across the system and thus dramatically improve the visitor experience in time for the National Park Service’s 50th anniversary in 1966.

The Mission 66 program represented the pinnacle of decades of labor invested by Park Service planners and national park concessioners to meet the brick-and-mortar requirements of the national park system. For other Americans, however, the early 1960s brought burgeoning anxieties about global environmental degradation and an American society obsessed with consumption. Environmentalist Rachel Carson warned of the “fateful and destructive power” of humanity in its relationship with nature if unrestrained by “wisdom and humility.” Wilderness advocate Edward Abbey scorned the “indolent millions born on wheels and suckled by gasoline” who demanded that the parks accommodate their industrial technology.

Many traditionalists within the National Park Service and the broader conservation movement found such critiques incomprehensible and often offensive. During the final decades of the 20th century, however, the Park Service began to respond to them as it adopted innovations such as national recreation areas, national seashores, national lakeshores, wild and scenic rivers, and historic parks in every section of the country to extend its reach in preserving history, scenery, and ecology. National recreation areas in particular sought to bring park spaces to burgeoning urban populations in settings
such as Gateway Recreation Area in New York (1972), Golden Gate in San Francisco (1972), and Santa Monica Mountains in Los Angeles (1978). By doing so, it hoped to relieve the pressure of visitors on existing parks and demonstrate the crucial role played by the Park Service as a whole.

Despite such efforts to accommodate the ever-rising tide of public visitation, the Park Service found itself falling further and further behind. By 1990, annual visitation to the nation’s park system reached 260 million people. Outdoor enthusiasts, hungry to immerse themselves in experiences from backpacking and river running to mountaineering, inundated many parks. Other vacationers, wedded to motorized technology from motor homes to all-terrain vehicles, clamored for better roads, more campgrounds to accommodate their machinery, and increased access to various park spaces. In hopes of mitigating the destructive impact of skyrocketing numbers and intrusive technologies, harried Park Service professionals and alarmed environmentalists struggled to find a balance between preservation and use.

Relying upon one tried-and-true technique for coping with increasing demand, the Park Service continued to add to the scope of the national park system. In this choice, the agency was aided and abetted by an environmental movement that saw itself in a desperate struggle with powerful and unrelenting forces of environmental degradation. To those ends, new acquisitions undertaken since the 1970s incorporated vast new holdings. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 alone added 43.5 million acres. Other federal initiatives, such as the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, significantly increased the
size of such existing parks as Death Valley and Joshua Tree. Meanwhile, the National Park Service sought to improve the management of its resources through the use of new tools, such as geographic information systems. Concurrently, it also endeavored to broaden the appeal of the national park system to an ever more diverse American population.

At the conclusion of a century filled with challenges, the National Park Service encountered one additional trial that had not occurred to the pioneers who had brought the bureau into existence. America’s earliest national parks had been established to protect landscapes of particular scenic magnificence. By the 1930s, however, many historic sites had become the responsibility of the Park Service as well. Today, a wide array of battlefields, mills and factories, historic homes, presidential birthplaces, and archaeological remains reside within its jurisdiction. Among these, the sites of tragedies—such as the Sand Creek massacre of Cheyennes and Arapahos in 1864, the legacies of slavery and segregation confronted by African Americans in cities such as Boston, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II—acknowledge some of the darker chapters in American history. The Park Service, in its role as custodian of much of America’s history, strives to portray the American experience in all of its complexity. On the brink of its second century, the Park Service’s labors as guardian and interpreter of so many of the nation’s treasures speak well of its legacy and its future.

Peter Blodgett, H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator, Western American Manuscripts

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**RELATED EVENTS**

**Celebrating our National Parks**

**Nov. 5 (Saturday) 11 a.m.–3 p.m.**
Join the fun as the National Park Service’s centennial celebration continues with special performances by 19th-century naturalist John Muir (portrayed by actor Lee Stetson), anchored by the special exhibition in the Library.
General admission.

**Lecture Series: Geographies of Wonder: Evolution of the National Park Idea 1933-2016**

**Jan. 26, Feb. 2 & 9 (Thursdays) 10 a.m.- noon**
Join curator Peter Blodgett for this three-part lecture series exploring some of the major themes of the exhibition. Discussions include visits to the Library’s West Hall where “Geographies of Wonder” will be on display. Members: $75. Non Members: $90.)
Fred Harvey Co., *Trails and Automobile Drives Grand Canyon National Park*, 1931.