

## National Parks: America's Public Lands Legacy

America's National Parks are known and loved the world over. Shielded by the country's most protective land management standards, National Parks have preserved our common heritage and provided evocative experiences for families for over a century, from the quiet solemnity of battlefields to the howl of wolves in Yellowstone.

The National Park System preserves a breathtaking array of archaeological, historical, and natural treasures. Its more than 390 units encompass hallmarks of our nation as varied as Gettysburg and the Grand Canyon, Martin Luther King's birth home and the geysers and wildlife of Yellowstone. The Park System began with an eye toward preserving lands as they existed before the West was settled. Bryce Canyon, Glacier, Mount Rainer, and Sequoia are all examples of that initiative. Since the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916, the System was expanded to include areas throughout the country that allow Americans to experience the events, places, and landscapes that have shaped us as a nation and a people. The National Park Service manages seashores, lakeshores, battlefields, historic sites, memorials, and other areas of national significance. The agency is charged with maintaining the highest standard of protection for these units. In fact, the agency's mission is "to conserve the scenery and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." National Parks are intended to be our country's legacy to pass on to future generations.



Grand Canyon National Park  
Photo by NPS

### The Historical Commitment to Protect Parks

The creation of natural national parks ranks high among America's contributions to world culture. Since the establishment of Yellowstone, over 100 countries have followed America's lead and designated their own national parks.

On March 1, 1872, Yellowstone National Park was designated by Congress as the world's first national park—protecting shooting geysers, bubbling mud pots, and expansive wilderness for all Americans. After nearly 20 national monuments were designated by Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, Congress established an agency (the National Park Service) in 1916 to manage these icons.

Over the last 90 years, the National Park System has not been immune to development pressures and threats to natural and cultural resources. In response to strong bipartisan and public pressure in 2006, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne abandoned an effort to weaken the Park System's conservation principles by reinstating the National Park Service Management Policies—declaring that the policies' renewed emphasis upon conservation as the overarching duty of the National Park Service is the "lifeline" of America's commitment to preserve the parks. These policies are the foundation for day-to-day management of the Park System and include critical direction for its future protection and preservation. The policies address the following issues:

***Conservation***

“Congress, recognizing that the enjoyment by future generations of the national parks can be ensured only if the superb quality of park resources and values is left unimpaired, has provided that when there is a conflict between conserving resources and values and providing for enjoyment of them, conservation is predominant.”

***Clean air***

“Natural resources, process, systems, and values found in the parks include ... physical resources such as ... clear skies during the day and night" and "highly valued associated characteristics such as scenic views.”

***Natural sounds***

“The National Park Service will preserve, to the greatest extent possible, the natural soundscapes of parks.”

***Wilderness preservation***

“The National Park Service will take no action that would diminish the wilderness suitability of an area possessing wilderness characteristics until the legislative process of wilderness designation has been completed. Until that time, management decisions pertaining to lands qualifying as wilderness will be made in expectation of eventual wilderness designation.”

***Less polluting and noisy vehicles***

“Where such use is necessary and appropriate, the least impacting equipment, vehicles, and transportation systems should be used.”



Firehole River, Yellowstone  
Photo by Jon Catton

**Improving the National Park System**

Sadly, many National Park System units suffer from poorly maintained infrastructure. Other units lack sufficient staff and operating funds to carry out vital elements of the mission given to the National Park Service by Congress that includes providing visitors with opportunities to learn about America’s history and the natural world in which we live. As a result, despite the best efforts of park employees and volunteers, visitors may see fewer park rangers and interpreters as well as crumbling roads, outdated and unsafe visitor centers, overgrown vistas, and poorly maintained campgrounds and trails. Research has demonstrated that the National Parks operate on average with only two-thirds of the needed funding—a System-wide shortfall that translates to more than \$600 million annually. In addition, the most recent estimate of the maintenance backlog puts the figure between \$4.5 and \$9.7 billion. Congress must work to rectify the operating budget shortfall, eliminate the maintenance backlog and restore natural biodiversity.

**Protecting Yellowstone National Park**

Opportunities to enjoy Yellowstone’s winter landscape and natural attractions continue to improve following years of ill health and controversy in the park. It is vital that the reasons for this long overdue recovery be understood so that healthy enjoyment of our oldest national park will be strengthened and not

unintentionally reversed. Until recently, Yellowstone was frequently shrouded during winter with air pollution and overwhelmed with excessive noise. Wildlife, challenged for survival in the park's harsh winter environment, were frequently harassed and pushed from their habitat. A series of publicly funded studies recommended phasing out snowmobile use that was causing the biggest share of these problems and instead providing increased access to Yellowstone with modern, environmentally-friendly snowcoaches.

Today, Yellowstone is in the midst of its fifth consecutive winter season where the steadily increasing popularity of modern snowcoaches has dramatically improved conditions for winter visitors. The park's air is cleaner and its chief attractions and roads less crowded and chaotic.

These improving conditions are no surprise. They were accurately forecast by three separate National Park Service studies, conducted over the past 15 years at a cost to the taxpayers of over \$10 million. After each of the studies, both the NPS and the Environmental Protection Agency concluded that phasing out snowmobile use inside Yellowstone and transitioning to snowcoaches is required to protect the park and its visitors. The snowcoach solution continues full, motorized access to the park, provides needed certainty for gateway communities, is overwhelmingly supported by the American public, and protects Yellowstone for future generations.

While Yellowstone is headed in a positive direction, the Bush Administration's latest plan would undermine and reverse its returning health. The average number of snowmobiles in Yellowstone the past five winters has been about 260 per day, but the administration continues to propose a plan that allows triple this current daily average. The latest scientific studies have indicated that 720 snowmobiles per day would result in significantly more air pollution than park visitors have experienced in past winters and would lead to significantly more man-made noise intruding on visitor enjoyment across greater portions of Yellowstone. In addition, park scientists cautioned that an increase in winter traffic beyond current averages would lead to more disturbance and displacement of Yellowstone's bison and other wildlife.

The administration's current regulation that allows 720 snowmobiles in Yellowstone per day is setting back Yellowstone's recovery and will result in negative consequences for visitors, employees, wildlife, and the park's environment.

### **The economic benefits of a snowcoach access system**

When its access system emphasized snowmobiles, Yellowstone was profoundly influenced by traffic, noise and pollution—leaving the park's air perpetually clouded. Many visitors from inside and outside the region stayed away. Now, businesses in gateway communities such as West Yellowstone, Jackson, and Gardiner report growing numbers of new visitors, including seniors, wildlife and photography enthusiasts, skiers, snowshoers, and families. By attracting new customers inside Yellowstone, while emphasizing snowmobiling on National Forest lands near the park, these communities are diversifying their winter economies and being placed on a more sustainable path that protects both the health and image of Yellowstone.



Modern snowcoach,  
Yellowstone.  
Photo by Jon Catton

### **Increasing popularity of snowcoaches**

Snowcoaches are larger, multi-passenger vehicles on skis that carry from six to 20 visitors into the park at a time. Snowcoach use has steadily grown for a number of reasons. As *The New York Times* observed on August 26, 2005: "Clean snowcoaches are the fleet of the future...Both tourists and former snowmobile operators have discovered the benefits of new snowcoaches, which include lower costs, greater comfort, better visibility and less disturbance for the animals."

### **The environmental benefits from a transition from snowmobiles to snowcoaches**

National Park Service studies demonstrate that new snowcoaches are up to 41 times cleaner per visitor than the least-polluting new snowmobiles. Meanwhile, the *Billings Gazette* has reported that, “Despite technology and fewer numbers, noise is still an issue with snowmobiling in Yellowstone National Park...Snowmobiles exceeded noise thresholds near Old Faithful, Madison Junction and the West Entrance...” Snowmobile noise has been reduced in Yellowstone, but Park Service monitoring has revealed that even with a daily average of 260 snowmobiles in the park, noise levels fall into the category of “major adverse effects,” interfering with visitor enjoyment including in areas of the park most accessible by the vast majority of visitors.

### **Conclusion**

We urge Congress to support the transition underway in Yellowstone by ensuring that the new administration implements a phase-out of snowmobile use in favor of park-friendly snowcoaches. The National Park Service and the EPA have concluded—three times each—that this alternative “best preserves the unique historic, cultural, and natural resources associated with Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.”

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