

This Day in History... August 25, 1916

National Park Service Established

Decades after the first national park was created, the National Park Service (NPS) was officially established on August 25, 1916.

The first person to propose the idea of a national park was American artist and author George Catlin. He traveled to the American West in the 1830s to record the lives and customs of the native people in portraits. He aimed to preserve in art what he foresaw as a vanishing race. Catlin recognized, like the Indian tribes, the undisturbed plains and prairies were also at risk. He believed the lands deserved some form of protection.



Stamp pictures George Catlin's The White Cloud, Head Chief of the Iowas.

Less than a decade later, similar concerns arose in Wyoming. Expeditions to the Yellowstone area found it was host to deep canyons, majestic waterfalls, pristine lakes, dense forests, and spectacular geysers. Concerns grew that developers would come in and charge fees to see the natural wonders, while not taking care to protect them. Then in 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed legislation protecting Yellowstone, and making it America's first national park.

More parks, preserves, refuges, monuments, and other pieces of land were set aside over time. However, there wasn't a unifying organization in place to manage them. As such, many lacked funding and private companies opened hotels, railroads, ranches, and sawmills on the land, putting the natural and historical sites in danger. By 1916, the Department of the Interior was responsible for at least 35 different parks and monuments.



From a set of stamps issued to celebrate the 100th anniversary of America's first national park - Yellowstone.



Stamp issued for the NPS's 50th anniversary in 1966.

Catlin's proposal gained little traction, but others like him soon followed. Artists, writers, and naturalists began to convey a new picture of the West. What people previously had envisioned as a desolate wasteland was being re-imagined as a majestic natural paradise worth preserving. One of the first pieces of land on American soil to be set aside for protection was Arkansas' Hot Springs, which was made America's first federal reserve in 1832.

During the Civil War, conservationists became worried about the effects of commercial ventures in Yosemite and lobbied for its protection. In 1864, President Lincoln placed Yosemite under the protection of the state of California. This was the first time the US government set aside park land specifically for preservation and public use.



Yosemite was the first area set aside specifically for preservation and public use.

Among the many calling for change was Stephen Mather, a wealthy industrialist. He launched an extensive campaign, backed by fellow industrialists, schoolchildren, newspapers, and even the National Geographic Society. Mather's efforts paid off on August 25, 1916, when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Organic Act, establishing the National Park Service. Over time, lands were transferred to the NPS from the Forest Service and War Department.

What began as a seemingly radical idea has developed into one of the nation's most successful agendas. Since its creation, the role of the NPS has expanded to include national monuments, battlefields, seashores, and more. In all, the National Park Service includes over 400 areas, covering over 84 million acres in the 50 states as well as American territories.

For 100 years the National Parks Service has upheld its mission to preserve the nation's "natural and cultural resources... for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations." Each year, more than 275 million people visit a national park to enjoy the beautiful nature, discover American history, or just relax at the seashore. Every park is a national treasure preserved because of an idea that took root over a century ago.

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