

National Parks Called America's Best Idea

Welcome to This Is America in VOA Learning English. I'm Jim Tedder.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. This week on our program, we talk about national parks in the United States.

The United States established its first national park in 1872. Yellowstone, in the western state of Wyoming, is home to grizzly bears, wolves and other animals.

Yellowstone was not only the first national park in America. It was the first in the world.

Since then, about 100 nations have followed the example. They have established over 100,000 national parks and protected areas for the enjoyment of people today and generations to come.

The National Park Service in the United States manages a total of 401 "units," as it calls them. These include national parks, historical sites, monuments, buildings and battlefields. They also include recreation areas, seashores, rivers, trails and parkways—almost 34 million hectares of land in all.

Visitors can hike in the woods. Climb mountains. Photograph animals. Explore Civil War battlefields. Go swimming or river-rafting. Ride horses. Or just enjoy a day outdoors with the beauty of nature.

The National Park Service was created in 1916. President Woodrow Wilson signed an act to make the National Park Service part of the Interior Department.

The National Park Service has two main jobs. One is to protect the national parks. The other is to help visitors enjoy them. In 2009, director Ken Burns made a movie about the history of the National Parks. He called them "America's Best Idea."

One way the National Park Service is able to operate is through the fees it charges. One hundred thirty-three sites charge entrance fees between \$5 and \$25. Each entrance fee is good for seven days. However, visitors can buy a yearly pass for \$80. And people over 62- years-old can buy a lifetime pass for \$10. A free lifetime pass is offered to people with disabilities.

In 2012, almost 287 million people visited the American national park system.

Today the United States has 59 national parks. Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is the largest park in the United States. It is in Alaska and covers over five million hectares of land—larger than the size of Switzerland.

Wrangell-St. Elias sells permits only to do research. Scientific research of fisheries, climate change, pollution, rock formation and ice mountains takes place in the park.

The park also includes historic areas where the Athabascan people lived thousands of years ago. Villages, camping and hunting areas of the Athabascan people can be found in the area.

The park has many historical structures and buildings of other prehistoric groups. The National Park Service says the structures represent periods of exploration, mining and transportation.

The smallest preserve in the United States is the Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial.

The memorial is in Kosciuszko's home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was a military engineer who left Poland to help fight for independence for the United States.

He is known for the battle sites and forts he built during the American Revolution. His greatest assistance was preparing for the defense of Saratoga. The battle of Saratoga is one of the most famous in the struggle for independence from the British.

The places under the care of the National Park Service are not all refuges of peace and quiet. Some are historic sites in the middle of busy cities.

For example, Fort Stevens is located in Washington, DC, off a busy road that goes between Maryland and Washington. During the American Civil War, Union soldiers protected Washington at Fort Stevens.

On July 12, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln visited Fort Stevens to witness the battle. He was shot at by opposing Confederate soldiers. The event was the only time in American history that a serving president was shot at by an enemy fighter.

One of the most memorable units is Mesa Verde National Park, in Colorado. Spanish explorers had named the area. The high, flat mountaintop is covered with many green juniper and pine trees. It looks like a huge green table, a "mesa verde" in Spanish.

A man named Richard Wetherill and his brother-in-law rediscovered the area in 1888, when they were trying to find some missing cattle.

The two men came to the edge of a deep canyon. Through the falling snow, they saw what looked like a small city across the canyon. It was suspended in the middle of the rock wall. There were many connected rooms built into a natural opening in the rock.

It looked as if the people who had lived there had just walked out, leaving everything they owned. Cooking pots by the fireplaces. Food bowls on the floors. Shoes in the corners. Digging sticks by the doors.

The ruins had been home to the ancestors of the present-day members of the Pueblo tribes. They were named Anasazi, or ancient ones, by the Navajo Indians. They moved to Mesa Verde about 1,500 years ago and left 700 years ago.

Today, from a distance, Mesa Verde appears as it did centuries ago. It rises more than 540 meters above the floor of the valley. Visitors can drive up to the top of Mesa Verde on a winding mountain road.

When you reach the top, you are 2,400 meters above sea level. In the distance are the flatlands and mountains of the Four Corners area. That is where the states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona meet.

Some of the ruins in the Four Corners area belong to the earliest people who lived there. They were hunters and gatherers, now known as Basket Makers. The Basket Makers lived in simple caves. Their civilization existed 2,000 years ago.

The first evidence that ancient people had moved to Mesa Verde is from about the year 500. Those people lived in pit houses. Pit houses were large holes in the ground with roofs of wood and mud.

In about the year 750, the early Pueblo people began building square structures of large connected rooms, or pueblos, above ground.

Finally, in about 1100, they climbed down the canyon walls and began building cliff dwellings. Today, visitors to the park can see some of the remains of all four kinds of settlements.

Around Mesa Verde National Park, archeologists have recovered many objects that the ancient people used—pots, tools and jewelry. Many of the objects are shown in the visitor's center.

However, human remains or any object from a grave may not be touched or shown. This is to honor the wishes of the modern Puebloan people who live in the area today.

In 2012 the most visited area under the care of the National Park Service was the Blue Ridge Parkway in the eastern United States.

The road goes almost 755 kilometers along the Blue Ridge Mountains between North Carolina and Virginia. The area is filled with wildlife and colorful flowers. It also includes some of the oldest pre-historic and European settlements.

Workers began building the parkway during the Great Depression in the early 20th century as part of a program to help put people to work.

Another parkway is the Natchez Trace Parkway, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2013.

It runs through Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

Long before the parkway became an official road, local Indians hunted large animals in the area and created many paths. Later the paths were linked and used for transportation, communication and trade.

We leave you with a few words from one of the most famous residents of a National Park: Yogi Bear. Yogi Bear is a cartoon character who first appeared on American television in the 1950s. He lives in Jellystone Park—a place that is a lot like Yellowstone Park.

“Let me point out that we bears were here before you rangers, and we made out okay. Now it’s don’t do this, and don’t do that, and we’re always tripping over the red tape.”

But despite the rangers, Yogi Bear and his friend Boo-Boo manage to steal a lot of “pic-a-nic” baskets. Then again, as he says, he is smarter than the average bear.

Our program was written by Nancy Steinbach and Kim Varzi. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Jim Tedder. For transcripts and podcasts of our programs, go to learningenglish.voanews.com. Join us again next week for This Is America.