



## Walking the Talk in America's National Parks

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**WALKING IS A VITAL PART OF MY LIFE.** For 40 years, my work day started and ended with the half-hour trek between home and my office on the campus of the University of Vermont. This was often a favorite part of the day, offering peace and quiet, some clarity as I anticipated and reflected on my teaching and research on the national parks, and even an occasional epiphany. Sometimes I also walk farther, hiking through many of the world's great cultural landscapes where every day on the trail engages me physically and intellectually. My work and leisure over the years have also taken me along the trail networks of nearly all the US national parks. I write about this in my books, *Walks of a Lifetime in America's National Parks* and *Walks of a Lifetime from Around the World*.

Given this centrality of walking, I've enjoyed reading much of the rich body of literature on its history, philosophy, and practice, and I've found strong connections to the national parks that I explore in this essay. The piece begins with a brief summary of the walking literature illustrated with photos I've taken along trails in the national parks, and accompanied by extended photo captions that reference some of the intersections between walking and the national parks. The essay concludes with some thoughts about the implications of all this for park management.

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*All photos by the author*

▲ Hikers ascend and descend through Grand Canyon on the Kaibab Trail, one of the world's most iconic walks.

## WALKING IS SIMPLE, BUT IT CAN BE PROFOUND

Some scholars believe the importance of walking can be traced to early human evolution. For example, paleo-anthropologist Mary Leakey suggested that bipedalism freed the hands of protohumans for tool-making and other advantages, and that the brain expanded exponentially to meet this opportunity. Thus, walking is a defining characteristic of what makes us human. Moreover, when viewed objectively, walking is also a marvel, a symphony among our highly developed nervous, skeletal, and muscular systems. The balance and strength required to hold ourselves upright while moving one foot in front of the other for miles on end, over all sorts of terrain, without falling (at least not very often!), and doing all this with little conscious consideration, is nothing short of miraculous.

Walking has stimulated human thought across recorded history. Aristotle is an early example, walking as he thought and taught in the Lyceum of ancient Athens. More recent examples include the philosophers, poets, and writers of the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement in the 18th and 19th centuries. French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau questioned Western society's march toward increasing industrialization and urbanism, encouraging readers to return to nature and simplicity, and his thoughts were informed by his own long walks; he wrote that "my mind works only with my legs."

Henry David Thoreau took up the Romantic mantle in America, walking extensively throughout New England and near his retreat at Walden Pond. Eloquent (but often cranky), he advanced his Transcendental philosophy, urging Americans to preserve remaining pockets of nature and to walk in this landscape to find manifestations of God and higher truths. His essay, *Walking*, is his classic statement, in which he wrote, "I think I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least ... sauntering through the woods and over the hills and

fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements." John Muir carried the Romantic tradition westward, walking a thousand miles from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico, then walking extensively in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California throughout much of his adult life. His walks offered him deep insights into human relationships with the natural world, and he used walking as a

**OVERLEAF** Both the US national parks and walking have evolved over deep time. Geology and climate—shifting tectonic plates, volcanic upheavals, wind and rain, freezing and thawing, the eroding force of great rivers and grinding glaciers—helped shape the dramatic and varied landscapes of the national parks. In an analogous way, humans have evolved in substantive ways as well as when our ancestors rose up on two feet, ultimately realizing our magical walking prowess and remarkable intellectual capacity. This shared heritage should be celebrated by walking in the national parks.

metaphor near the end of his life when he wrote that "I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out until sundown: for going out, I found, was really going in."

The very act of walking has advanced an array of political causes. Prominent examples include Mohandas Gandhi's 200-mile Salt March in 1930 to protest British taxes, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 54-mile march in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to draw attention to unjust voting laws, and César Chávez's 340-mile March for Justice in 1966 in California to protest mistreatment of farmworkers. Rebecca Solnit speaks to the power of walking in her book, *Wanderlust*, where she writes that "walking becomes testifying."

One of the political causes closest to many walkers is conservation. The prophets of Romanticism sent legions of walkers out of their gardens and into the wider and wilder landscape, where they searched for beauty and solitude. Of course, this meant that walkers needed wild places to walk in, and many banded together in what have become powerful social forces for parks, wilderness, and environmental protection; prominent examples include the Appalachian Mountain Club (founded in 1876) and the Sierra Club (founded in 1892). Walking is also one of the most sustainable forms of recreation, having relatively little impact on the environment (compared to driving, for example).

Contemporary adults often find themselves caught in frantic lifestyles, searching for ways to slow the pace of life, and walking offers life at the more human scale of two-to-three miles an hour, deepening our engagement and appreciation of the world. Following his pioneering hike through Grand Canyon, walking guru Colin Fletcher wrote in his book, *The Man Who Walked Through Time*, "walking is the yin to life's more hectic yang."

Walking has a parallel track in cities as well. In Paris, it was the *flâneur* or bohemian who famously explored the city's nooks and crannies in the 19th century and, in the words of Walter Benjamin, went "botanizing on the asphalt." But Charles Dickens may have been the ultimate urban walker, logging as many as 20 miles a day in his native London, giving him welcome respite from his writing desk and providing first-hand observations of the often grim details of city life that he used to illustrate his books. The golden age of city parks in America—including Philadelphia's Fairmont Park (1855), New York's Central Park (1858), and San Francisco's Golden Gate Park (1870)—occurred during the same period as the Conservation Movement of the late 19th century when the early national parks were established, and with similar causes and consequences:

▼ Many of the rich and pleasing details of the national parks, like these tracks of wind-blown sand at Indiana Dunes National Park, can only be sensed and appreciated at walking speed.



**AT HUMAN SPEED** Walking is the most intimate and authentic way to experience the national parks. When you travel at the human speed of two-to-three miles an hour you can appreciate the parks through all the senses: see the delicate, ephemeral tracks of wind-blown sand as you wander the beach at Indiana Dunes National Park, hear the iconic call of the canyon wren as you hike through Grand Canyon National Park, smell the sweetness of ponderosa pines warming in the sun as you walk through Yosemite National Park, taste the salt air as you follow the Ocean Path at Acadia National Park, and feel the solid bedrock beneath your feet as you explore the trails at Isle Royale National Park.

▼ The starkly beautiful Cinder Cone Trail at Lassen Volcanic National Park leads hikers up and into this classic volcanic feature.



#### **SUSTAINABLE RECREATION**

Walking is one of the most sustainable forms of recreation, helping to ease the environmental and social impacts of the 300 million annual visits to the National Park System. Of course, hikers should be encouraged to stay on the trail, yield to wildlife, be considerate of other trail users, and otherwise limit the potential impacts of hiking, but choosing to walk the parks (rather than drive, for example) can help save them. Moreover, by stepping out of the car and onto the trail, the crowding that plagues many visitors to the national parks can be minimized, and you can even find precious moments of solitude instead.

▼ The trail along Slough Creek in the northeast quadrant of Yellowstone National Park is emblematic of the diversity and beauty of the park.



#### **FUNDAMENTALLY DEMOCRATIC**

When Wallace Stegner famously wrote that the national parks are “America’s best idea,” he was referencing their foundational democratic character; indeed, the 1872 legislation establishing Yellowstone National Park—widely recognized as the world’s first national park—states that the park is for “the enjoyment and benefit of the people.” Walking, too, is fundamentally democratic, as it’s the most broadly accessible form of recreation; most people can walk, costs are minimal, and doing so requires little specialized knowledge or equipment. You can celebrate this shared democratic heritage by walking in the national parks.

▼ Glacier National Park's dramatic Grinnell Glacier Trail offers much of the best of the park, including its signature and showy bear grass.



**ECOSYSTEM SERVICES** A growing body of research demonstrates the powerful contributions of walking—especially in nature—to human health and well-being, and the national parks offer quintessential opportunities. Like carbon sequestration, enhancing air and water quality, and maintaining biodiversity, providing opportunities for walking in nature is another entry on the growing list of ecosystem services that flow from the national parks.

residents of densely populated cities demanded open space and safe, clean places to walk.

Walking can also have a strong spiritual dimension that's most evident in the pilgrimage. Pilgrims have been walking for centuries for spiritual enlightenment. The oldest and largest pilgrimage is the Hajj in which two-to-three million Muslims annually travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, often on foot. Christian pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela, and other holy sites began in medieval times and are experiencing a renaissance.

If there's a silver lining to the recent global pandemic, it's documentation of the physical, emotional, and social benefits of walking, especially in nature. Obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are epidemic, and walking is a frequently prescribed antidote. Richard Louv coined the term "nature deficit disorder" among children in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, and walking in nature is his prescription. A whole new scientific literature has emerged on these and related topics and is powerfully summarized by Trinity College Professor Shane O'Mara in his book *In Praise of Walking*, where he writes "The core lesson ... is this: walking enhances every aspect of our social, psychological and neural functioning. It is the simple, life-enhancing, health building prescription we all need." The recentness of this revelation is ironic given ancient Greek physician Hippocrates' dictum that "Walking is a man's best medicine."

Walking is simple; Geoff Nicholson writes in his book *The Lost Art of Walking* that "walking is analog in a digital world." But it can also be profound, honoring our evolutionary heritage, stimulating our thinking, exercising this authentic form of political expression, contributing to conservation and sustainability, deepening our understanding and appreciation of the world, exploring spirituality, and making us healthier and happier in the process. But in today's world, walking is a choice we must consciously make; it's more conventional to sit and ride. In an especially appropriate turn of contemporary phrase, one must "walk the talk" to enjoy the manifold rewards of walking, and there may be no better place than in the national parks.

I should emphasize that I recognize many people are wheelchair users or are otherwise physically unable to walk. While the discussion that follows is directed toward people who are able to walk, I do not mean to imply that people with physical disabilities should be excluded from parks, or that their experience of parks is somehow inferior to that of people who are able to walk. People of all kinds of abilities must have access to parks, and there should be park facilities—including trails—that facilitate access by everyone. What I mean to do is celebrate the

benefits of walking in parks available to those who are able to perform this activity, as well as those who travel park trails by wheelchair or other mobility devices.

### MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS OF WALKING

My guess is that many readers of *Parks Stewardship Forum* are already confirmed walkers/hikers, and I hope some of the ideas I've presented in this essay might help inform and enrich this activity, and perhaps even stimulate other readers to join the walking community. But are there any park management implications associated with all this? I explore several in the final section of this essay.

The National Park Service (NPS) enjoys a well-deserved reputation for the high quality of its educational/interpretive programming, which has a heritage nearly as old as the agency itself. Guided walks are a staple of this program, where rangers lead groups of visitors on park trails as a means of teaching them about the natural and cultural history of the parks. But are we missing an opportunity to model the powers of the walk itself? Perhaps these (and other) interpretive programs could include a component on the rich history, philosophy, and practice of walking/hiking, including the iconic opportunities for walking in the national parks and the contribution of walking to everyday living and sustainability. After all, interpretive programming is supposed to deliver messages that visitors can take with them and apply at home. Should there even be guided walks to walking itself? If so, NPS could start visitors early through its popular Junior Ranger Program.

The more recently recognized synergistic relationship between walking and the national parks is their mutually reinforcing ability to contribute to public health and well-being; both can promote human health and happiness, but the effect is magnified when walking is done in a natural environment. This is increasingly being recognized as a vital ecosystem service of the parks, and NPS should capitalize on this, offering all the opportunities for walking it can, and extending the power of the parks by developing legions of healthy and happy national park walkers, many of whom are likely to become park supporters. The many urban and urban-proximate units of the National Park System—so close to where most Americans live and where nature can be in short supply—are a great place to focus.

Walking might also play an important role in addressing, and maybe even alleviating, issues associated with the dramatic increases in park visitation. The most recent data report that the number of annual visits to the National Park System now exceeds 300 million, and that's putting enormous strain on park resources, staffing, and



**ADVANCING CAUSES** In the 1950s, Congress considered developing the 180-mile Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and its lovely Towpath Trail into a parkway for automobiles. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, a frequent walker along the Towpath Trail, responded by leading a successful eight-day protest march along the path, calling the park “a long stretch of quiet and peace.” Consequently, the parkway idea was withdrawn and in 1971 today’s national historical park was created. This is one of many walks used throughout modern history to advance an array of political and social causes, including protecting the national parks and the broader natural and cultural environments. Enjoy a walk along the historic and delightful C&O Canal Towpath today thanks to Douglas and his band of walkers.

▼ A walk along Yosemite National Park's Lyell Creek can stimulate thoughts as lofty as the park itself.



**GOOD FOR THEMSELVES** Walking has a well-deserved reputation for intellectual stimulation, and this may be especially pronounced in the national parks. John Muir provides a good example, as he developed many of his remarkable insights into nature and human nature on his walks in Yosemite's High Sierra and other national parks. For example, in his book, *The Yellowstone National Park*, he wonders in a journal entry, "What are rattlesnakes good for?", then draws on original ideas of ecological objectivity and intrinsic value, replying that they're "good for themselves." This spark of biocentrism helped start the contemporary Environmental Movement.

▼ Much of Washington, D.C.'s National Mall and Memorial Parks was designed as a grand promenade, suggesting that the best way to appreciate its public buildings and monuments is on foot.



**WALKING FOR ALL** Walking shouldn't be confined to the hinterlands and neither should national parks. Given the power of walking to enhance the enjoyment and appreciation of parks and open space, the National Park System's growing suite of urban and urban-proximate sites extends the joy of walking and its many benefits to traditionally underserved people, helps alleviate "park deserts," and honors cultural landscapes that have important human components.

▼ The old-growth forests of Redwood National and State Parks are often described as “cathedrals.”



**SPIRITUAL TRUTHS** Descriptions of the national parks often invoke the spiritual; the parks are churches; their old-growth forests, cathedrals; and the experiences they offer, sublime. The Transcendental philosophy of the 19th-century Romantics suggested that nature is God’s most pure creation, and walking in nature will reveal spiritual truths. As usual, Muir said it best: reflecting on the national parks, he wrote “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in.”

budgets. In response, some parks are rationing public use through permits, reservations, timed entry systems, and other means. But in a recent book (Manning et al. 2022) my colleagues and I discussed some principles of managing parks and outdoor recreation that can be extracted from the scientific and professional literature. This literature reports the findings of hundreds of studies of visits and visitors to national parks and related areas, and many of these studies address the environmental and experiential impacts of outdoor recreation. One principle derived from this literature is that management should focus on the *impacts* of recreation use, not necessarily on the *amount* of use. Visitor activities can vary substantially in their environmental and experiential impacts, and walking/hiking is generally at the low end of the scale. Low-impact activities (such as walking) should be encouraged in the national parks and high-impact activities should be discouraged; in this way, more visits might reasonably be accommodated.

Driving in the national parks is a common high-impact activity. There's an old adage that suggests "there aren't too many people in the parks, there are too many cars." That's pretty simplistic, but like a lot of such enduring maxims, there's an element of truth. Cars present inordinate problems in so many parks—traffic congestion, conversion of prime park land into parking lots, chronic shortages of parking, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, disturbance of natural quiet, collisions with wildlife. By comparison, walking is pretty benign. This suggests that strategic park roads should be given over to public transit systems that deliver visitors to key attractions and trailheads, where they then proceed on foot. In this way, the parks might accommodate *more* visits with *less* impact, a potential win-win scenario.

A back-of-the-envelope analysis suggests the potential power of this strategy. At just under 150,000 acres, Zion National Park is relatively small. But its innovative (and required) public transit system delivers visitors to the park's primary attraction of Zion Canyon and associated trailheads where they then walk the lovely Emerald Pools Trail, up the West Rim Trail for the white-knuckle scramble out to Angel's Landing (assuming they have the required permit), and wade through the Virgin River Narrows, all examples of the iconic, pedestrian-based kinds of park experiences that are especially appropriate in national parks. This focus on public transit and walking allowed Zion to accommodate a whopping 4.7 million visits last year. Compare this to Yosemite National Park which is five times the size of Zion, relies primarily on cars to access the park, accommodated fewer visits (3.7 million) than Zion, and has a deserved reputation for often feeling *very* crowded. Moreover, the road into iconic

Zion Canyon, now served by the shuttle bus system and closed to cars (with a few exceptions), has been transformed into a quiet and peaceful grand promenade for walkers and bikers. Reimagine the Yosemite Valley Loop Road in this way!

Much of my academic work examined crowding in the national parks, studying the crowding-related perceptions of park visitors in many contexts. I learned that the number of visitors encountered can lead to perceived crowding, but that this relationship is often mediated by what those other visitors are doing and how the park manages visitor use. A closely related concept emerging from the crowding literature is that density of use doesn't always equate to perceived crowding, especially when use is managed appropriately. Waiting in a half-mile-long line of cars at the park entrance station and the stress of a fruitless search for a parking spot at attraction sites and trailheads induce high levels of perceived crowding (and that may be an understatement!), but strolling along a quiet path with like-minded others is far less impactful, even enjoyable. This issue is sometimes called "functional density" in psychology, and refers to the degree to which a place (an office building, a park) allows and facilitates the purposes for which it was established. In the context of parks, this is the degree to which visitors can see, experience, and appreciate a park without unreasonable and unnecessary inconveniences. The implication is that parks can accommodate large numbers of visits without feeling crowded if they're planned and managed in an informed and progressive way. And one of these ways is to maximize walking and minimize driving.

This issue has evolved into the contemporary concept of the "walkability" of communities, neighborhoods, and now parks. Measures of walkability have been found to positively correlate with human health and well-being, and walkability indexes (such as Walk Score) can be influential in determining residential real estate values, an indication of the degree to which many people value the opportunity to walk as a part of their daily lives. We should measure, manage, and monitor the walkability of the national parks.

The good news is that much of the National Park System is well positioned to advance the cause of walking. Most of the larger parks employ (consciously or not) a "concentrated/dispersed" design and management approach. Visitors and associated facilities and services are concentrated in a small portion of the park (sometimes as little as 5% or less of the park) to provide access to primary attractions and limit the geographic extent of visitor impacts. The remainder of the park is left largely undeveloped and accommodates a relatively small

▼ The John Muir Trail through Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite National Parks offers the most authentic and intimate way to appreciate these remarkable national parks along the celebrated “High Sierra.”



**DEEPER APPRECIATION** Many people are introduced to the national parks in the classic American family vacation of visits to ten national parks in two weeks. But this allows little time for walking, the most intimate and authentic way to experience the parks. A three-week walk of the John Muir Trail through Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite National Parks capitalizes on the power of walking to more deeply appreciate these three national parks, infinitely more so than a series of short visits to each. Consider visiting fewer parks, but lingering in those you do visit by taking the time to experience and appreciate them on foot. As he was wont to do, Ed Abbey said it more directly: “You can’t see anything from a car; you have to get out of the god-damned contraption and walk.”



**EXEMPLARY BENEFITS** The US National Park System includes many thousands of miles of trails, including much of our remarkable National Trails System. For example, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is one of the most exemplary in the nation—and the world—and the hundred-mile section through Shenandoah National Park offers the trail at its best. Just follow the beckoning white blazes to reap so many of the manifold benefits of walking

▼ Walks like this one through Blue Mesa at Petrified Forest National Park can lead to public appreciation of the national parks and, ultimately, support for more and bigger parks.



#### **FROM WALKING TO PROTECTING**

Attracting visitors to the national parks is an especially effective way to build support for them; after all, the parks don't easily disappoint. Historically, groups such as the Sierra Club, National Geographic Society, and NPS itself have capitalized on this, leading hiking and camping trips into the parks and building a corps of passionate national park supporters. Today's more than 300 million annual visits to the national parks continue this tradition. Given the power of walking, especially in the national parks, this may be a particularly effective way to help expand and protect the parks; park managers should recognize and maximize these benefits.

amount of dispersed visitor use. Both of these “zones” are well-positioned to provide a range of walking opportunities. Developed areas of the parks should offer short and less-demanding walking, often on paved trails, boardwalks, and other highly-maintained surfaces designed to accommodate large numbers of visitors (including wheelchair users) and limit impacts, and readily accessible by car (or, better yet, public transit). The remaining dispersed-use portions of the parks are often designated as wilderness (or awaiting such designation) where the only types of development generally allowed are trails and campsites, places that offer opportunities for longer and sometimes more challenging walking, and for finding solitude. Small parks and those located in or near urban areas should generally manage for walking opportunities more like those found in areas of concentrated use.

The science and trends seem clear. Walking can contribute to the quality of life in so many ways, and the national parks should be managed in a manner that promotes walking to enhance the quality of visitor experiences, limits impacts of rising visitation, accommodates as many visits as possible, and encourages more walking in everyday life. Now *that's* walking the talk in the national parks!

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