



## BRANCHING OUT

# “Here Is Your Country”: An Evangelical Perspective on Parks and Public Lands Stewardship

*Text & photos by* **Tori Goebel**

Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children’s children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.

🌿 *Theodore Roosevelt* 🌿

“**Here is your country.**” This was the refrain in my mind during a two-month sabbatical road trip through the American West. Sandstone, red rock, natural arches. “Here is your country.” Deep blue lakes colored by glaciers, snow-capped mountains. “Here is your country.” Rainforest, rocky coastlines, giant sequoias. “Here is your country.”

At the very same time I was immersing myself in perhaps the most scenic, iconic sites I will see in my lifetime, my social media feed was full of friends, allies, and strangers all rallying around the protection of our public lands as they faced the threat of a mass sale at the hands of our elected officials: the very thing Theodore Roosevelt warned about. And while the debate over the value of our shared, public lands was happening in DC, I was also witnessing the impacts of staffing shortages and deferred maintenance work in America’s national parks—places also heavily impacted by air pollution and climate change.

For me, my faith is the driving force behind my desire to protect these landscapes. As a Christian,

stewardship is a deeply held value and calling for me. It is also why I am so glad to work for the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), a ministry dedicated to helping our fellow evangelicals rediscover and reclaim the Biblical mandate to care for creation. This calling involves stewarding God’s creation for future generations, including national parks and public lands. Maintenance needs, climate and biodiversity crises, staffing investments, and looming threats of sale are interconnected issues that should concern *all* Americans, the inheritors and stewards of national parks and all public lands.

During the months of May and June 2025, I felt the deep significance of our national parks and public lands as I set out on a solo journey to find both rest and meaningful stories highlighting the importance of these places. National parks and public lands not only provide places of recreation and adventure, they protect sanctuaries for wildlife and are places of education—teaching visitors about history, ecology, and more. Highlights of my trip included the unique experience of watching wild bison roam freely

---

Tori Goebel serves as chief operating officer of the Evangelical Environmental Network. [tori@creationcare.org](mailto:tori@creationcare.org)

throughout Yellowstone National Park and attending every ranger program I could at each park I visited. These special places, and the staff who make visits not only possible but safe and informative, are worthy of our stewardship and care.

Genesis 1:31 says, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” I think anyone would have a hard time standing in Zion Canyon and thinking anything other than “indeed, it is good.” For me, I feel closest to God in creation—an experience affirmed by Scripture. Romans 1:20 states, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” As evangelicals concerned about sharing God’s love with those around us, stewarding creation is a meaningful, tangible way to do that. A significant part of my desire to protect creation is rooted in the hope that others may experience God and find peace, strength, and renewal in his handiwork. I have come back to faith in new and deeper ways countless times through outdoor experiences, and future generations ought to have the same opportunity.

While public lands belong to the American people in a legal and philosophical sense, as Christians we have a deeper understanding of our role and place within God’s world. As a follower of Christ, I know I am only a tenant (Leviticus 25:23), passing through with a calling to steward and cherish God’s intricate, interconnected world. Psalm 95:3-5 states “For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.” In his hands is the Grand Canyon. The Rocky Mountain peaks belong to him. His hands formed the Canyonlands.

What does this mean for Christians? I believe it means that we ought to approach stewardship of

creation—including and especially national parks and public lands—with a posture of reverence and humility, not control and domination. While some may interpret “dominion” in Genesis 1:28 as a free license to control, destroy, and use in any way, I look at this as a deep privilege and responsibility. The assignment of dominion ought to be understood through the lens of our calling as followers of Christ to love God and love our neighbors, through the lens of service that Christ so often modeled. I do not believe we can love God while destroying or ignoring God’s creation, and we cannot love our neighbors while ignoring the threats of air pollution and climate change and selling off our shared land for profit.

I’m sure most of us can appreciate and understand the non-monetary benefits of time well spent in

nature. Studies have shown the significant mental health benefits provided by time in the outdoors, and my hope is that we have all experienced

a moment where we found God or came back to ourselves due to an experience outside. I believe the impacts of time outside—especially in the historic, scenic, and almost unbelievable landscapes found in national parks—cannot even be measured monetarily and touch something far more sacred and important than revenue. That said, national parks also provide significant benefits to the local and national economies while also creating affordable ways for families to vacation and explore.

According to the National Park Service (NPS), in 2023 the parks created 415,000 jobs and added \$55.6 billion to the national economy. Economists note that national parks and nearby federal lands contribute significantly to local economies in the gateway communities of the parks through tourism revenue. Beyond that, the benefits of accessible outdoor recreation and preserved beautiful scenery retain and attract both businesses and residents.

A significant part of my desire to protect creation is rooted in the hope that others may experience God and find peace, strength, and renewal in his handiwork.

Often found outside of national parks are beautiful US Forest Service (USFS) lands and sites operated by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Not only do these USFS and BLM lands provide additional recreational opportunities, many of them offer campsites that are extremely affordable, if not free. As I traveled, I utilized a great deal of free camping on our public lands—something I am so glad my tax dollars can support. Outside of Bryce Canyon National Park, I had a beautiful, free campsite just eight minutes from the park’s entrance station, courtesy of USFS, which allows dispersed camping for up to 14 days in any given area. These spots included solo travelers like myself, but I also saw groups of friends and countless families enjoying an affordable vacation and a low-cost way to explore. Without these spots, many folks may not be able to afford to witness some of our nation’s grandest views. Unfortunately, these were the very spots threatened by sell-off attempts.

USFS campsite outside of Bryce Canyon National Park in May.



Sites under construction at South Campground in Zion National Park, photo taken from bike path through a fence opening.

Though parks and public lands provide untold benefits to our economy, families, spirits, and national heritage, they have not always been supported and invested in in ways that reflect their vast benefits to Americans and all who visit. Over years of inadequate investment, many park amenities, roads, and structures fell into disrepair. From bathrooms to overall water systems, from roads to campgrounds, many national parks had full logs of deferred maintenance. In 2020, the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) became law after years of advocates urging our elected officials to address the critical maintenance needs of our parks that had piled up over decades of disregard. According to NPS, “The 2020 Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) established the National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) which provides the National Park Service with up to \$1.3 billion each



Arches National Park in Utah.

year for five years (fiscal years 2021–2025), or \$6.5 billion total, to address extensive and long overdue maintenance and repair needs in national parks. The fund provides crucial investments to repair or replace aging buildings, roads, trails, campgrounds, and utility and water treatment systems in national parks. It enables the National Park Service to complete large-scale projects on a level that could not be met through usual funding sources.”

The GAOA was something that EEN fervently advocated for. I myself spent many hours in DC educating decision-makers on critical maintenance needs in the parks and how addressing them would benefit their districts and states. Since its inception, the National Parks Conservation Association states, the Great American Outdoors Act “has so far addressed more than 400 critical repair and maintenance projects across the National Park System, such as crumbling

park roads, worn-out trails and outdated water systems. It also addresses issues to improve visitors’ experience and safety. These improvements have generated substantial economic output, contributing \$8 billion to the economy and creating more than 72,500 jobs.”

The GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund, however, expires this year and without reauthorization, this important source of funding for our parks will be gone. That is precisely why I spent two months witnessing the success stories of the first five years while also cataloguing all that still remains to be done. It was a profound experience to witness firsthand the impacts of something EEN worked so diligently on, and it reminded me of all that can be accomplished when we come together for the good of God’s creation and all who enjoy it.

One park that both surprised me and left me in awe was Zion National Park. Unsure of what to expect and with minimal photographic research, I was rendered speechless while exiting the historic Zion–Mount Carmel tunnel as I witnessed the rock formations of Zion. Later on, at an NPS program, the long-time ranger shared that Zion is unlike other national parks because it is named after an idea, not a scene or feature like Mount Rainier or Arches. Instead, it is a reference to the city of God. I cannot think of a better reference for a place as hard to describe, yet altogether majestic. The handiwork of God’s creation is on display around every corner in this National Park, one of the most-visited of the 433 sites in the National Park System. With towering rock formations, emerald pools, and a stunning river, it is easy to see how early visitors and stewards of the park felt it was like the city of God.

Zion National Park is not only a highly visited and incredibly stunning park, but an important success story for the GAOA. Often, it is the most heavily visited parks that are in the most need of repair, and Zion is no exception. As the most-visited National Park in the West, it boasts only two campgrounds in the core part of the park, canyon of the Virgin River, with the third being Lava Point Campground on Kolob Terrace—over one hour from the canyon—that has only six sites.

When I was there in May, the South Campground was closed for repairs as part of the GAOA. Currently, about 128 sites are undergoing renovation for accessibility and ease of use, along with the addition of roads and other critical amenities.

During a bike ride down the canyon and into the area surrounding the campground, I was able to witness firsthand the construction and repairs underway. As a camper myself, I can appreciate the vital work being done to level sites for tents and recreation vehicles to be able to rest, eat, and sleep comfortably. While this renovation was overdue and is much needed, it also highlights the importance of quickly addressing maintenance needs as they arise and not letting them grow worse over time thus creating even lengthier, and more expensive, repair processes. When I planned my visit, Zion had only one campsite for one night available. Thankfully, there was BLM dispersed camping nearby to cover the rest of my stay, but my

one night at Zion’s Watchman Campground was a highlight of the trip, with the aforementioned ranger program and a star-filled sky over the Watchman, a stunning sandstone mountain. All together, my time in Zion underscored the importance of investing in park services so visitors can not only see but savor places this beautiful as well as the need for a robust public lands system that includes not only the parks but also BLM, USFS, and others..

Nearly 1,000 miles away, another park that stands out from my trip is Glacier National Park, a place with crystal-clear lakes and stunning mountains covered in snow and glaciers. It is also a park dealing firsthand with the impacts of climate change. Its namesake glaciers are receding farther back with each passing year, making it more challenging for visitors to see their grand beauty. A highlight of my four days in Glacier was driving the Going-to-the-Sun Road, a 50-mile road boasting the most stunning scenes from

Zion Canyon and the Virgin River.



Going-to-the-Sun-Road in Glacier National Park.



my trip. With one side an overhanging rock wall and the other a cliff, this road is a scenic but also precarious journey. That is why repairs and upkeep are so important. The GAOA made possible needed repairs on this highly sought-after road, so popular that it requires vehicle reservations to ensure visitor safety. These critical infrastructure and safety repairs highlight the importance of extending the GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund so continued investments can be made in these places that serve Americans in a multitude of ways.

One of my most anticipated parks was Sequoia National Park, especially after seeing the redwoods in Muir Woods National Monument a few years ago. These towering, stunning trees are beyond words and difficult to capture in a photo, and they reminded me of just how diverse and creative God's creation is. I was grateful to spend two nights at Lodgepole Campground, the main campground in the heart of the park. I was delighted to discover that it was the recipient of another GAOA project, with primary repairs being to the water system—both improving it for visitors and ensuring ease of access for firefighters. The landscape in and around Sequoia National Park highlighted the damage that wildfires can create and it is encouraging to know the GAOA is not only improving visitor experiences and safety but preparing parks for the worst impacts of climate change. Water is a critical component of life, and the GAOA has funded this and other essential water-related projects across the park system.

In addition to these inspiring highlights, I also unexpectedly witnessed how recent staffing cuts are impacting visitor experience and safety in our national parks. In Kings Canyon National Park, adjacent to and co-administered with Sequoia, ranger programs were cancelled in Grant Village, the main part of the park. In Sequoia National Park at the Lodgepole Campground, there were also no ranger programs despite the campground being fully booked, and the visitor center was closed indefinitely. Around the Giant Forest, the most popular part of the park due to General Sherman, the world's largest tree by volume, the only open visitor services were in a small museum. I remain grateful for the help and advice

from the staff that were there, but as peak season approached and crowds increased, the toll of staffing cuts was beyond clear.

These cuts not only impact the national parks but are crosscutting for our public lands, including USFS and BLM sites and other national recreation areas. On my trip, I met many folks who were on similar road trips to visit multiple parks, and these public lands sites that are scattered throughout gateway communities and in between popular parks provide other notable stops. While driving between Grand Canyon National Park and Zion National Park, for example, I was excited to not only do a short hike in Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument but to see the visitor center, as visitor centers are critical places to receive safety information and information for your adventures. As I pulled off the well-traveled highway, I was disappointed to see that the visitor

#### Suspended ranger programs at Kings Canyon National Park.





### Closed visitor center at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

center was “closed until further notice.” This spot may not be as known as the parks it sits between, but I was not the only one disappointed. For families taking a once-in-a-lifetime road trip, these sites provide a fun layover to learn and explore, and, for some, an entire destination worthy of their time.

Staffing cuts and maintenance needs are not the only interconnected issues facing our parks. Climate and environmental challenges are also impacting our parks in profound ways. The second spot on my trip was Arches National Park in Utah, a very popular and all-around incredible place to visit. The first thing I noticed when pulling in was a large construction operation taking place right out front of the entry gate, a place everyone stops to pay and show their timed entry reservation. I asked a ranger what was going on, and she shared that in 2024 they had three historic floods in Moab that impacted the entrance station—the only way to access the park.

In Sequoia National Park, there is an intense but beautiful climb to the top of Moro Rock that overlooks the surrounding area. On the top, there is an exhibit describing air quality issues in the area and letting visitors know that is why the view is often obstructed by the haze of air pollution. At the time I’m writing this, my heart breaks with the news of the wildfires in Grand Canyon National Park. NPS reports that the historic lodge on the North Rim, along with several cabins and other structures including the visitor center, have been destroyed by the fire. The North Rim will remain closed for the rest of 2025. At the very same moment in Colorado, the entire Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park is closed to visitors and has been evacuated due to an on-going fire. The issues of climate change and park stewardship are deeply interconnected, not just separate concerns.

The good news? There is something we can do! With the GAOA up for reauthorization this year, EEN and others are advocating for continuation of this vital funding for our parks. EEN is also working to defend public lands from funding cuts, sales, and other attempts to shrink and reduce these sacred spaces. I witnessed the benefits of a fully complete GAOA project in Yosemite National Park at the Crane Flat Campground. Securing camping spots at Yosemite National Park is highly competitive, and this oasis at Crane Flat is a mere 18-minute drive into the bustling Yosemite Valley. A variety of reservation windows were offered for the campground, including up to two weeks out, allowing me to secure a spot for six nights to explore the park, which was on the top of my list to see. Crane Flat Campground just recently reopened after previously having the notorious reputation of being one of the worst places to stay due to deferred maintenance. With the new renovations and updates, I found it to be peaceful and had all one needed for a rustic experience in Yosemite.

Care for our parks and public lands is something that has transcended party lines and united Americans from all walks of life. In 2020, the GAOA passed with broad bipartisan support and was signed into law by President Trump. This summer, the proposal to sell large swaths of public lands was rescinded due to an overwhelming outcry of support for public lands from both sides of the aisle.



ABOVE Newly renovated campsite at Crane Flat Campground, Yosemite National Park. ● UPPER RIGHT Vernal Falls in Yosemite National Park. ● LOWER RIGHT Yosemite Falls from the Yosemite Valley.



There is much work yet to be done in our national parks, and that is why I urge you to join us in advocating for the reauthorization of this historic and important effort. In Arizona, I had a great conversation with a volunteer at the Glen Canyon Dam. He used to work in maintenance, and when I told him about my reporting project he said “deferred maintenance is an oxymoron. There is no deferred maintenance, you either maintain it or you lose it.” Our elected officials must properly steward our parks so that we don’t lose them. This is not only a Christian value but a moral imperative for America.

*Here is your country. How will you help to steward it?*

*The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.*