The National Parks and Geography

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The US national park system is a much-loved set of places that preserve scenic beauty and the nation's history. Almost all of us have visited at least a few units, perhaps on dimly recalled family vacations, on an adventuresome trip, or while wandering through a city. You may have visited some parks that you didn't even know were parks. They are found throughout the country and attract hundreds of millions of visitors from all over the world. Parks are also often in the news due to congestion, fires, inadequate budgets, disappearing glaciers, border problems, rangers who have been shot, search and rescue missions, the creation of new units, and the lack of diversity among visitors. In 2016 there was news coverage of the centennial of the National Park Service (NPS).

There are many books on the national park system, but this one is different. It is not a book about bears or wolves or mountain scenery. Instead, we take a geographic perspective: Where are America's parks, and why are they in particular locations? What are they located near? Where do visitors come from? How does distance play a role in which parks are visited? How have park facilities developed to accommodate visitors? The national parks are geographic features: they have legally defined boundaries and are not located randomly or to serve the greatest number of people. They are affected by what is around them, as are shopping centers and neighborhoods. Their boundaries are even more gerrymandered than voting districts, and they are integrated into the nation's road network.

The study of geography can be differentiated into different fields, such as physical geography (land, water, and climate) and human geography. Human geography naturally deals with people: our cities, economic practices, political systems, transportation, and cultures. We will focus on the human geography of parks, or parks as political and cultural features, sites for public facilities and economic activities. These park units were created at great cost to the federal government and with great benefit to the American people and environment. Therefore, they cannot be understood without considering whether all Americans have access and ensuring that the park system remains relevant in the future. Our perspective is quite different from others that focus on parks solely as nature preserves or wilderness.

This book is written principally from the spatial or locational tradition of geography, one of the four major philosophical tenets of geography introduced by geographer William D. Pattison in 1963. While all four traditions are interrelated or impossible to divorce from each other, the core concept of the locational tradition attempts to understand a topic in relation to location, distribution, and patterns over time utilizing the geographer's powerful tool of mapping (cartography). At the same time, this book also embraces other traditions of geography or concepts that emerged from criticism of spatial analysis. Given the eclectic and diverse nature of geography, our book discusses the varied geographic issues of national parks and is synchronized by a focus on geographic locations, distributions, and the

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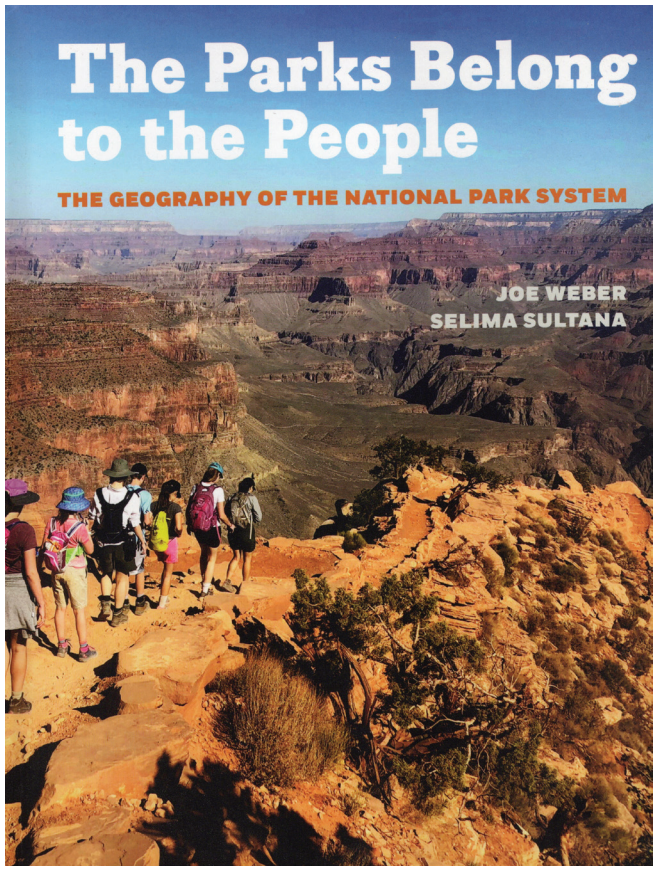

Dawn at the Grand Canyon. For many people, this spectacular landscape represents the best of America's national park system. MURRAY FOUBISTER, 2013 / WIKIPEDIA, CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-SHAREALIKE 2.0 GENERIC LICENSE

processes of growth and development of Park Service units and park boundaries. This book also tries to explain the regularities that unite seemingly different parks, as well as the differences among them, such as the origins of visitors, visitation patterns in relationship to size and proximity to the parks, and how the formation of national parks, shaped by the sociopolitical structure of the locale, formed social, cultural, and economic relations in the surrounding communities. We have tried to answer these inherently geographic questions throughout the book while investigating different topics that relate to national parks.

We examine the national park system using several important geographic themes: concepts of place and location, spatial interaction, spatial organization, and the concept of cultural landscapes.

GEOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS

Location may be absolute or relative; in the first case, it could refer to the latitude and longitude coordinates of a park feature, such as 44.460552, –110.82807, or to the street address of an urban unit, perhaps the one at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW in Washington, DC. Several survey systems have been used to define park boundaries, and hikers rely on GPS coordinates to locate themselves. In the early years, locations were not always well known, but 150 years of mapping and surveying have usually eliminated these problems. Absolute location can change, as with the two-block move of the historic home that makes up Hamilton Grange National Memorial, an NPS site in St. Nicholas Park, Manhattan, New York City, or Death Valley's famous sliding rocks, known as "sailing stones," which move by themselves.

Relative location refers to a park's location compared to other features: What is the park near? What places does it lie between? The pioneer fort at Pipe Spring, Arizona, was midway between Zion and the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and became a national monument because that location made for a convenient stop for travelers between the larger parks. Relative location is also always changing: a park that was remote in 1900 may be within a big city today. Horseshoe Bend National Military Park in Alabama is located a few miles off Highway 280, once a busy highway for beach-bound northerners. The park catered to those travelers until the construction of faster roads drew them away from the park.

Distance and spatial interaction can be measured in many ways, including accessibility, which shows their relative location or distance to people. Distance is measured either in a straight line ("as the crow flies") or along a road, trail, railroad, or other network using miles or any other units. It can also be measured as the travel time between places (on foot, in a car, on a plane, or some combination). It could be measured as a cost, perhaps in dollars or in calories. Different measures will be appropriate depending on whether you are flying to a park or choosing which trail to take to your favorite peak. If you are using time as a measure of distance, it may be hard to predict and can change depending on the weather, the presence of a "bear jam" stopping traffic, what kind of a road you are on, or whether you are going uphill or downhill. No matter how distance is measured, it is related to the relative cost of movement, which has a profound impact on spatial interaction between people and parks. Some parks are easier for people to get to than others; they are a shorter drive or are located on faster roads or closer to an airport with more (or cheaper) flights. We can talk about the ease of reaching parks as their accessibility; Golden Gate National Recreation Area is in San Francisco, a city of over six million people that is far more accessible than Rainbow Bridge National Monument, which requires an all-day drive from the closest big city, followed by a three-hour boat ride across Lake Powell through the Utah desert. The varying accessibility of parks can be related to visitor numbers: more people tend to show up at those parks that are closer to more people and easier to get to. It is no wonder that Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the most visited national park, located as it is in the southeastern United States.

It has gotten easier to get to parks over time as travel has improved from horse-and-wagon days to cars; we call this space-time convergence or compression. The South Rim of the Grand Canyon was rarely seen before 1882, when a railroad was built across northern Arizona. Then a rough three-day stagecoach ride from towns along the railroad allowed a few hardy travelers to see the canyon from the South Rim. Accommodations were limited in number and quality. In 1901 a railroad was built to within a few feet of the rim, and visitation exploded; the railroad made sure new hotels, restaurants, and other facilities were ready. The automobile and good roads created a new wave of visitors, with more and more facilities required for them. Mission 66 was an effort to keep ahead of this visitation growth.

Today few parks are as remote as the Grand Canyon was before 1882; residents of the Atlantic coast can reach even the most remote Alaskan park today in less time than they could have reached the Grand Canyon in 1881. These Alaskan parks have very low visitation and no development; neither outcome is inevitable and may be a temporary condition. If large numbers of people begin making their way to these parks, the demand for visitor facilities will grow. If new facilities are built, visitation will increase.

The opposite of space-time convergence is space-time divergence. It is less common, but examples can be found in the park system. The National Park of American Samoa is much harder to get to now than before the 1970s when airplanes crossing the Pacific would land at this island territory to refuel. Longer-range airplanes now fly between the United States and Australia without stopping.

In sum, the concept of distance and spatial interaction can explain how different places are connected and the movements of people, goods, or ideas between them. National park units are connected to the rest of the country and the world by well-developed transport networks, allowing the movement of people from all over the world to visit them. Visitors do not arrive from random locations but can be predicted by the concept of distance and spatial interaction.

Spatial organization describes how parks or larger areas are geographically organized or why facilities such as museums, campgrounds, and even roads are located where they are within parks. Geographers frequently refer to regions. These may be formal, as when boundary lines are drawn on a map to indicate a park or county or even natural features such as landforms. Conditions on one side of a boundary line may be quite different from those on the other, a situation with which any park visitor is familiar: once visitors pass the dramatic entrance sign, the road often changes, buildings may disappear, and visitors know they are in a special place. Parks are formal regions, but they are contained within larger formal regions such as counties, states, and congressional districts. Few parks will share the same combination of these three regions.

Regions may be functional when they indicate areas defined by their spatial interaction, such as a large metropolitan region to which workers commute and goods are shipped each day. Parks may be one element in a tourist-dominated regional economy, a small part of an annual animal migration cycle, or a link in a transport system moving big-city residents to and from their weekend recreation lands.

A *cultural landscape* is the combination of the natural world and human activities in an area. It could include settlement patterns, long-lived agricultural practices, architecture, and other human efforts that have created a built environment or shaped the natural one.

Large parks possess cultural landscapes in the form of carefully designed scenic roads and rustic park buildings, while in urban areas a cultural landscape might include architectural styles and even the details of a city's street pattern. Battlefield parks have become the most visible cultural landscapes in the park system, combining carefully manicured landscaping and countless memorials, markers, signs, and plaques. Even when there are no buildings or roads, a cultural landscape may exist, reflecting the meanings we give to a place, the names we bestow on natural features, and the ways people use the land. Cultural landscapes are always open to reinterpretation or disputes.

A related concept is the sense of place, shaped by people's interactions with a location, which vary with each person's experiences and sensitivities. Many park visitors have a strong attachment to the landscape of their favorite park unit. Our sense of place when we are in a park may be difficult to communicate to someone who has not experienced that location. For example, the description of national parks as embodying some of America's central values and experiences may not be understood by people from a different cultural background or with different experiences. A person's negative interactions with people in a national park might give them a feeling that they do not belong there. Places can be part of a social order, as in "knowing one's place."

GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARKS

In addition to our geographic perspective, our book differs from other works on the park system because we examine the full range of the national park system, not just the large nature parks that often receive the greatest attention, such as Yellowstone. Most units in the national park system are not scenic mountains or canyons; instead, they are devoted to battlefields, historical events, or archaeological sites or people, and this focus is reflected in our approach. While each park is unique, all parks share the common imprint of NPS management. We discuss how these units differ from other places, such as national forests administered by the US Forest Service, wildlife refuges overseen by the Fish and Wildlife Service, and wilderness areas found in all these areas. Toward the end of the book we also broaden the scope to examine protected places in other countries and Antarctica and even possibilities for parks on other worlds.