

Teaching With National Parks

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In today's university world, offering a course titled something like “natural resource management,” “environmental history,” or “geography of public lands” doesn't guarantee a high enrollment. But if the magical words “national parks” are included in the title, students will flock to the course. What is it about those words that students find so intriguing? National parks are one of the iconic features of the United States, our country's equivalent of the Parthenon, Versailles, or Machu Picchu. Names like “Yellowstone,” “Yosemite,” and “Grand Canyon” conjure up much of what Americans love about their country, its majestic scenery and natural grandeur. At the same time, at a very personal level, national parks can trigger fond memories of road trips and summer vacations with family and friends.

Once lured into a course by the promise of hearing about these places (and possibly going on exciting field trips!) students will learn that national parks and other protected areas are also places fraught with conflicts and contested histories. Students will dig much deeper into American history, geography, and environmental management through these courses, exploring such things as the conflicts over wolves on public lands, disputes between ranchers and environmentalists over disease-spreading bison, how national parks were linked to railroads and the growth of American corporations, how Indigenous Peoples were expelled from their lands, and how a changing climate is leading to species extinction. Through it all, students will gain a clearer understanding of the varied threats facing these treasured lands

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and how history can be interpreted in different ways and mean different things to different people.

More than 50 universities and colleges across the United States offer some kind of course on national parks and protected areas (see Table 1). These range from elite private universities such as Duke and Rice, to state flagship universities including Colorado State University and the Pennsylvania State University, to private liberal arts colleges such as Gettysburg College, and to

TABLE 1. United States universities and colleges currently or recently offering a course in national parks. For those marked with an asterisk, the course is focused on geology/earth science.

Appalachian State University*	Lane Community College	Spokane Community College*	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill*
California State University-San Bernardino	Michigan State University	Sul Ross State University	University of North Carolina-Greensboro
Carleton College*	Ohio State University*	Temple University*	University of North Texas
Catawba College	Pennsylvania State University*	University of Alabama	University of Oregon*
Colorado State University	Rice University*	University of California (UC Online)	University of Pittsburgh*
DePauw University*	Roanoke College	University of California-Santa Cruz*	University of Southern California
Duke University	Rowan University	University of Florida*	University of Tennessee-Chattanooga*
Florida Atlantic University	Rutgers University	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	University of Texas-San Antonio
Fresno Pacific University	San Francisco State University	University of La Verne	University of Utah*
Gettysburg College	Scripps Institution*	University of Massachusetts-Amherst*	University of Washington
Illinois State University	Sierra College*	University of Michigan*	University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Indiana University	Snow College	University of Montana	US Air Force Academy
Lafayette College*	Southern Utah University*	University of North Alabama*	Western Kentucky University
Western Washington University			

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regional public universities such as California State University-San Bernardino and the University of North Alabama. About half of the national parks courses focus on the geology of the national parks and are found in departments of geology and earth science. The remaining courses are spread across disciplines such as geography, history, environmental studies, and others.

Whatever their approach and discipline, all these courses use national parks and other public lands and protected areas as their focus. National parks and similar lands are excellent entry points for exploring such diverse issues as conservation biology, natural resource management, geology and landforms, tourism and recreation, Indigenous

and settler histories, institutional management, visitor behavior, climate change, the interactions between humans and the environment, and many more.

Several instructors for such courses gathered at the inaugural George Wright Society ParkForum workshop in Missoula, Montana, in October 2025 and presented on their experiences. Three of those paper presentations are collected here, sharing inspiration and pedagogical techniques from three quite different academic institutions: Colorado State University, Gettysburg College, and the US Air Force Academy. Each of these papers narrates the story of a particular national parks class, providing some insight into how these classes are structured and perhaps giving those contemplating teaching such a class some ideas and inspiration. However, we also hope that some of the insights shared here prove useful in other contexts, including public outreach and education efforts administered by federal resource managers. We welcome your feedback and suggestions!

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