# What is the Purpose of the National Parks?
## Teaching the Course "History of America's National Parks"

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**For the past several years I have taught HIST 476: History of America's National Parks.** Created by one of my predecessors at Colorado State University, the class introduces students to the major events that have shaped the national parks over the past 200 years. While it is an elective course, I typically have full, to overfull, enrollment. But unlike many upper-division history courses, the majority of the students in the class are not history majors. I often attract students from natural resources, biological sciences, political science, communication studies, art, engineering, and sociology, to name but a few. And so, I have had to think about how to teach an upper-division history course to primarily non-majors.

At the start of every semester, as students settle into their desks, I walk to the front of the classroom and write across the whiteboard the question, "What is the purpose of the national parks?" Turning to the students, I go around the room asking each for their initial answer to the seemingly simple question. Most reply with some version of preservation or conservation, with a few suggesting recreation, tourism, or even history as the National Park System's mandate. Their answers are not all that surprising. Most enroll in the class because of their passion for the parks and conservation, and because they understand the National Park System as lands set aside explicitly for environmental protection. It is a narrative widely believed by the millions who visit the parks every year. As superintendent of the National Park Service's High Plains Group, Eric Leonard, has explained, members of the public "love what they think we do."[1] Yet, as the students will learn over the coming months, it is not that simple of a story.

Historical thinking, as educational psychologist Sam Wineburg notes, is an unnatural act that "goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think."[2] History is more than just what happened, or merely a list of events and personalities. Rather, it requires thinking empathetically about those who came before us in attempting to reconstruct a past world, often based upon a limited body of evidence. History of America's National Parks gives me the opportunity to expose future land managers, scientists, and park visitors to the complex array of issues and contexts that have shaped the national parks since the early 19th century.

The class is principally structured around learning historical inquiry, in which students engage with historical sources, listen to lectures, and read an array of books in crafting their own answer to the central question of what is, and more importantly, what has been, the purpose of the national parks. Historical inquiry is the basis of the method in which historians observe a historical phenomenon, form a question about its meaning, collect evidence, place it into the context of the thinking of other scholars, and provide as complete an answer as possible. If this sounds a lot like the scientific method, you are right. Like the sciences, history requires a good amount of creativity in order to re-create the past. Our answers will always be imperfect, I tell students, but that is the point.[3] We cannot perfectly re-create the past because we have a limited amount of evidence on which to do so, even on a topic as well chronicled as the national parks.

Historical empathy is more difficult to master, as it requires students to see the world as a historical actor once saw it, and not judge that view by current cultural values but rather come to a deeper understanding of the past. In this manner, empathy is both the placement of the past into its own historical context and an act of imagination, and so takes considerable thoughtful effort by the student.[4] The combination of inquiry and empathy are the basis of thinking historically, both of which I seek teach to my students through exploring the history of America's national parks from their conception in the early 19th through today.

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Throughout the 16-week class, I reiterate that their answer to the question of the parks' purpose can, and

most likely will, be different from mine, but must always be grounded in the evidence. I also remind the students throughout the semester the answer is far from simple. While the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act states that the purpose of the national park and monuments "is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations," each generation has understood the national parks through their own eyes.[5] While often expressed as the "dual mandate," I want students to see how the national park ideal has changed from generation to generation, and how those shifts in meaning shape the park system we have today.

The National Park Service's mandate to preserve its own history makes teaching the history of the park system accessible. The agency's Park History Program website offers countless primary and secondary sources from which students can understand the parks' past.[6] Sprinkled with a few sources I found in my own research, I have students read a wide array of primary documents, from Olmsted report on management of Yosemite of 1865, Bernard DeVoto's 1953 missive "Let's Close the National Parks," a 1957 letter from climber Warren Harding to Yosemite Park Superintendent John Preston, the 1963 Leopold Report, Wallace Stegner's 1983 essay "The Best Idea We Ever Had," and the Gateway National Recreation Area Act of 1972. Students write a brief reflection on each source, which we then discuss in the following class.

Class discussions begin with a student offering a brief overview of the reading, followed by a question focused on a particular aspect of the text. Such questions often launch a discussion about who authored the source, why it was written, and how its author understood the park's purpose in their own time. Placing these primary sources within their historical context offers a more accessible way to analyze their meaning.

One of my favorite discussions always happens after the students read Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.'s "Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865" at the start of the semester. Written by the famed landscape architect on the proposed management of the newly established Yosemite Grant, the report lays out Olmsted's argument that quiet contemplation in the presence of natural wonders like Yosemite Falls and Half Dome could provide restoration and renewal for the war-torn nation.[7] Students immediately see the connection between Olmsted's report and their own modern experiences of national parks, but by placing Olmsted within the context of his own time, they come to understand his argument in a very different light from their own.

I provide this historical context through lectures on a wide range of subjects and themes. For the first third of the course, I follow the conception, creation, and establishment of the national parks from changing views of nature in Antebellum America landscape art, changes in federal land policy, the rise of automobile culture, and the creation of the National Park Service in a roughly chronological order. I then turn to more thematically organized lectures including architecture in the National Park System; the establishment of national monuments, battlefields, the National Trail System, and historic sites; fire management; the controversies surrounding Effigy Mounds National Monument; the role of memory and race at Manzanar National Historic Site and Appomattox Court House National Historical Park; and why not everyone wants a national park in their back yard, to name a few. These lectures not only tell the history of lesser-known national park units, but also demonstrate how management and the role of the National Park Service changed throughout the 20th century.

One of my favorite sets of lectures is on dams. Not only do they allow me to make endless puns, but I can describe how utilitarian ideas clashed with the national park ideal in shaping the broader National Park System. Beginning with the fight over the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park, I show how

**Students study the controversies around serious mismanagement that took place at Effigy Mounds National Monument from 1999–2010. Shown here is Nazekaw Terrace Boardwalk, which was illegally constructed by the park in 2008–2009 without completing the required consultations with the state historic preservation officer nor associated Tribes. Construction was terminated by the National Park Service in 2009, and the boardwalk removed the next year.** NATIONAL PARK SERVICE


LEFT **A view across Hetch Hetchy Valley, early 1900s, from the southwestern end, showing the Tuolumne River flowing through the lower portion of the valley prior to damming. The photo was published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* for January 1908.** ISAIAH WEST TABER • RIGHT **A similar view from 2014 showing the inundation.** BLAKE CARROLL / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the controversy pitted competing visions of Progressive reform against one another. Dam proponents led by Mayor James Phelan argued that supplying San Francisco with a reliable, safe water source represented the highest public good, while John Muir and other park advocates contended that preserving the valley would better serve the nation's broader public interests.[8]

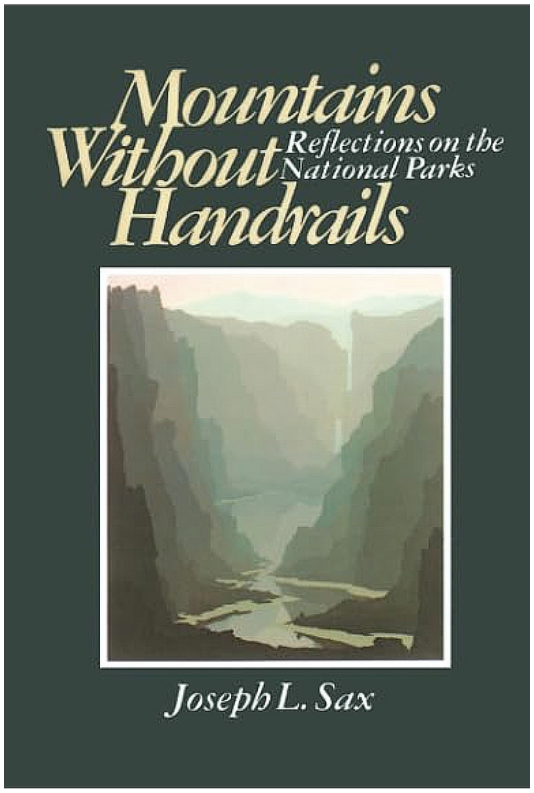
A similar story played out decades later when the Bureau of Reclamation declared its intent to build a reservoir in Dinosaur National Monument's Echo Park. I guide students through the story, explaining both the parallels to the fight over Hetch Hetchy and the role Echo Park played in mid-century American environmental politics, focusing on the West and wilderness.[9] Lastly, I address the removal of the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams in Olympic National Park, and how their removal reflected broader issues surrounding economics, the environment, and Indigenous dispossession within national parks.[10]

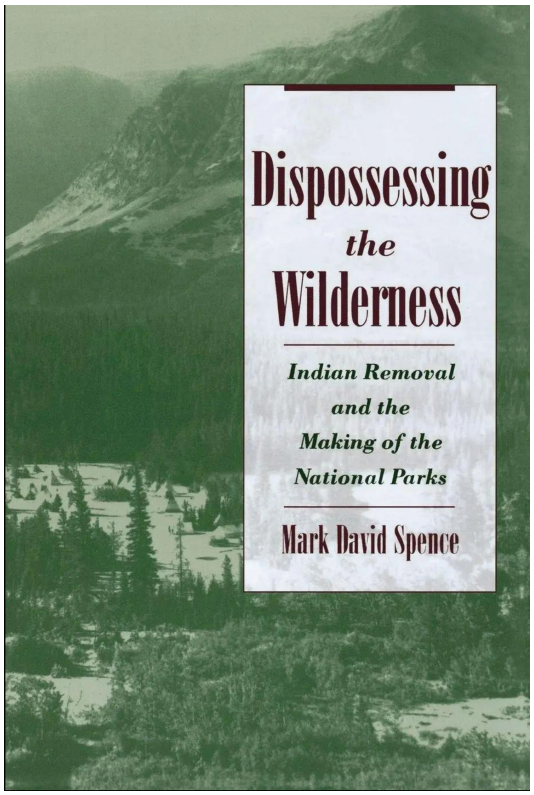
In each lecture, I connect the story of the national parks to broader themes in United States history. For example, in discussing James Watt's efforts to reduce the size of the National Park System, I use the controversy to help students understand how shifting national politics, especially debates over energy independence, government spending, and the role of the federal government, shaped policy decisions and placed the National Park Service at the center of a much broader historical narrative. In this way, I demonstrate how the national parks have always reflected America's history.

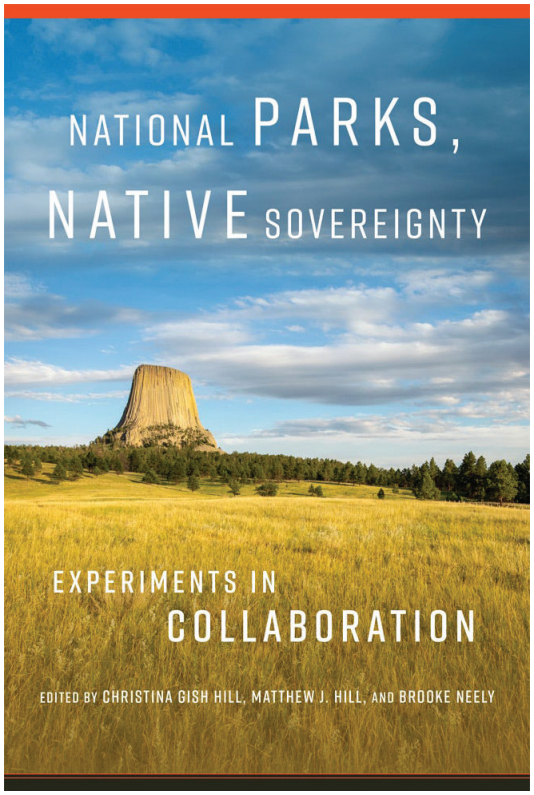
Along with having students reflect on primary sources and listen to lectures, I assign students three books. These have changed somewhat over the years, but has always included Joseph Sax's *Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks*. Published in 1980, the book critiques the National Park Service's management of an ever rapidly expanding system, and argues for a more contemplative experience of the parks emphasizing meaningful engagement with nature over commercialized entertainment.[11] The book acts both as a primary and secondary source for students. Sax's argument came in response to what he saw as the over-commercialization of the national parks in the previous decade—a topic I cover exhaustively in class lectures. But *Mountains Without Handrails* also provides a framework for students to understand the National Park System's history, which they use in writing their final assignment.

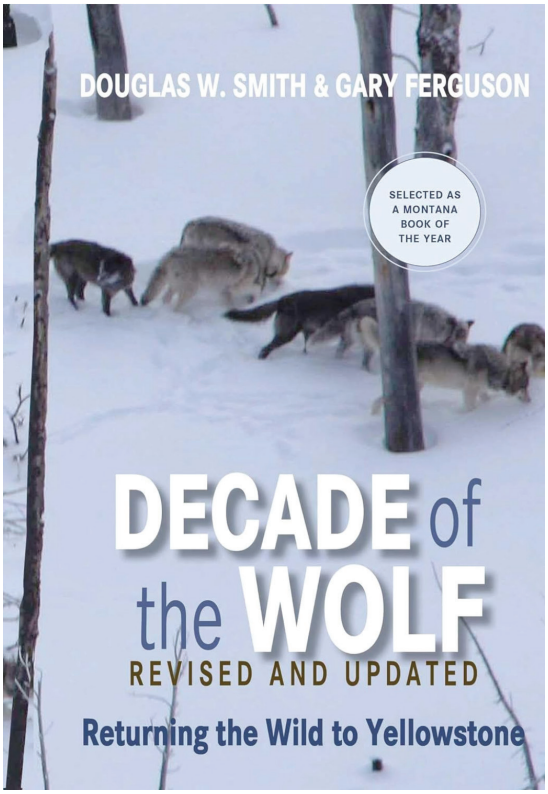
I have assigned two different books on Native peoples' place in relation to the national parks. The first, Mark David Spence's seminal *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks,* introduces students to the removal of Native peoples in Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier National Parks in order to make each park appear as a wilderness.[12] While now foundational in how we think about park units, *Dispossessing the Wilderness* is often the first time many students have been introduced to the idea that parks were a part of the nation's larger removal of Native people as well as the idea of nature being framed as a human-less landscape.

Recently, I have swapped the now 27-year-old *Dispossessing the Wilderness* with the recent anthology *National Parks, Native Sovereignty: Experiments in Collaboration*.[13] While not strictly a history, the anthology brings together essays by scholars and National Park Service staff, along with interviews with retired superintendent Gerard Baker and tribal historic preservation officer Lance Michael Foster, both Native Americans, to help students understand the historical role of Native peoples in the national parks




while also introducing contemporary debates and future possibilities around co-stewardship. In this manner, *National Parks, Native Sovereignty* includes a wider range of voices, including Native voices, in discussing the national parks and their wider purpose.

I end the class with a unit on the reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone National Park. I assign retired National Park Service biologist Doug Smith and journalist Gary Ferguson's *Decade of the Wolf: Returning the Wild to Yellowstone*, which follows the first decade of the program, providing gripping stories of individual wolves and Smith's views on his and the park's role in bringing back the wolf.[14] Students really enjoy the book's storytelling style, and the links between the wolf reintroduction and past efforts in managing wildlife within the National Park System.

There are countless books I could assign, as my sagging bookshelves attest, but these four have provided a wide range of voices on the class's central question, What is the purpose of the national parks? From concerns over commercialism and recreation, to the history of Native peoples, to the introduction of a charismatic, but controversial, predator, each gives students further insight into the complexity of history and how those in the past understood the national parks in a similar but much different way than we do because they lived in a different time and place. This is the foundation of historical empathy: of being able, to best of our ability, to place ourselves into the context of a moment foreign to us in order to understand how previous generations viewed and acted in the world. We do this based upon analyzing evidence from that time and place, placing it into context, and being humblingly aware that we will never know it all.

These, then, are the core lessons of the course. By the end of the semester, students should leave not only with a working knowledge of the historical evolution of the National Park System, but with the confidence and skills to think critically and creatively about complex historical questions. Rather than asking students to read abstract texts on historical methodology, materials that often feel disconnected from practice, the course emphasizes learning history through active engagement. Students analyze primary sources, debate competing interpretations, and connect lectures and readings to broader historical themes. This approach culminates in the final essay, in which students answer the question, What is the purpose of the national parks? Using the documents, lectures, and books explored throughout the course, students construct and defend their own historically grounded arguments.

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Another outcome is exposing future land managers to the history of federal land policy and how the National Park System evolved. Such lessons are invaluable to the few in the classroom who will find themselves working in the National Park Service. They most likely will not have the time to read through the administrative history of whatever unit they will work in, and that is if the unit even has an updated administrative history available. As the authors of the 2011 report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* noted, the agency's weak support for its history workforce—through deficient funding, placing history into silos, narrow and static conceptions of history's scope, and timid interpretation—had imperiled the agency's ability to manage its sites "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."[15] This problem has only worsened in the years since, especially with the recent gutting of federal employees. The class, in a very small way, hopefully counters such deficiencies by introducing to a few students a glimpse into the national parks' past.

The students' final essay asks them to synthesize the themes and lessons of the course by engaging directly with its central question. In a roughly 2,000-word essay, students situate *Decade of the Wolf* within the broader context of the course's assigned primary and secondary readings, as well as course lectures. By placing the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in historical perspective, students must ultimately address the question: what is the fundamental purpose of the National Park System? Most return to their first answer to the question, arguing conservation is the National Park Service's, and by extension the entire system's, fundamental purpose. Others note recreation's central role. Some note that the diversity of national park units, including historic sites, national battlefields, and recreation areas, make answering the question far from easy.

Students finish the class knowing a little something about the national parks, American history, and public land management. More importantly, they leave with a deeper understanding of historical thinking, of how to ask questions of the past, weigh evidence, and recognize that earlier generations experienced and understood national parks in ways both similar to and different from our own. While many will not go on to become historians, most will visit a national park, monument, battlefield, historic site, or recreation area at some point in their lives. When they do, I hope they see each place as a complex historical landscape, one that reflects competing values, evolving ideas about nature, and broader questions of national identity, while also enjoying it as the public good promised by the 1916 Organic Act. I also hope that students who pursue careers in natural resource management bring a historical perspective to their work, even if only by situating present-day decisions within a broader context. Understanding why parks are managed

as they are is essential to determining how best to steward them so that future generations may enjoy them unimpaired. These are my objectives for the course.

And it works. At the beginning of the recent fall semester, I received an email from a former student. She had just visited Manzanar National Historic Site, something we had discussed at length in class, and had also spent time at the Yale Art Gallery's exhibit of post-1800 American landscape artists. She is now pursuing a graduate degree at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego, focusing on the social dimensions of ocean conservation initiatives. But because of the class, she said she now sees her work through a much broader lens. It is the kind of email professors love to get—one that reminds you that teaching can ripple outward, shaping how students engage with the world long after they leave your classroom.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Eric Leonard, "Roundtable on Rethinking History in the National Park Service: Relationality and Inclusion," 65th Annual Conference Western History Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 16, 2025.
2. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 7.
3. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48.
4. Kaya Yilmaz, "Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools," *The History Teacher* Vol. 40, No. 3 (2007), 332.
5. National Park Service Organic Act, ch. 408, 39 Stat. 535 (1916).
6. National Park Service Park History Program, https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1220/index.htm.
7. Rolf Diamant and Ethan Carr, *Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea* (Library of American Landscape History, 2022), 7.
8. Robert Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 66–95.
9. Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 191–215; Mark Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).
10. Jeff Crane, *Finding the River: An Environmental History of the Elwha* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2011).
11. Joseph Sax, *Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980),
12. Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press 1999).
13. Christina Gish Hill, Matthew J. Hill, and Brooke Neely (eds.), *National Parks, Native Sovereignty: Experiments in Collaboration* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024).
14. Douglas W. Smith and Gary Ferguson, *Decade of the Wolf: Returning the Wild to Yellowstone* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2012).
15. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla R. Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen (eds.), *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Bloomington, IN: Organization of American Historians, 2011), 1.