

National Parks and “Mission Essential”: Teaching About Protected Areas at the United States Air Force Academy

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The United States Air Force Academy is one of five federal military academies in the United States and combines the functions of military training with academic education. The Academy is an entirely undergraduate institution, with about 4,000 cadets, who will graduate with a bachelor’s degree in one of over 30 majors. It was the last of the military academies to be founded, dating from 1954, and is located on a large and park-like campus on the outskirts of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

A class on national parks and public lands was taught for the first time (to our knowledge) at the Academy in spring 2025. This article narrates the history of that course and how it was structured to adapt to the unique environment of a military academy. It also highlights some of the distinctive features of teaching at such a place and the course’s role as “mission essential.”

The history of this course, “National Parks and Public Lands,” dates to 2013–2014, when the second author of this paper (Michael Pretes) was on sabbatical leave from his home university in Alabama and spent a year in the Department of Geography at the University of Wyoming in Laramie.

COURSE ORIGINS IN WYOMING AND ALABAMA

When I (Michael Pretes) spent my 2013–2014 sabbatical leave at the University of Wyoming I was given the opportunity to create and teach a new class in the Department of Geography. Given that the first national park, national monument, and national forest were all in that state, it surprised me that no class on national parks had ever (to my knowledge) been taught at the University of Wyoming. I proposed such a class and reached out to the campus community for suggestions and inspiration. There was an overwhelmingly positive response, with many people saying that it was about time that such a course was offered and even volunteering to assist with it.

The course was called “National Parks in Global Context” and enrolled over 25 students from a variety of disciplines. During that semester the course explored

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the origins of national parks in the United States and the spread of the idea across the world, focusing on parks history, management, conservation, recreation, conflicts, and future challenges. Each student prepared three research posters. The first of these was on a topic of their choice, while the second focused on what place they thought should be the next national park in the United States. The third poster compared an American national park with a similar park in another country.

With the enthusiastic support of the University of Wyoming Special Collections Librarian, Tamsen Hert, the students had access to archives and displayed their second and third posters in the lobby of the university library, which gave them campus-wide exposure. Towards the end of the semester students went on a one-day field trip to Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. A university course on national parks had finally arrived in the state that is home to the three “firsts” referenced above: Yellowstone National Park, Devils Tower National Monument, and Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reserve (now split among several national forests)!

When I returned to the University of North Alabama at the conclusion of my sabbatical leave, I replicated

the course there but renamed it “National Parks and Public Lands.” The course content and structure are nearly identical, and the course assignments, including the research posters, are the same. The second and third posters are also displayed for several weeks in our university library and again get campus-wide attention. This course is taught every other year.

CREATING A NATIONAL PARKS COURSE AT THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

When I (Michael Pretes) arrived at the Academy to spend a year (2024–2025) as distinguished visiting professor of geosciences I was also given the opportunity to create and teach a new class. Not surprisingly I chose to teach the “National Parks and Public Lands” course that I had been teaching for ten years and which both suited the parks-rich environment of Colorado and the interest of cadets in outdoor experiences.

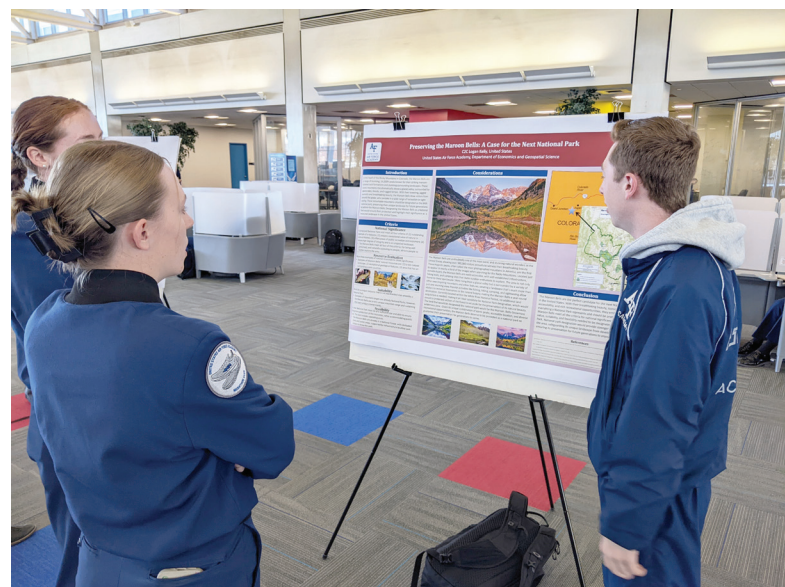
The course was proposed for the spring 2025 semester contingent upon at least six cadets enrolling. It turned out that 52 cadets enrolled! This made it the largest “special topics” course taught at the Academy that year and necessitated a rethinking of course structure to accommodate that many cadets. The solution was to divide the course into two sections of 26 cadets each, and to add a co-instructor who would assist with the teaching of both sections. That second instructor was Lieutenant Colonel Jason Lackey, who holds a PhD in earth and planetary sciences from the University of Hawai’i at Manoa with a focus in geophysics. Given that

my own background is in the more historical, managerial, conservation, and nature-society relations side of national parks studies, adding a co-instructor with these skills enabled us to broaden the focus of the course, allowing it to incorporate geology and geomorphology as well (topics of great interest to the cadets).

The course was publicized across the Academy prior to cadet enrollment, and I secured agreement from several other departments and programs—biology, political science, economics, and management—so that this geosciences course would count as an elective towards their majors. This helped increase cadet enrollment.

At the Academy all instruction is face-to-face (no online courses or online components to courses) and class attendance is mandatory. Cadets are high achievers and seem to enjoy their classes and the challenges of contemporary and controversial topics. For this class we used Randall Wilson’s *America’s Public Lands: From Yellowstone to Smokey Bear and Beyond*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), with cadets reading selections from that book over the course of the semester. The course had five quizzes, of which the four highest scores counted, and the lowest score dropped, covering different aspects of the course. We also required three research posters, the same topics as in the earlier iterations of the class (the first on a park-related topic of their choice, the second on their proposal for the next national park, and the third comparing an American and overseas park). The last two posters were presented and

LEFT **FIGURE 1.** In the McDermott Library of the Air Force Academy, cadets present their posters on where the next national park should be located. MICHAEL PRETES
RIGHT **FIGURE 2.** A cadet presents his proposal for the 64th national park. MICHAEL PRETES



displayed in the McDermott Library, the main Academy library, and remained up for more than a week, drawing a great deal of attention (though not always completely favorable: some of the leadership wondered how national parks topics related to warfighting!).

Course content started with a discussion of attitudes towards nature from Classical times, leading up to the evolution of Romanticism and Transcendentalism, and then on to Preservationism and Conservationism in the United States. We explored the development of early park-like lands such as mediaeval hunting preserves, then covered the history of public lands policy in the United States, including the origins of federal public lands and the development of the Public Lands Survey System (i.e., the township and range system) and disposition of federal lands, including those ultimately used as national forests and national parks. After this we examined the history of the development of national parks in the United States, then looked at the formation

of the National Park Service, and, later, at other public lands and their management agencies including national forests, Bureau of Land Management lands, national wildlife refuges, and others.

Now that cadets had a solid grounding in national parks and public lands, we turned to specific places. We looked at the cases of Yellowstone, Grand Teton, and Rocky Mountain national parks as well as others in the United States. We examined specific issues in selected parks—conflicts over wildlife management, conservation biology, recreation and over-tourism, impacts of climate change, visitor population dynamics, the physical geology of the parks, recent trends towards more urban-adjacent and eastern parks, budgeting and the funding problems of parks, other managerial issues, and the future of national parks and the National Park Service. Cadets also learned about the research method of repeat photography, which they practiced on campus and were to use on their field trip.

FIGURE 3. Cadets practice repeat photography at the Academy in preparation for the Rocky Mountain National Park field trip. MICHAEL PRETES



Finally, we turned to national parks and protected areas in other countries, looking at cases in Europe, southern Africa (see sidebar), and Australia and New Zealand. Cadets found this particularly interesting as most were seniors and planning their “60-Day” travel adventure, something they traditionally do after graduating and commissioning as second lieutenants, starting on the Air Force payroll, but before reporting for duty two months later. Most cadets will use these 60 days to travel domestically (often to national parks) or, especially, internationally, and discussions in the course gave them plenty of ideas for places to travel.

GUEST SPEAKERS AND A FIELD TRIP

We were fortunate to have four guest speakers for the class, each coming from a different viewpoint and background, but with many stories to share. The first was Steven Gordon, associate professor of geosciences at the Air Force Academy, who spoke about his research on the weathering of volcanic rock and landforms in the Hawaiian Islands. Gordon continues to monitor volcanic activity on the Big Island in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park and spoke about how he goes about that research. Our second speaker was our textbook author, Randall Wilson of Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, who gave a virtual presentation about his

VISITING NATIONAL PARKS ON AN AIR FORCE ACADEMY CULTURAL IMMERSION PROGRAM TO SOUTH AFRICA

In addition to the opportunity to teach a national parks class at the US Air Force Academy, I (Michael Pretes) was also able to lead a “Cultural Immersion Program,” or study abroad trip, for Air Force cadets to South Africa in March 2025. Part of this experience focused on national parks in that country, though this study abroad trip was not connected to the national parks course described in the main article.

I traveled with six cadets (the maximum number allowed on such trips) for a one-week (not including travel days) program to the Cape Town region of South Africa. I chose South Africa because I have a university affiliation with Stellenbosch University there as well as a research interest in the country. Though the trip emphasized learning about a different culture to help prepare cadets for leadership experiences, it also included exploring environmental and land management issues. We visited Table Mountain National Park and West Coast National Park, both in the Western Cape province of South Africa.

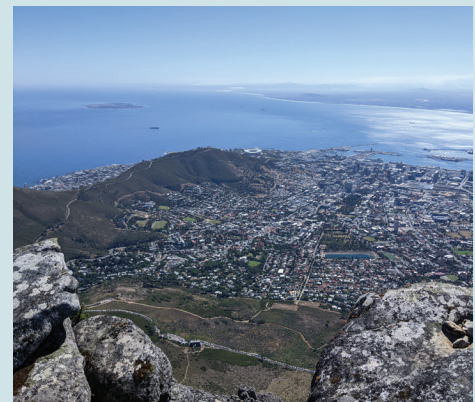
We flew from Colorado Springs straight to Cape Town with only one connection in Atlanta. But cadets are good travelers—a sixteen-hour flight in coach class is nothing to them (they will experience worse in Air Force transport and cargo planes, though they may have the luxury of the pilot's seat!). We made two visits to Table Mountain National Park, which gets heavy visitation as it borders the city of Cape Town and contains the iconic Table Mountain and Cape of Good Hope. Nevertheless, it has areas with few visitors and where the unique South African *fynbos* biome occurs and is protected, along with ostriches, penguins, elands, and rock hyraxes. Cadets learned about this distinctive floristic kingdom, the threats it faces, and its role in South African history and cultural importance.

West Coast National Park, about two hours north of Cape Town, was the second national park we visited. Getting relatively few visitors, this park protects a variety of birds and antelopes as well as caracals and mongooses. Besides observing wildlife, cadets learned about how South African national parks are managed and the similarities and differences compared to national parks in the United States.

This short South African study abroad adventure gave cadets the opportunity to experience a different culture as well as to experience other national parks and learn about efforts to protect the environment in a developing country.

TOP View of Cape Town from Table Mountain National Park.

BOTTOM Hiking to the Seeberg bird hide in West Coast National Park.



new book *A Place Called Yellowstone: The Epic History of the World's First National Park* (Berkeley CA, Counterpoint, 2024). Wilson led us on a journey through the development of Yellowstone National Park and the issues it faces today.

Our third speaker was James Woolsey, former superintendent of Great Basin National Park in Nevada. Woolsey shared his experiences in the National Park Service and in working at a national park (more than one in his case; he worked at many, including Death Valley National Park, where he was acting superintendent). We think his talk gave more than one cadet some ideas about a post-Air Force career! Our fourth speaker took the cadets by surprise as it was none other than Brigadier General Linell Letendre, who was the dean of the faculty (a position equivalent to a university provost) at the Air Force Academy, with a background in law. She shared many stories and photos of her family's adventures in national parks from many years ago to the present, including some stories (with photos!) of close bear encounters in Alaska.

For most cadets, the highlight of the course was the field trip to Rocky Mountain National Park, located only a few hours away from the Academy. Cadets have tightly controlled schedules and do not get much time to leave the base, so many had not been to this national park. The experience started with a 0600 departure from the Academy to the park, where we were welcomed by Superintendent Gary Ingram and his staff. Ingram and his staff gave us an introductory talk about the park, and

then cadets were sworn in as Junior Rangers! After that, cadets went out on a long hike, on snowshoes, to see something of the area and to learn by direct observation and experience, also making use of their repeat photography skills in documenting landscape change, both physical features such as vegetation, and the built environment including buildings and roads. At the end of the day a group of tired cadets (and three faculty) returned to base.

TEACHING ABOUT NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS AT THE AIR FORCE ACADEMY

Military academies both are and are not like universities. In many respects the Air Force Academy functions as a regular university; as noted earlier, there are about 4,000 student-cadets, and over 30 majors to choose from (many in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines). Departments are housed within divisions of a faculty (like a university college), and faculty teach courses, conduct research, and perform service obligations. Cadets also engage in research, and the Academy provides funding for equipment, field work, and conference travel. The Academy also has National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I teams that compete nationwide. Most cadets participate in a varsity or club sport and are members of various campus clubs. Cadet life centers around attending classes, studying, extracurricular activities such as sports and clubs, eating, sleeping, and of course military training—the one thing that distinguishes the Academy from a regular university.

LEFT **FIGURE 4.** Rocky Mountain National Park superintendent Gary Ingram and his staff welcome cadets to the park. MICHAEL PRETES

RIGHT **FIGURE 5.** Cadets look at some of the exhibits in Rocky Mountain National Park's Beaver Meadows Visitor Center. MICHAEL PRETES





FIGURE 6. Air Force cadets are inducted as junior rangers, swearing to protect the park! MICHAEL PRETES

Cadet life is intensely structured: they have set times for getting up in the morning and going to bed at night, set times for eating meals (at a mess hall with limited food options), and set times for classes and military training. They live, study, and train on the Academy base, with very limited opportunities to receive permission for traveling off base. In this way the Academy differs greatly from a regular university. Given this structure, cadets have very little free time to explore national parks and other public lands.

It will come as no surprise to the reader that at a federal institution such as the Academy there is a lot of paperwork, far more than at a regular university (and there is plenty there!) and with multiple levels of approval necessary for seemingly minor activities. Academy classes are permitted only one off-campus activity or field trip, so despite the wealth of opportunities to explore public lands in the mountains and plains surrounding the Academy, we were restricted to just the Rocky Mountain National Park field trip. On the other hand, that field trip was fully funded by the Academy—covering a bus with driver, fuel, meals (pack lunches),

snowshoe rental, and insurance—at no cost to the cadets. The clout of the Air Force Academy meant that Rocky Mountain National Park rolled out its big guns, with the park superintendent, the deputy superintendent, chief ranger, and multiple other staff there to welcome us upon arrival and give us a briefing about the park, something that groups from other universities might not get.

The cadets themselves, given their required military and fitness training, are in excellent physical condition, and had no issues with hiking, snowshoeing, and doing other outdoor activities in snow. Cadets also have excellent situational awareness; they are eager for challenges but know their limits and know what to do in an emergency situation should that arise. We did not have to worry about them wandering off and getting lost, or being unable to complete a hike, or to complain about field conditions or weather (though we had excellent weather on the field trip). They know how to (and do) follow directions and are on time for everything. If you have taught students at other universities, you know that this is not always the case!

The course educates young cadets about what it means to be an American, about what exactly one is defending when one defends America.

NATIONAL PARKS AND “MISSION ESSENTIAL”

Cadets enjoyed the course and their evaluations were extremely positive. It was something different from the usual course topics (especially as this was the first time a national parks course was taught at the Air Force Academy), it related to outdoor recreation and adventure as well as science and the environment, it laid the groundwork for personal travels, and course content related to almost every major, whether geosciences, history, biology, management, economics, political science, civil engineering, astronomy, law, or just about anything. The course enhanced the visibility of the geosciences program at the Academy. But was the course “mission essential”?

“Mission essential” is a phrase commonly heard at the Academy. It means, Is this course or activity related to the core mission of the Air Force Academy?—namely,

to prepare warfighters and leaders of character. On the one hand, the course aims at more pacific goals than the Department of Defense’s focus on warfighting and lethality. On the other hand, the course educates young cadets about what it means to be an American, about what exactly one is defending when one defends America, about chapters in American history and its territorial expansion and management of its lands and possessions, about how to sustain American heritage and patrimony, and about how to manage a vast network of different kinds of lands and places. The course inspired them to explore, protect, and sustain. There is a story told about Winston Churchill, which, though apocryphal, is very in keeping with his character. The story goes that during World War II, when London was being heavily bombed, a woman asked Churchill why art museums and symphony concerts were still open and taking place, given that Britain was fighting a war. Churchill turned to her and replied, “Why, what do you think we’re fighting for?” Something very similar is the purpose of this national parks class at the United States Air Force Academy: teaching cadets about what they are fighting for and building leaders of character.

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