

National Park Service

ANNCR: The National Park Service – Today on Congressional Moment

National parks have been called "the best idea America ever had." But the idea of preserving land ran contrary to the prevailing national mood during the 19th century, which saw nature as something to be subdued and conquered.

The first national park, Yellowstone, was reserved by Congress in 1872, and 5 other parks were added over the next 40 years. In addition to offering environmental protection, the parks also stimulated tourism and economic expansion in the West.

By 1916, the Interior Department was responsible for 14 national parks and 21 national monuments. With meager funding, they had to use army personnel and civilians to tend to many parks and monuments.

A wealthy and concerned Chicago businessman named Stephen T. Mather had joined the Department of Interior in 1915 and used his private funds to publicize the plight of the national parks.

Congress responded, and on August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson approved legislation that created the National Park Service.

The many roles of the Park Service have expanded over the years, as has the number of areas under its jurisdiction.

In 1980 Congress added 47 million acres of unspoiled wilderness in Alaska, more than doubling the size of the Park System. Controversy still remains about whether or not they should be used to drill for oil, and how best to allow public access to the parks without destroying their integrity.

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