

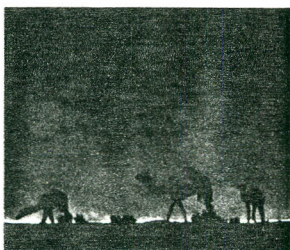
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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After the Storm

By Thomas Y. Canby
Photographs by Steve McCurry



Spilled oil sullies the Persian Gulf and shrouds of smoke from blazing wells turn day to night in the aftermath of the gulf war. Cleanup has begun, but battle scars will mark the environment for decades.

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✓ "The Best Idea America Ever Had"

By Paul C. Pritchard
Photographs by Cary Wolinsky



The U. S. National Park Service—75 years old this month—guards 357 significant sites. Dedicated men and women tend threatened wildlife and injured hikers, spot poachers, and reclaim forest, while facing an unending tidal wave of visitors.

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A Comeback for Nuclear Power?

By Peter Miller
Photographs by Roger H. Ressmeyer

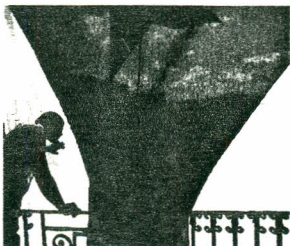


As demand rises for more electricity—and for more nuclear safeguards—the nuclear industry unveils designs for reactors said to be safer and more economical.

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Cuba at a Crossroads

By Peter T. White
Photographs by José Azel

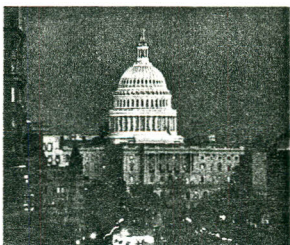


A last bastion of Marxism-Leninism, Cuba skirts economic collapse, but Caribbean rhythms of life continue to pulse on this island of tropical beauty.

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L'Enfant's Washington

By Alice J. Hall
Photographs by Sisse Brimberg



Two hundred years ago a French architect envisioned a gracious new capital for the infant United States. His plan left an indelible imprint on Washington, D. C.

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COVER: Resembling creatures from another world, environmentalists in protective suits examine the tar-encrusted ground amid raging oil fires in Kuwait. Photograph by Steve McCurry.

By PAUL C. PRITCHARD
Photographs by CARY WOLINSKY STOCK, BOSTON

“**T**O CONSERVE THE SCENERY and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same . . . unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” With a stroke of his pen, President Woodrow Wilson thus signed the National Park Service Act 75 years ago this month.

Thirty-six national parks were brought under a single federal agency by this law. Former British ambassador to the U. S. James Bryce called them “the best idea America ever had.” In the words of J. Horace McFarland, one of the visionaries who helped establish our National Park Service in 1916, “It is the one thing we have that has not been imported.” Other nations had preserved gardens and open spaces—but mainly for the privileged classes. Not so for the U. S. parks, which would be preserved for all.

The National Park System has grown to 357 sites covering 80 million acres, including national parks and monuments, wild and scenic rivers, seashores, historic sites, scenic trails, and battlefields. In addition to natural wonders, such as Yellowstone and Grand Canyon, the Park Service preserves pieces of our history and culture—British cannon surrendered at Yorktown, the derringer that killed Abraham Lincoln, Carl Sandburg’s typewriter, even a type of short-legged Hereford cattle bred by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The service is acutely aware that its lands are among the last natural refuges for America’s plant and animal diversity. More and more, it is being called upon to provide scarce habitat for thousands of species and to use the parks as laboratories for research in a world of dwindling wild places. The service’s 12,000 employees include those investigating why rare saguaro cactuses are dying in the Southwest, seeking how to protect a shrinking population of sea turtles in the U. S. Virgin Islands, exploring how to get clean water to Florida’s Everglades in the right volume, and managing a bison herd in Yellowstone that wanders outside the park.

(Continued on page 42)

“THE BEST IDEA
AMERICA
EVER HAD”



These concerns reflect a growing sensitivity and sophistication in our understanding of the natural world. In Yellowstone, for example, where bleachers were once erected at the garbage dumps so tourists could watch grizzly bears feeding, the dumps have been closed, the bleachers have been razed, and thousands of dollars have been spent to install bear-proof garbage cans. The bears have returned to their normal diet, and they are healthier.

As our understanding of nature has changed, so has the role of national parks. Most Americans probably still think of picture postcard vistas. But, in fact, most parks today focus on history or culture, and they often are within easy reach of cities and suburbs. And many of today's parks reflect our nation's evolving values and demographic mix.

In San Antonio, Texas, the Park Service is working with the Roman Catholic Church to preserve old missions, representing the heritage of Spanish colonial days. In California, Asian Americans have asked for a national park at Manzanar recognizing the internment during World War II of American citizens of Japanese descent. In Massachusetts, restored 19th-century textile mills at the Lowell National Historical Park sit in a city of 103,000, the site of America's first planned industrial town.

Our park system has been called the "largest university in the world." The prime purpose of the system, says Yale University historian Robin Winks, "is to educate people, with the 357 park units as branch campuses." But this great university faces a number of challenges stemming from overcrowding, understaffing, and budget constraints. In the 1970s our parklands were doubled with the creation of many urban parks and the addition of more than 40 million acres of Alaska lands. But there has been no comparable increase in staff—this during a time when more people than ever, more than 250 million a year, are visiting parks. The number of visitors is expected to grow, with estimates that the parks' popularity will push the annual visitation figure to half a billion by the year 2010.

Today there are parks, such as Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah, where millions of feet walk over the same ground during the course of a year. Visitors seeking solitude are often disappointed to find that some parks are beset by the same crowding and noise that afflict cities.

Even the chief of the Park Service is not immune. "On my first visit to Yosemite two years ago," recalls National Park Service Director James M. Ridenour, "it was so noisy outside I had trouble sleeping. It's quieter in my home not far from the nation's capital than it was in the park that night. We hope that we don't get to the point where we'll have to close parks down, but at Yosemite and some other parks we may have to put up a chain across the road and say, 'Sorry, nobody gets in until somebody comes out.'"

While the flood of visitors rises, the federal budget for parks has failed to keep pace, leading to the deterioration of many parks, which suffer under a backlog of maintenance, renovation, and repair that could cost more than two billion dollars. To neglect these projects threatens not only the preservation of our heritage but also public safety.

Not long ago a building at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Atlanta collapsed. In Philadelphia the roof of Independence Hall leaked for a number of years. At Grand Canyon an abandoned uranium dig emits low-level radiation only a few steps from a visitors path.

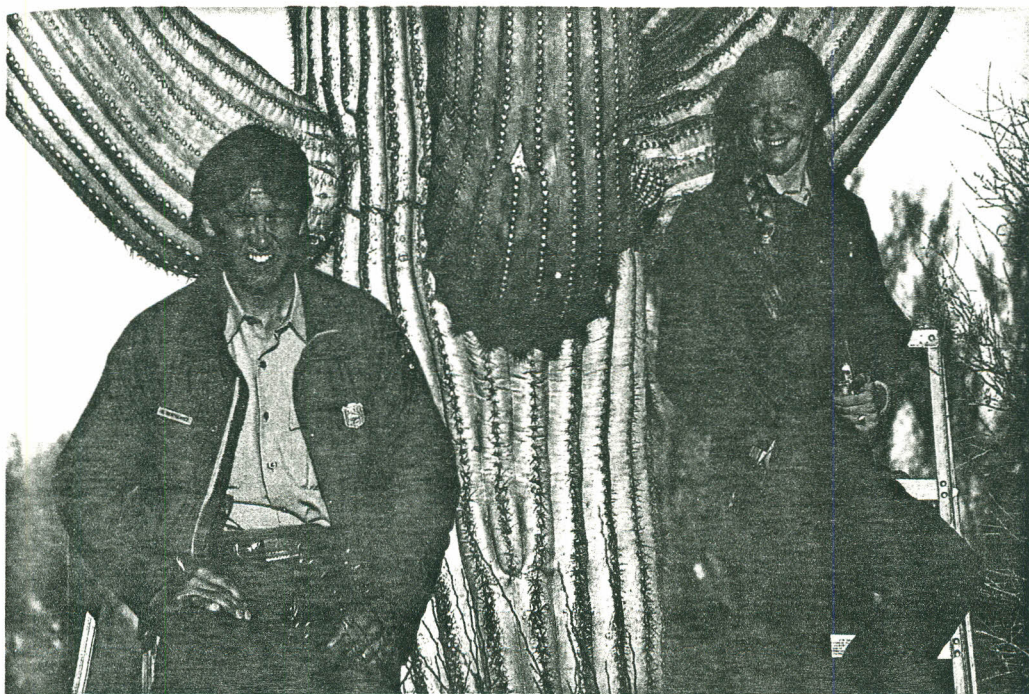
Under this stress, park rangers could become an endangered species, victims of too little pay and too much work. Surveys within the Park Service indicate that while many dedicated individuals continue to perform outstanding feats of public service, the general level of morale is at an all-time low. It's understandable. Many rangers who joined the service to be close to nature must increasingly deal with the problems of drug enforcement, vandalism, and pollution.

Rangers' average starting salary is only \$15,000. Lacking adequate housing, some have been forced to sleep in their cars; others subsist on food stamps. "The rangers of the National Park Service can't live on sunsets," says Representative Bruce Vento of Minnesota, chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands. "We're eroding the professional nature of the job."

A ready source of income for the parks could come from concessionaires—private businesses



PAUL C. PRITCHARD is president of the National Parks and Conservation Association, a nonprofit citizens organization dedicated to defending, promoting, and improving our country's National Park System. Photographer CARY WOLINSKY covered the Kremlin and its treasures for the January 1990 issue.



PATTE & MIKE DANISIEWICZ

SAGUARO NATIONAL MONUMENT

Shoulder to shoulder with a saguaro cactus, ranger Mike Danisiewicz and his wife, Patte, a Park Service biological technician, examine the 25-footer to assess the effects of pollution on native plants. In the following pages meet some of the Park Service's 12,000 employees—all in their way as much a natural resource as any rock arch or geyser.

licensed to sell food and hotel space in parks. They operate as monopolies and make more than 500 million dollars a year but return only a small portion of that profit to the federal government. The money disappears into a general fund for use in other programs. But even if Congress mandated that a larger portion of concessionaires' annual earnings be returned directly to the Park Service, this alone would barely reduce the financial strain.

Another approach for stretching federal park dollars has already begun, with the Park Service joining with state and local governments to create jointly operated parks, such as the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park in Texas and the Lowell National Historical Park.

The federal government relies on partnerships with private land conservancies. In the old days the government might have acquired wild lands and unique habitats. These days private conservation groups buy lands and manage them as preserves or hold them in trust until they can be transferred to the Park Service. Concerned citizens have also established the National Park Trust, which is raising money to buy the two million acres of private lands within our national parks. The idea is to hold these lands safe from development. Businesses also contribute to the trust, gaining goodwill in the process.

Such partnerships will carry the Park Service into its next 75 years, according to James Ridenour. "Without the active involvement of state and local governments and the private sector, we could not begin to preserve—let alone manage—the land needed to meet the outdoor recreation and open-space needs of our population. The natural resources of the parks are under increased stress . . . the present and future health of the system depends, to a great extent, on the level of public support we can achieve."

This anniversary has rekindled concern for the well-being of the National Park Service. Americans care deeply about their natural and cultural heritage, and they admire the dedicated individuals who keep our parks open. Without such people, some of whom you will meet in these pages, there could be no national parks.