

Center for State of the Parks



THE STATE OF OUR NATIONAL PARKS: A RESOURCES INDEX

As America's National Park System approaches its 100-year anniversary in 2016, our national parks—sometimes called "America's best idea"—face unprecedented challenges. Chronic under-funding is hampering park protection and diminishing our national parks' role in educating new generations of Americans. Air pollution is obscuring park landscapes, and climate change is disrupting wildlife habitat. Non-native, invasive species are killing and displacing native plants, and our sprawling civilization is crowding some park boundaries.

As challenging as the future seems, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), the independent, nonprofit voice for the national parks, is undaunted in its work to protect and enhance America's parks. Meeting this goal requires accurate information on the conditions of natural and cultural resources in the national parks.

To meet this need, NPCA's Center for State of the Parks provides a steady flow of up-to-date information on resource conditions in the National Park System. Among the building blocks of this expanding information base are the Center's rigorous assessments of cultural and natural resource conditions in a representative sample of 160 individual national parks. Researchers use scientifically designed, peer-reviewed methodologies to numerically score



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resource conditions in each examined park. This information contributes to a comprehensive understanding of resource conditions in the National Park System. This is the first-ever scientifically based strategy to evaluate resource conditions in the National Park System as a whole.

The State of Our National Parks: A Resources Index describes the results of the first 54 of the Center's resource assessments. This report presents the findings through a new tool called the National Parks Resource Index, a statistical representation of how natural and cultural resources in our national parks are faring. As America's National Park System approaches its second century of existence and the Center for State of the Parks gathers more information on resource conditions in the national

parks, NPCA will periodically present the National Parks Resource Index as a national monitoring and evaluation system for evaluating changes in resource conditions.

THREATS

In this first iteration of the National Parks Resource Index, our national parks did not score well. On a scale of 0 to 100, the index rates the National Park System's natural resources (elements such as wildlife, ecosystem health, and air and water quality) at 70 points and cultural resources (including historic buildings, cultural landscapes, and museums) at only 61 points. These scores indicate that the challenges to our national parks are serious, but surmountable:

- Chronic under-funding is compromising the ability of the National Park Service to preserve and protect irreplaceable elements of our nation's natural and cultural



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heritage. At Virgin Islands National Park, hundreds of structures from the plantation era of the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as 19th-century military structures, are crumbling to rubble, often before they can be identified and documented. At Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in Wisconsin, travel among the park's 21 islands is constrained by rising fuel costs, while staffing levels (two permanent natural resources staff members and one cultural resources staff member) are woefully insufficient to care for the park's diverse and geographically widespread resources.

- Increases in greenhouse gases and atmospheric deposition of pollutants—including nitrogen, sulfur, and mercury—are damaging resources the national parks were intended to protect. At Joshua Tree National Park in California, pollutants from fossil fuel combustion that are deposited on the landscape are facilitating the growth of non-native grasses, which are in turn exacerbating wildfires that damage or kill the park's namesake Joshua trees.
- Development on lands adjacent to national parks and associated demands for water are compromising park wildlife and vegetation and leading to species loss, noise pollution, degradation of scenic views, and the loss of dark, starry nights. At Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, research has shown that the movement of large carnivores such as mountain lions, bobcats, and coyotes is constrained by highways running through the park.
- Failure to recognize the value of our national parks' cultural resources and fund their protection is eroding the story of America's people, democracy, and cultural history. For

example, Mojave National Preserve in California has museum and archival collections that include prehistoric pottery, American Indian artifacts, and historical maps and photographs, but the park has never had any staff dedicated to the care of these artifacts and none of the items have been cataloged or assessed. Although the National Park Service received funding to invest in natural resources protection through the Natural Resources Challenge in 1999, no parallel funding exists to protect cultural resources within our national parks.

ACTIONS

The 100th birthday of our National Park System is less than eight years away—now is the time for action. It is imperative that Congress, the next administration, and the American public address the challenges to our national parks and preserve them for future generations.

- Increase annual operational funding for national parks. Launch a Cultural Resource Challenge to direct specific funds and professional expertise toward the preservation of historic and cultural treasures in national parks nationwide.
- Congress and the next administration must enforce the clean air laws now on the books and put the brakes on dirty coal-fired power plants and other polluters that are now making national park air unhealthy for people and wildlife and exacerbating the harmful effects of global warming.
- We can still protect our national parks from the worst damages of global warming if we reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help parks adapt to changes that are already occurring. If we act now, the next generation of Americans will be able to enjoy the natural and

historical treasures protected by our national parks; if we wait too long, more and more of our shared heritage will be lost.

- In order to protect and preserve our national parks, the National Park Service must have adequate funding to buy private land within the parks as it comes on the market.

ABOUT NPCA AND THE CENTER FOR STATE OF THE PARKS

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, its members, and partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

NPCA initiated the State of the Parks® program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policymakers, the public, and the National Park Service improve resource conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

CONTACT US

For a copy of NPCA's full report *The State of Our National Parks: A Resources Index*, to get copies of reports on individual national parks, or for more information about the Center for State of the Parks, visit www.npca.org/stateoftheparks or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president for the Center for State of the Parks, at jnations@npca.org.

For media inquiries, please contact Andrea Keller-Helsel, Senior Director of Media Relations, at 202.454.3332. To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of our national parks, visit www.npca.org/take_action.