

Portfolio Note: This article was written for the *Matador Network* as a standalone essay making the case for more parks in the most populated parts of the country. This article required a fair amount of statistical research (park location, visitation information, and the sheer number of monuments and structures covered by the National Park Service which aren't actually parks at all).

The Case for More National Parks in Middle and Eastern America

The first national park I visited was [Alaska's Kenai Fjords National Park](#). If you've never been, the park itself backs up against the Gulf of Alaska, where craggy arms of stone and glacier create a series of lagoons, inlets, and bays. The park is accessible by land, but water access is easier. Departing from Seward, AK, just east of the park, several touring companies have based their entire business around this water-based access. In addition to watching killer whales breach and puffins crash hardily into the water, I spied vast glaciers and thick, green forests — wild, untamed lands open for human exploration, but closed to extended habitation.

As the tiny boat wound its way along a glacial cliff, I found myself thinking, “Why don't we have one of these parks back home?”

I grew up in an environment diametrically opposed to the vast glacial shelf and taiga wilderness that I saw by boat. Gulf Shores, Alabama has none of that. Instead, you'll experience sandy, white beaches and a series of wetlands in and around Mobile Bay and Bon Secour that are unique to the coastal plain. But what you won't see, [for 500 miles in any direction](#) is a national park.

This isn't to say that the wetlands aren't actively protected or managed. Nor does that statement indicate a lack of presence by the National Park Service (NPS), which manages the [Gulf Island National Seashore](#) at Fort Pickens. But, if you're like me, when you think of a national park, you're not thinking of a small section of seashore or a strip of islands off the Dauphin Island coast. You're thinking of Yellowstone, Denali, or Yosemite: protected places where wilderness has the right of way and human are only visitors.

The East / West Park Ratio

Few of these places exist in the Eastern and Midwestern regions of the US, the most visited of which is the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), with [10.4 million recreational visits in 2015](#). By contrast, Grand Canyon National Park (GRCA) managed a total of [5.5 million visits in 2015](#), a distant second by any metric — unless you're looking at a map. Put geographically, GRCA is located around a cluster of competitive recreational areas, banked by Zion and Bryce Canyon a few hours north, Death Valley and Joshua Tree to the west, and Saguaro and Mesa Verde to the East. All of these are easily accessible to regional visitors and may compete for attention from repeat visitors. Additionally, considering [US population density](#), there are far fewer locals in the Western US. By those standards, 10.4 million visitors to one of the largest national parks in the east seems low.

During my mid-twenties, I relocated to Knoxville, TN — one of the gateway towns in the Eastern Tennessee foothills — and spent a few years there. GRSM is about an hour outside of town via 441S, and I became a frequent visitor to Cades Cove, Clingman's Dome, Tremont, and other attractions in the park. I was new to the area, and as I connected with locals in the hiking community, the response I received when I brought it up was a mix of jaded exposure and frustration at the funneling effect that the park tended to have.

While the park attracted visitors and spurred a tourism economy in Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Sevierville, the constant uptick in traffic stunted local visitors, especially during the fall peak season. What was new to me was old news to the local community, and many preferred instead to travel north to Big South Fork and Daniel Boone National Forest to explore less crowded areas in the region. After a few years, I followed suit — but given the opportunity, I'd have explored another national park in a heartbeat before looking at state-level recreation.

Without a doubt, the call of the Smokies is far and wide. Visitors from all over the US visit GRSM in the fall, but I believe that pull is finite. Growing up on the Alabama coast, I could never picture myself driving ten hours to the Tennessee mountains. At the time, that was as much of a pipe dream as traveling abroad.

What Makes a National Park?

Considering the distribution statistics, and the viability for state and local governments to create, manage, and maintain their own parks, what makes a National Park different from the rest?

According to the [nomenclature of the park system](#), a national park “contains a variety of resources and encompasses large land or water areas to help provide adequate protection of the resources.”

That’s it.

The National Park Service handles other places, too, of course. From the same list, you’ll see definitions for national monuments, preserves and reserves, lakeshores, seashores, rivers, trails, scenic byways, and battlefield sites. However, at its most basic and fundamental level, a national park is a resource-rich area located on a largish chunk of land or water.

But how large?

Not very large, in fact. The smallest national park under NPS management is [Hot Springs National Park](#), located in Hot Springs, AR, at 5,550 gross acres, or roughly 8.7 square miles. Compared to Alaska’s [Wrangell-St. Elias National Park](#), which ranges in at about [13 million acres](#), Hot Springs is a microscopic footprint on the size and breadth of the nation’s park coverage.

And yet, there aren’t more national parks around, despite the benefits to communities via [employment](#) and economic tourism. According to the National Parks Conservation Association, [the US National Park System generates about four dollars in value for every dollar invested in its annual budget](#). Additionally, the national park system is heavily underfunded, with nearly a [\\$12 billion maintenance backlog](#) as it reaches its centennial.

More Important Back East

If you're looking at a map, most parks managed by the NPS are located at the western fringes of the Mississippi River watershed, where the Great Plains give way to the Rockies. As much as 47% of western land is owned by the federal government, but [you'll notice from this map](#), that the lion's share goes to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Only a small portion is dedicated to the National Park Service.

Given how small national parks can be, where they are located is just as important. If parks are designed to protect land- and water-based resources, why not strategically center new parks around populous areas where those resources may be unique or endangered and allow the tourism economy to thrive?

Why isn't there a "Great Plains National Park", a "Gulf Coast National Park", or a "Bayou National Park"? Even [Adirondack Park](#) in Upstate New York, which easily fits the definition of a national park by way of size and resource protection, isn't a national park. The argument could easily be made that significant, geological landscapes across the contiguous United States are ignored by the NPS (which has its hands full managing monuments, and scenic byways, in addition to its parks), placing them at risk to commercial and industrial exploitation.

America's Best Idea?

It's been said that the national parks are [America's best idea](#), but the truth is pretty clear cut:

- National parks are widely varied and, though technically available to anyone, often require extensive travel for more than half the national population.
- Though the Department of the Interior [operates on a \\$13.3 billion discretionary annual budget](#) (not including mandatory upkeep spend), [the National Park Service only gets about \\$3 billion of that](#) while the park system is suffering with a \$12 billion backlog in maintenance and repair.
- The NPS is a proven economic positive, employing 20,000 and impacting local areas where the parks exist by driving tourism while fighting to protect and conserve America's scenic wilderness.

Certainly, the national parks have a lot to offer by way of culture and recreation, but is it enough? The maintenance backlog points to an underfunded organization in desperate need of restructuring and repair. At the same time, those local communities that can reap the benefits of keeping that underfunded organization around.

Additionally, the NPS looks wholly different today than it did [when it was originally founded](#). The transfer of historical monuments and sites in the 1930s, as well as the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 have shuffled more responsibilities under the NPS umbrella. Considering that many of these sites don't have an entry fee, expecting them to operate at a loss isn't a stretch.

As a counterpoint, consider that the BLM — also housed under the Department of the Interior and operating on about half the NPS annual budget — actively leases its land and resources to generate income. While the NPS may charge admissions fees in some parks, the lands are preserved and those fees aren't enough to cover operating expenses.

What's Next?

Without a doubt, the NPS is hurting for cash, yet [a 2015 Gallup poll](#) shows 73% public satisfaction with how the government currently handles the service. In addition, American opinion about park expansion has shifted drastically from the 60s, when the public wanted more land set aside. As far back as 2001, polls show a public desire for the NPS to focus more on protecting existing upgrading existing land.

As an adult who has spent a fair amount of time sifting through budget reports and surfing through arguments for and against the NPS, I can see why public opinion to expand the park system might be low. After all, a \$12 billion backlog isn't a great place to start if you want to expand. At the same time, as a kid growing up in Alabama, having a national park — one of America's great treasures — right on my doorstep would've gone a long way in helping me to fully appreciate the outdoors.

And I'm not the only one.

American demographics are changing. In 2008 - 2009, a survey of national park visitors found that [78% of park visitors were non-Hispanic white](#), which may indicate a diversity problem when compared to the national demographic makeup. Couple that with the idea that today's average visitor to the park [is nearing retirement age](#), and that the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the country is on its way to [becoming a majority-minority nation](#), projecting a tipping point in 2044. It's easy to see a bleak horizon for national park visitation and upkeep if a younger generation can't be persuaded to visit and partake in what NPS has to offer.

So what do you do?

You can't pick Yosemite up and move it to Central Park, but maybe christening additional national parks in unique, more accessible areas could encourage new visitors. From the perspective of brand recognition, it's much easier for me to care about something when I experience what it has to offer firsthand. But if the closest national park is 500 miles away and I'm never going to get there, then the NPS and its mission are worth less to me on a fundamental level because I have no personal stake in it.

That's the sad truth, and it could be what ultimately kills our national parks.