

 NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC

# ENDURING TREASURES

National Parks of the World





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Since 1872, when Yellowstone became America's—and the world's—first national park, the idea of protecting fragile and beautiful wildernesses has taken root all over the globe. Today, visitors can explore national parks on every continent except Antarctica, from Europe's Mercantour, a comparatively small and easily accessible Alpine preserve, to the vast 13.2 million acres of Wrangell-St. Elias in Alaska, an unspoiled wilderness boasting 9 of the 16 highest peaks in North America.

These are just two of the parks showcased in *Enduring Treasures*, a colorful, beautifully illustrated celebration of some of the world's finest natural wonders. You'll experience the hauntingly timeless power of Aboriginal art in Kakadu, the largest and wildest of Australia's national parks; you'll float downriver through flurries of parrots and macaws amid the amazing biodiversity of Peru's Manu National Park; you'll marvel at the big cats, elephants, rhinos, and other incredible wildlife in Kruger National Park, South Africa's oldest and largest. And in the Jordanian desert, you'll walk the ancient lanes of Petra, a city carved into the sandstone cliffs of Jordan's Jebel al Khubtha by Bedouin tribespeople some 2,000 years ago.

Highlighted by more than a hundred stunning photographs, the engaging, informative text begins with a moving personal introduction by Paul C. Pritchard, founder and head of the National Park Trust. In the following six chapters, a major park on every continent except Antarctica is explored, the writers vividly evoking the local people, flora, and fauna of these special places. And every chapter ends with a description of other important national parks on the continent—each park an enduring treasure that makes the Earth a more compelling and beautiful place.

COVER: *Giraffes in East Africa wander freely between the protected lands of Serengeti National Park and the adjacent Masai Mara Reserve.*

Manoj Shah/stone

# Introduction

*Paul C. Pritchard*

I'm not sure when my first "awesome" experience occurred in a park. In my childhood, awe came in small packages. Finding my first snakeskin in the local park by our house may have been it. The snake seemed awesome—as long as I was tall. My older brother and sister told me that it was from a giant poisonous python that lived in the park. I think I wanted to believe that as much as they did, but even then I knew that pythons were unheard of in West Virginia.

Parks have been the mortar in my life, bringing together my childhood, my career, my travels, my family experiences, my very self-image. Today, after decades with the National Park Service and then as the founder and head of the National Park Trust, I look back at having helped double America's national park system, at having advised the Haida peoples of Canada on how to save their home islands as parks, and at having counseled numerous nations and park advocacy groups from Ireland to China. National Park Service employees talk of being paid in sunsets. My annuity will be in having saved sunsets.

Years ago a foreign ambassador called national parks "America's greatest invention." Yellowstone, established in 1872, was the world's first national park. While there had been protected landscapes for royalty, nobility, and



*Hikers in Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park make camp among the peaks of the Chugach Mountains. With 13.2 million acres, Wrangell ranks as the country's largest park.*

the social elite through the ages, ours were the first parks for all the people, born of our democratic principles. Today we have more than 375 national park units in America, but equally important, the national park concept has become one of our finest exports. Some 120 nations have adopted the national park model in some manner or fashion, and the world park movement continues to grow, paralleling the democratization of more and more nations throughout the world.

When I suggested this book to the staff at the National Geographic Society, we all realized how difficult it would be to select representative parks from all the continents. With more than a thousand different units in the world's national park systems, the challenge of finding the few superlative



parks for this book was frustrating. Our goal was not to create a global catalog of national parks but to give some indication of their rich diversity—the range of landscapes they encompass, from marshes to mountains, from tundra to seashores; the cultural heritages they protect; and the amazing diversity of plant and animal life they harbor.

We also wanted to tell some of the stories behind the founding and development of these precious places of our collective biosphere. Ironically, less developed nations with low population densities often find it easier to identify and set aside natural areas “untrammeled by the footprint of man.” Some of these countries, like Costa Rica, claim to have met the goal proposed by the World Conservation Union (WCU) to dedicate 10 percent of their domain to national parks—far more than the 4 percent in the United States. In older nations with high population densities, such as those in Europe, it’s harder to find pristine, untrammeled areas, and private lands are often included within park boundaries. But size and ownership are less important than the intent to protect the land, and its historical and natural heritage.

Hoping to provide a global forum to ensure that heritage, the WCU holds periodic conclaves for the world park movement. At one of these gatherings, in Germany, a prominent German businessman asked me to bring together European and North American park experts to advise his government. We convened in the Bayerischer Wald National Park in Bavaria, where two particular problems were presented to us. The first was the profusion of deer that was overwhelming the park’s dwindling vegetation. The superintendent told us that the animals had to be penned up each winter and fed like livestock. The deer had no other home. Ironically, they moved freely through what was then the Iron Curtain. The park was their only refuge. How many should be saved, we were asked. A hard question to answer.

But it was the exhibits of dying forests in the park’s interpretation center that mesmerized us. In understated narration, a harrowing scientific explanation of the effects of acid rain on the park was presented. In the forests themselves we saw areas where the bark hung from dead trees afflicted by a sort of leprosy borne on the air from outside the park. We left feeling that

acid rain was our common enemy. But it took a political event—the fall of the Berlin Wall—to slow the effects of acid rain, as nations reclaimed their traditional lands, their souls. Maybe those haunting forest scenes throughout central Europe had been a call to action.

On another occasion, I took a group of experts to visit China's national parks. The government of China had asked us to examine the impact that rising waters from the Three Gorges Dam would have on several existing and potential national parks. We were taken on the Yangtze—China's Long River—traveling through the dam construction site, then upriver, occasionally making forays by motorized or poled skiffs into side tributaries. We saw a seemingly never ending series of scenic wonders: Towering rock faces, massive streams gushing out of mountain walls, ancient towns now abandoned—all would soon be gone as part of the price to harness the river's might for the future of the nation.

That has long been the critical dilemma for a world growing in population and shrinking in resources: How to juggle the needs of humans against the preservation of the natural world and the cultural legacies of the past. Increasingly, organizations like UNESCO have turned their attention to this problem, identifying International Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage sites in countries throughout the globe. At the same time, governments are recognizing the scientific value of parklands, especially as places to find new medicines and monitor the condition of the Earth's rapidly changing climate. For quite a while now, national parks have served as the planet's "canaries in the cage"; if the parks are healthy, so then is the Earth.

But sadly, neither national park health nor status is inviolate. National parks, even in this country, can lose their designation—and the protection that goes with it. I have a favorite national park spot, a place where I like to sit and stare into the Grand Canyon and listen to a solitary canyon wren as it glides over that immense chasm. Every time I am privileged to sit there, I wonder: If the Grand Canyon had not been preserved as a national park, would that special spot on the Earth still be there for me? And will it be there for the generations still to come?



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