

NAME

National Parks System_NoAsk.mp3

DATE

July 12, 2022

DURATION

31m 4s

4 SPEAKERS

Hannah McCarthy

Nick Capodice

Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

Will Shafroth

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:01] Hannah McCarthy

In the beginning there was Yellowstone and it was good. I mean, good, you know, but kind of neglected. The kind of neglected that inspired one 1877 visitor to the park to remark that though the formations around the Yellowstone geysers appeared delicate, they were, in fact so solid that a, quote, hatchet is often necessary to obtain a choice piece for your cabinet.

[00:00:32] Nick Capodice

Wait, you can't do that. That's not allowed.

[00:00:35] Hannah McCarthy

No, that's not allowed. But see, it's a little tricky when you've got 3472 square miles of park and one guy in charge of it all.

[00:00:45] Nick Capodice

One guy all alone, no help.

[00:00:59] Hannah McCarthy

One guy, a single superintendent under the Department of the Interior with no help and no pay. Eventually, Congress figured out that you can't just call something a protected park without the money to protect it. And the answer is simple.

[00:01:17] Nick Capodice

Create the National Park Service.

[00:01:19] Hannah McCarthy

No, no, no, no. Send in the troops.

[00:01:25] Nick Capodice

Like the military, the federal troops.

[00:01:27] Hannah McCarthy

Yes, the military. Our first park rangers, in essence, August 18th, 1886, Captain Moses Harris rides into Yellowstone with Troop M of the US Cavalry. And it's not just Yellowstone that needs protecting. By 1890, you've got Sequoia National Park, Kings Canyon, National Park, Yosemite National Park. And by the way, many of these cavalymen were what were known as Buffalo Soldiers. That's a subject that deserves a whole episode. These were all black American regiments who did everything from build trails to kick out poachers to stop private livestock from grazing in parks. Now, after a while, the Department of the Interior started hiring civilian scouts and rangers as well. But still, there was no official National Park Service.

[00:02:15] Nick Capodice

So at what point do we actually have a park service? Like when does the military march out and Ranger Smith march in to chase Yogi Bear around?

[00:02:25] Hannah McCarthy

Great question. This is Civics 101. I'm Hannah McCarthy.

[00:02:29] Nick Capodice

And I'm Nick Capodice.

[00:02:30] Hannah McCarthy

And today we're taking a walk in the National Park Service.

[00:02:36] Nick Capodice

And a quick note to listeners. We recently released an episode about our first national park, Yellowstone. You should give a listen in the podcast feed. But back to today, NPS, the National Park Service.

[00:02:47] Hannah McCarthy

So how did we go from rough riding cavalry to, like you said, Nick, Ranger Smith and Yogi Bear, which, by the way, is a reference to a popular cartoon from the Sixties featuring a meddlesome bear who steals picnic baskets in Jellystone Park and the put upon Ranger who is trying to stop him. Ranger Smith, by the way, is actually former military U.S. Army. Who knew? So before we can get to the beginning of the park rangers who, you know, today, a little someone named Teddy Roosevelt has to come in.

[00:03:17] Nick Capodice

We need leaders of inspired idealism, leaders to who are granted great visions, who dream greatly and strive to make their dreams come true. You need, like, synonymous with the idea of national parks.

[00:03:29] Hannah McCarthy

He did create five of them. That's true. He doubled the park system. The park system did not actually exist as an official agency at that point. Also, super importantly, Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act of 1906, which empowered presidents, including him, of course, to designate national monuments, basically to federally protect all kinds of historic lands and structures and things of scientific interest.

[00:03:56] Nick Capodice

So a national monument isn't like a statue, per se?

[00:04:00] Hannah McCarthy

No, no. Sometimes they have statues. But the primary difference between a national monument and a national park is the historical, cultural, scientific significance thing and the fact that a president can just make them without Congress. Hmm. Also, the land already has to be owned by the federal government, so the president can't add to the blue. Say, Hey, Nick, your backyard is fascinating. We're making it a monument.

[00:04:25] Nick Capodice

All right. Got it.

[00:04:26] Hannah McCarthy

The military does indeed march out eventually, 30 years after troops first arrived in Yellowstone, the National Park Service arrives. That is 1916, courtesy of President Woodrow Wilson. And 100 some odd years later, you're talking 423 national park sites across 85 million acres of US states and territories staffed by 20,000 people.

[00:04:56] Nick Capodice

Well, maybe I've grown cynical over the past few years, but there's something strange about having tens of thousands of federal employees whose sole job is to handle beautiful or historical land for people to visit. It seems weirdly romantic for a federal project.

[00:05:14] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, I agree. This idea of, like, let's not mess with this place too much is not exactly an American tradition. Right? So let's figure out how this odd duck works.

[00:05:25] Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

When folks think about the National Park Service. Those are the folks that actually you see in the green uniforms when you go to the national parks. A lot of times that's what people think about. But the national park system is so much more than that.

[00:05:41] Hannah McCarthy

This is Kirsten Talken-Spaulding. She's deputy regional director of the National Park Service Northeast Region.

[00:05:48] Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

So with over 400 individual units of the system, there are, gosh, 150 or so related sites. That means they're not necessarily units, but we work with them directly.

[00:06:02] Hannah McCarthy

Wait, units? Yeah, it's kind of a funny term and it's because these places take so many different forms, which we'll get to later.

[00:06:11] Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

There are a ton of assistance programs that the National Park Service does. The National Park Service administers a number of programs that are particularly geared towards the natural and cultural history.

[00:06:25] Hannah McCarthy

And Kirsten, like so many who work for the National Park Service, has been with and all over the system for a long time.

[00:06:32] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

I've had the opportunity to serve all across the nation as far west as Haleakala on Maui, starting to brand new national park units, one Mojave National Preserve in California and most recently at Fort Monroe National Monument, again here in Virginia, mentioned the fellowship have the opportunity to serve on the Hill with the United States Senate, working with them for a year on the language that actually creates the bills.

[00:07:02] Hannah McCarthy

The Bevin Neto Fellowship, by the way, is a two year program for National Park Service employees to learn how Congress works and the role that Congress plays for the NPS.

[00:07:11] Nick Capodice

So Kirsten actually got to see how the sausage of her own federal agency got made.

[00:07:16] Hannah McCarthy

Yes. And just as a quick aside, you know how we used to refer to this podcast as Schoolhouse Rock for adults?

[00:07:21] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

Some folks are familiar with Schoolhouse Rock, and perhaps you're familiar with a little cartoon of I'm just a bill. That is the training video for folks coming into the fellowship.

[00:07:35] Nick Capodice

I hope they decide. To report on me favorably. Otherwise I may die. Die? Yeah, die in committee. Oh, but it looks like they actually watch it.

[00:07:45] Hannah McCarthy

They actually watch it. So here is how the legislation that governs this enormous system happens.

[00:07:55] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

It's an interesting thing. Have you ever been in a game of telephone before?

[00:08:00] Nick Capodice

Telephone tickets even play telephone anymore? I don't know. Well, you're like, park my car by the library, and it gets whispered around the room in the last person's like, Put my eggplant the fry, daddy.

[00:08:10] Hannah McCarthy

It's actually a fun game.

[00:08:12] Nick Capodice

Yeah, that is a fun game, man. I'll give you that.

[00:08:15] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

Writing bills can be a lot like that, where the language that's intended isn't what ends up on the paper.

[00:08:22] Hannah McCarthy

One of Kirsten's jobs was to make sure that at the end of that game of legislative telephone, whatever the bill was actually made sense.

[00:08:30] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

What I was able to do was to read the language that was provided and say, okay, well, when I read it like this, my understanding of how it would be implemented in the national park system is that and then the person could go, Oh, that's exactly what I meant. And then we would move merrily on. Or they would go, Oh man, that is not what I meant at all. And so they would ask for some refinements and we'd work collaboratively to make sure that that congressional members intent behind the bill, that language was reflected in the bill itself.

[00:09:03] Nick Capodice

But what kind of legislation is still happening nowadays? Is Congress creating new national parks?

[00:09:08] Hannah McCarthy

Sometimes I found out that Congress snuck New River Gorge in West Virginia into the COVID 19 relief bill in 2020. Sometimes they expand a park's borders, sometimes they change a name. That's an especially useful tool when a site has a racist or derogatory name, which is, believe it or not, not all that uncommon. Sometimes they authorize a new park or unit. They can also decommission a park which doesn't necessarily make a park go away. The government just divests it and it goes to a state or town. For example, Nick, the second ever National Park, Mackinac Island in Lake Huron, was decommissioned in 1895 and then became Michigan's first state park.

[00:09:50] Nick Capodice

Hmm. And as I learned at the beginning of the episode, when you make something a national park, you can't just casually entrust it to one unpaid employee. You've got to give it resources. When you're looking at 85 million acres, 20,000 employees, how much money does Congress budget for the National Park System?

[00:10:11] Will Shafroth

Congress appropriates about three and a half billion dollars to support the National Park Service. That is primarily to support the 22,000 full and part seasonal employees that work there and all the operating costs associated with each of those park units as well as the overall administration and management of the system.

[00:10:28] Hannah McCarthy

This is Will Paffrath. He's the CEO of the National Parks Foundation, which Nick Get This is a nonprofit that Congress established to raise money for the National Park Service.

[00:10:42] Nick Capodice

I had no idea that was even a thing. Hannah like the Department of Homeland Security doesn't have a nonprofit organization funding their body scanners. How is that a thing?

[00:10:52] Hannah McCarthy

I don't know. It just is it's a thing. The federal operating budget for the parks doesn't cover everything the parks do. So this foundation was established to help cover the gaps.

[00:11:04] Will Shafroth

The idea was first developed in the early sixties as a result of an undertaking that actually President Eisenhower initiated called the Outdoor Recreation Review Commission. And looking at all of our public lands and figure out how do we make them better? How do we manage the diversity of needs on there for recreation, for conservation? And so there was a proposal to create a nonprofit organization, the first of its kind to support public lands in this country. And the National Park Foundation was ultimately established in 1967 to be the official charitable partner for the national parks.

[00:11:39] Nick Capodice

All right. So what is the National Parks Foundation actually doing?

[00:11:43] Hannah McCarthy

They do what we public radio people do all the time, Nick. They ask for money and then they give that money to the National Park Service and they do other things too.

[00:11:52] Will Shafroth

What we fund is really the over and above that, that the Park Service really doesn't get covered through the federal budget process. And so we serve in a way as a land trust to support the national park. So we step in and we will help often partner with other organizations to acquire a piece of property and then turn it over to the National Park Service so it becomes part of the federal estate. The great example of that was at Martin Luther King's National Historic Park in Atlanta, where the King family, you know, desired to basically sell the birth and life home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Coretta Scott King and really sell them through us to the National Park Service. So we stepped in with the resource that. Natural Resources took us a while to negotiate the transaction because of a lot of complicated things around it. But we did that with a full permission and support of the National Park Service.

[00:12:45] Nick Capodice

I had never considered the fact that the national parks properties have to be negotiated over or bought.

[00:12:52] Hannah McCarthy

Well, think about it. It's giant swathes of real estate, often beautiful and historically significant real estate. Now, obviously, there are parks like Yellowstone that were just designated and taken, but these days there are millions of acres of private land that the park system wants to acquire that need to be paid for.

[00:13:14] Nick Capodice

Until the National Parks Foundation is like the benefactor who swoops in and saves the day.

[00:13:18] Hannah McCarthy

It's not quite as romantic as all that. Even with the help from the National Parks Foundation, even with their portion of the federal budget, which, by the way, comes from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as of 2021, there was billions of dollars worth of land that the NPS wanted to acquire and protect, and the money just wasn't there.

[00:13:38] Nick Capodice

So basically it's not as simple as Congress saying, Hey, that's pretty, or, Hey, that's important, let's make it a park.

[00:13:43] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, stuff costs money.

[00:13:45] Nick Capodice

So what is the federal budget actually do for the Park Service?

[00:13:48] Hannah McCarthy

I think will SHAPIRO sum this up pretty well when he talked about what he raises money for?

[00:13:55] Will Shafroth

We are not going to be effective at raising money from individuals, families, foundations or corporations to pay for road maintenance or repair of the water system or a new septic system at some remote park or roof repairs or a new HVAC equipment. We've done that a little bit, but, you know, basically those kind of things just feel like the federal responsibility, right? That's what the Park Service is supposed to be doing. So so we have to define not only what the priorities are, but be honest with them and say these are the things of your long list. Here are the ten things that we think that we're going to be really good at raising money for. And if we if you sent us off on a kind of a fool's errand of trying to, you know, raise money to repair the potholes, we're not going to come back with very much money.

[00:14:39] Nick Capodice

In other words, the foundation leaves the quotidian, everyday stuff to the federal government and raises money for flashy stuff like a piece of the Florida Everglades.

[00:14:48] Hannah McCarthy

It's just not a very sexy cell to be like, Hey, donors, Gettysburg needs a new septic system.

[00:14:54] Nick Capodice

Well, hold on for a second, actually, because Gettysburg is a battlefield. We could do this all day. Like, how is Gettysburg a national park? See, this is the thing I'm trying to wrap my head around. Hanna at the park system is not just enormous, spectacular natural landscapes. It's also battlefields like Gettysburg and Martin Luther King Jr's home. Right.

[00:15:14] Hannah McCarthy

And the Ford Theater and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Fire Island National Seashore and the Statue of Liberty. By the way, we mentioned those national monuments, the things that presidents get to make. Some national monuments are also under the national park system like Stonewall National Monument in Manhattan, for example, Nick, the first ever national monument dedicated to LGBTQ rights and history that was both designated by Barack Obama and put under the NPS so far.

[00:15:47] Nick Capodice

Hannah The national park system is much more patchwork and varied than I expected. You've got different types of land, different types of funding sources. There's like so many different places in so many different purposes. Who runs the whole thing?

[00:16:01] Hannah McCarthy

There's a Senate confirmed director of the National Park Service, as well as three deputy directors to keep this sprawling network functioning. Kirsten has a pretty apropos way of describing the structure.

[00:16:11] Kirsten Talken-Spaulling

I often think about the service like a large tree. There's all these different branches. We've got a law enforcement branch and we've got naturalists and we've got scientists and we've got maintenance employees. These are all different branches. And then we've got the administration that's like the roots of the tree. You don't always see them, but they're bringing on all kinds of resources that really allow that that organism to thrive.

[00:16:41] Hannah McCarthy

So what does that tree actually doing? We'll figure out what the national park system is about today after a short break.

[00:16:47] Nick Capodice

But before we do, just a quick reminder that we, too, rely on donations.

[00:16:52] Hannah McCarthy

That's a good pivot.

[00:16:52] Nick Capodice

Thank you. If you're feeling charitable, please consider heading over to [Civics101podcast.org](https://civics101podcast.org) to make a contribution. And in the meantime, we'll keep cultivating the park of civic engagement. Thanks.

[00:17:09] Hannah McCarthy

We're back. You're listening to Civics 101 and we're talking about the national park system. Now, before the break, we talked about the fact that the NPS acquires and then manages important land when they can afford it. But I want to give you a closer look.

[00:17:22] Kirsten Talken-Spaulling

So when Congress authorizes a national park, they authorize it, often with an exact boundary like this is in and that's out of the park.

[00:17:32] Hannah McCarthy

This is Kirsten Talken-Spaulling, a longtime NPS employee.

[00:17:36] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

Now, it doesn't mean that there's federal ownership of all of that land within the boundary. So we have an authorized boundary of the park, but then we have the federal lands that are part of inside that authorized boundary. So let's say Farmer Joe is inside the authorized park boundary. You don't want to be a farmer anymore. His kids don't want to be farmers anymore. He wants to sell his land. He can sell to a developer and he could have multiple houses or whatever developed on that land if it's within the authorized boundary of the national park. We will engage with that person that has what we call a willing seller. We will engage with the willing seller and say, Listen, this land is important to us and we'll share with him the reasons why it's important. It may be within the view shed of a cultural landscape that's important to telling the stories of the park. It may have specific resources on that land.

[00:18:46] Nick Capodice

Okay. So just to clarify, there are people who actually live inside national parks.

[00:18:51] Hannah McCarthy

There are, for example, somewhat controversially, someone not too long ago built a luxury home on a private parcel in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, which, while we're here, Nick, is a national park that I discovered by accident while I was on a road trip. And it's like gobsmacking. It's beautiful. But anyway, the point is, these pieces of land, these parcels are called in holdings, and often the government tries to buy them or just hopes that the landowners don't eat them.

[00:19:20] Nick Capodice

Well, speaking of buying land of the federal government, deciding something ought to be a park for whatever reason, like what makes something park worthy.

[00:19:29] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

For a long time, I think that there was a myopic view of what it means to be worthy, to be preserved. It's a story that we should tell that glorifies us as a nation. And I think over the years, we've come to understand that to be inclusive means to recognize that we haven't always gotten it right. It also means that we go back and we try and reconcile and rectify some of the issues that we've had in the past.

[00:19:59] Nick Capodice

Having been here at the table across from you recording the Yellowstone episode, Hannah, one such issue that comes to mind is that most of this land was the home and birthright of tribal nations across the country.

[00:20:12] Hannah McCarthy

Kirsten and I talked about this at length. She took Acadia National Park in Maine as an example, where parks ecologists are finally asking the original stewards of the land how to best preserve it.

[00:20:24] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

So like the Mi'kmaq, the Penobscot, the Passamaquoddy, the indigenous folks that have been on the lands for hundreds and thousands of years, in some cases when Acadia was created, it severed that natural relationship with the indigenous peoples of the land. When you create a park, you create opportunities. And in the past sometimes it feels like we've also diminished opportunities. And I think when we when we've had that chance to really broaden out where we are and understanding what a national park can be, not just a place that we talk about past practices, but we actually encourage them to continue. Today, the sweetgrass traditions that were done by the Mi'kmaq, the Penobscot, the Passamaquoddy. They did this natural resource study.

[00:21:25] Hannah McCarthy

A quick history lesson here. For the better part of the past hundred years, tribal citizens were prohibited from gathering sweetgrass in Acadia, which was both a vital cultural and ecological process. Even when the Wabanaki were permitted to reinstate this practice, it was under tight restrictions by the NPS and this natural resource study that was aimed at understanding the impact of gathering sweetgrass. It ended up revealing how much better the Wabanaki understood sweetgrass than the botanists who were studying it.

[00:21:57] Kirsten Talken-Spauling

So vitally important when we think about climate change and the impacts that potentially could be had on our national parks, especially in the coastal lands. They came to. Find out that it actually enhances the plant itself. Working with the tribes from that area, we can understand more deeply what it means to be connected to the land and do a better job of managing the land, not just what we think should be done, but understanding the hundreds and sometimes thousands of years of knowledge that some indigenous peoples can bring as well.

[00:22:38] Hannah McCarthy

I want to be clear here that there is also a nationwide indigenous led movement to put Indigenous land back in Indigenous hands. It's called the Land Back Movement and in other countries Indigenous managed land proves to be just as if not more biodiverse than preserved lands managed by governments. Now currently the National Park Service has around 80 official tribal relationships, as well as four co-management agreements, which are specific legal arrangements that look different depending on the park and the tribe. Chuck F Sams, the current director of the National Park Service and by the way, the Park Service's first ever director, who is also a tribal citizen, has been clear that he wants to create more collaborative and co management arrangements with tribes across the country.

[00:23:26] Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

Certainly the director has an interest to ensure that we're doing our part, not just to collaborate and cooperate with our tribal nations, but that we work with them in a really structured way. And I think that our agreements are part of the way that we do that. These agreements aren't just about like the science, but it even comes down to how do we manage from a maintenance standpoint. You know, if we know that we've got ground nesting birds, we don't mow that time of the year. So we have mowing plans that ensure that we assist with the populations of some of our species that are unique to the areas we think about the development and planning related to climate change. That's got a lot to do with our connection or understanding with our tribal nations and working with them directly as well.

[00:24:18] Nick Capodice

You know, Hannah, Kirsten mentioned earlier that part of the goal here is to reconcile and rectify, to acknowledge that the things that our government chose to preserve and the way it chose to preserve it was often about glorifying a country that has plenty of condemnable history. There are beautiful and important places that can at the same time represent American shame and disgrace. So I guess my question is, is the National Park Service building that truth into the parks experience today?

[00:24:52] Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

National parks can be the tip of the spear when it comes to being able to have difficult conversations. So at Fort Monroe National Monument, at that space, that's where the, quote, contraband decision was made. And it was a pivotal turning point in the in the Civil War where those folks that had been enslaved. Self emancipated and they were now considered contraband of war and were not returned to enslavement. That changed a lot for the Civil War. Well, what does that now mean? How do we have that conversation about equity? How do we have that conversation about enslavement? How do we have the conversation about the ripple effects and the ongoing impact that the history that is told and understood at Fort Monroe National Monument. What better place to have that conversation right here in the heart of the south, where there was the well, say the capital of the Confederacy was in Virginia. And here is this union fort. This union controlled fort in the middle of the capital of the Confederacy. What a great place to talk about what freedom means. So the value of a national park is not just imbued in the economics that it brings to the area, but in our ability to have a civil society that allows us to have these conversations, to understand where we have done well, where we have done wrong, and how we can be better as a nation into the future.

[00:26:42] Hannah McCarthy

Kirsten told me about one of the newest additions to the National Park System, dedicated in March of 2020 to the Amaechi National Historical Site. It is also known as the Granada Relocation Center, where more than 10,000 Japanese-Americans were interned during World War Two. Now, the ostensible goal here, according to the government officials who have been talking about it, is to preserve a site reflective of an abhorrent period in American history and to teach visitors what we as a nation did to our own citizens. And that happened in large part because of a high school teacher who'd been working with his students for 25 years to preserve the site. President Biden signing a bill this afternoon designated Amaechi as the nation's newest national park. The former Japanese-American internment camp is located in southeastern Colorado and Grenada and near Lamar.

[00:27:34] Nick Capodice

It occurs to me that the park system is kind of like a living archive. It can set a place aside at the federal level that serves as proof of something having happened or something happening right now. Or sure, something being beautiful or scientifically interesting. Its artifacts and art.

[00:27:57] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, I spoke about this with both Kirsten and Will Shaffer, both from the Parks Foundation, and both saw that aspect as an opportunity to skirt politicization. Will talked about, for example, the fact that Glacier National Park will serve as a testament to climate change simply by melting away.

[00:28:15] Will Shafroth

We don't expect there to be glaciers in by 2040, you know, and so there are things that that we can help in a very safe context that is apolitical and a judgmental and just say, here's what's going on. It's also what we can do. And around a whole different set of issues around racial justice and equity that the parks really provide a place to tell the truth, to tell the truth about our nation's history and the long journey that we've taken to get to where we are and frankly, just how much further we still have to go. In a lot of ways, they just are just kind of telling the truth.

[00:28:53] Hannah McCarthy

Of course, for something to get to that point, it has to go through the political process. It has to be presented as worthy of the Park Service, worthy of federal money. I come back again to that well-trodden line. The National Park Service is America's best idea. And I kind of think it's more like the National Park Service reflects American ethos. The changes to the system are, in part a result of citizens and organizations saying, Hey, this is important, don't look away. This is America. Whether you like it or not, you better put it in the archive before we forget.

[00:29:31] Kirsten Talken-Spaulding

Over 400 units. There's a reason why there are so many. You can't tell the nation story at just a handful of national parks. You've got to have all of those voices, all of those stories, those dissonant times, those joyful times. You've got to have all of that together to really make an incredible symphony. And that's part of what our national park system does for the nation.

[00:30:12] Hannah McCarthy

This episode was produced by me, Hannah McCarthy with help from Nick Capodice. Christina Phillips is our senior producer. Our staff includes Jacqui Fulton. Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer. Music In this episode by Nul Tiel Records, Evan Schaefer, Kesha, Walt Adams, Site of Wonders, Dusty Decks, HoliznaRAPS and Margareta. If you liked this episode, please consider writing a review. It tells us how we're doing. It tells us you're listening. We actually care about that. Thanks for everything. Civics 101 is a production of NHPR New Hampshire Public Radio.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



Automated transcription by Sonix
www.sonix.ai