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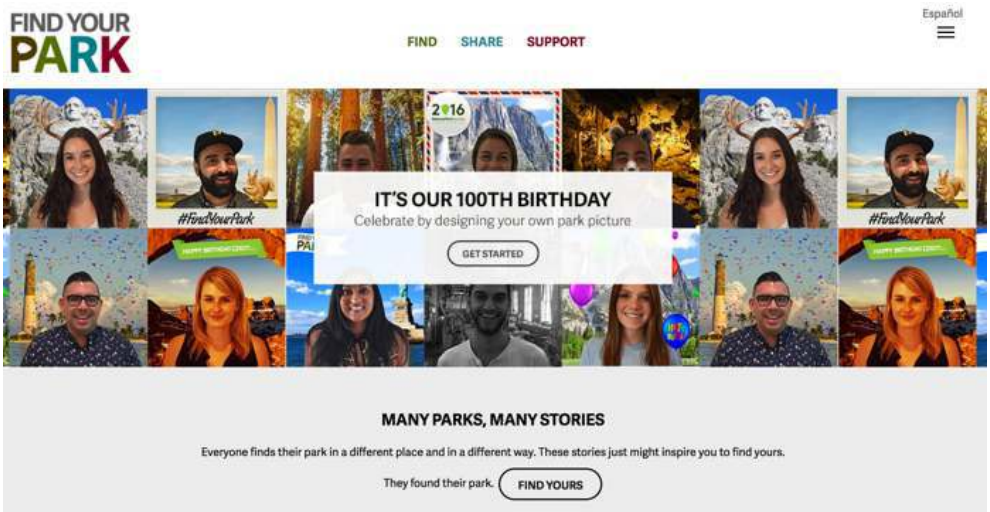
“For the benefit and enjoyment of the people”: from wilderness icons to National Geographic’s bear’s-eye views on the occasion of the National Park Service's 100th anniversary

Chiara Salari

1 On August 25, 2016 the National Park Service celebrated a hundred years of managing and protecting the United States National Park System, which is made up of 59 national parks, but also includes recreation areas, national lakeshores, national monuments, national battlefields, scenic trails and other protected landscapes for a total of 412 units of wild nature, history and sacred sites. Today, the National Park System embraces vast preserved areas in the West from the iconic Yellowstone and Yosemite to the instantly recognizable Grand Canyon and deserts as different as Death Valley and Joshua Tree, as well as "parks for the people where the people are”, such as the Golden Gate recreation area near San Francisco or the National Mall and Memorial Parks in Washington D.C. Together, they form an essential part of the American experience.

2 Preserved national areas mean different things to different people. On the occasion of this 100th anniversary, the online platform “find your park” (http://findyourpark.com/) helps to personalize one’s own experience and allows people to share images and stories to support the parks , while the National Parks Service website (https://www.nps.gov/index.htm) proposes events and activities: recreation, conservation, and historic preservation programs like ranger talks and walks, special hikes, landscape photography exhibitions, movie screenings, and theatrical or musical performances.



Homepage of the website "Find your park"

3 "Join the celebration to explore, learn, discover, be inspired, or simply have fun". This call reflects the recreational impulse at the origin of the park preservation movement: Yosemite Valley was set aside in 1864 as "a park for public use, resort and recreation", and the world's first national park, Yellowstone, was established in 1872 as a "public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people". Other preservation acts followed, but in 1912 parks were visited by a mere fraction of their owners, the "American people". The National Park Service was established in 1916 by the Department of the Interior to respond to the administrative chaos, stating that « the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments, and reservations... is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations"[1].

4 Parks are both to be used and preserved, in the present and for the future. A new concept of government administration of natural scenery as heritage was born, along with the recognition of the effects of the scenery on the "enjoyment of mankind". Recreation[2] and health[3] , but also heritage[4], patriotism[5] and economics are at the basis of the creation and preservation of the national parks as "natural antiquities", as American wilderness wonders opposed to European castles and cathedrals. Indeed, according to the former National Park Service director Horace M. Albright, the general functions of the parks included the development of citizens' physical and mental health, their interest in outdoor life, and their knowledge of wild animals and natural history, but also the development of national patriotism, and the diversion of tourist travel from foreign countries in order to retain the money spent by American tourists abroad in the country.

5 Paintings, photographs, maps and videos are used to promote, document or substitute the national parks experience. This article will explore this communicative role but also the images' political power in creating and preserving protected landscapes, in particular through photography for its realistic effect and National Geographic magazine for its iconic status.

National parks and visual culture

6 Yellowstone was a harsh wild place in the popular imagination before the artist Thomas Moran and the photographer William Henry Jackson brought back pictorial records from the Hayden expedition in 1871.[6] Reaching the popular press and presented to Congress, Jackson’s photographs were proof that what the artist (Moran) was showing really existed, and they are said to have influenced the vote on the passage of the National Park Bill in 1872.

7 Images of the American landscape have been linked with politics of the land from the beginning, and the genesis of parks with the rise of tourism: Yellowstone’s paintings and photographs helped eastern audiences to picture the marvels of the West and the drama of its exploration, while in 1869 Powell's Grand Canyon expedition book fired up the public’s imagination; the “Yosemite book” (1869), with photographs by Charleton Watkins, represented one of the first economic exploitations of the picturesque, and in 1890 John Muir's articles for preserving Yosemite as a national park were filled with illustrations.

8 In particular, the link between natural heritage management and photographic politics is visible in the work of the photographer Ansel Adams from the 1930s and in the Sierra Club exhibit format series of the 1950s and '60s. They offer a “best general view” of national parks, developing the strategy of using untouched beauty as an incentive to conservation, in the conviction that making people understand beauty is the first step towards preserving it. Photography played a major role in the fight between conservationists and preservationists, the former defending a wise use or planned development of resources (following the ideas of the forester and politician Gifford Pinchot), and the latter responding with a rejection of utilitarianism and advocating nature unaltered by man (following the environmental writer and philosopher Muir).

9 There are two moments in 20th century environmental history that can be taken as examples: the failure in preventing the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite (1913), and the Echo Park victory in stopping the Colorado River storage project in Dinosaur National Monument in the 1950s. Considered as the wilderness movement’s “finest hour to that date”, the Echo Park dam block was a test case for the changing public opinion about the conservation issue. Although the Hetch Hetchy fight used essays and photographs to support its cause , Echo Park supporters used David Brower’s photographs of Hetch Hetchy Valley “then and now” and some audiovisual materials as a negative example . The same combination of words, photographs and films would be used during the Rampart Dam controversy in Alaska (1950s), and in preventing the damming of Colorado's Glen Canyon (the Sierra Club devoted an exhibit format series to it in 1963, François Leydet’s color photographs of the Grand Canyon in 1964 and some film showings). Photography still plays a major role today in many environmental organizations, which use images pristine landscapes, books and films as vehicle for politics.

10 While images have been used as political weapons (to stimulate or prevent action) by environmentalists and artists, private and governmental institutions have also made use of them for promotional purposes. For example, railroad companies have always been interested in the tourist appeal of national parks, as shown in the 1884 Northern Pacific

Railroad's travel brochure entitled “Alice’s Adventures in the New Wonderland” or in the Great North West's 1900-1916 “See America First” campaign .

11 In 1938, the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration asked artists to create National Park posters, inviting Americans to experience “all day hikes, nature walks, and campfire programs.” The WPA posters’ iconic look and timeless mission inspired Max Slavkin and Aaron Perry-Zucker (co-founders of Creative Action Network) to reinvent not just the national park poster series, but also the concept behind the WPA itself: from the idea of an organizing force putting artists to work for the public good we move to a combination of grassroots organizing techniques with the Internet’s ability to connect people in different places. “See America” is a contemporary project that invites artists and designers from all 50 states to create a new collection of posters celebrating U.S. landmarks, hoping to continue to do what many generations of artistic and conservationist collaborations have done: encourage a new generation to embrace the parks and the job of creating new parks.[7]

National Geographic post-iconographic

12 National Geographic magazine celebrated this 100th anniversary with special articles, issues, and multimedia projects, confirming the support it has provided to the National Parks since some copies of the April 1916 issue covering a trip to the Sierra Nevada were given to members of Congress. Almost five months later, the federal law establishing the National Park Service passed, and a unique cooperation with the National Geographic Society only one year after, led to the appropriation from private owners of the Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park.[8]

13 Later in the century, National Geographic sponsored an ecological survey of California’s coastal redwoods that, in 1968, would be set aside as the Redwood National Park by President Johnson (It is said that he exclaimed, “Look at this monster... it must be saved!” on a huge National Geographic photograph of one of the world’s tallest living things). From the preservation to the promotion of national parks, the collaboration between National Geographic and the National Park Service will continue, for example, with the production of national parks guides or special audiovisual programs.

14 With “the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge” as its mission, National Geographic evolved from a scientific specialists' journal (founded in 1888) to a commonplace item in ordinary American households, medical waiting rooms and schools, bringing distant images to the most intimate local spaces and becoming an influential American institution. National Geographic's “view of the world” (represented by the yellow bordered cover as “a window on the world”) has been criticized as a Western and Imperialist viewpoint that is absorbed uncritically by its readers .[9] But a study of the varieties of spectatorship and the rituals of readership has revealed readers’ attentiveness and readiness for critical debate (so that the yellow frame would be more mediating rather than controlling)[10], as well as a variety of imaginative appropriations of the magazine as a textbook or guidebook, an object to display or collect, an invitation to travel, or a substitution for travelling. Both cosmopolitan and middle American, mainstream and exclusive, a product of the progressive era and an expression of Victorian values, the magazine managed to combine professional and amateur and high and low culture. It is today a popular icon but also a generator of icons or iconic types, partly thanks to its success in using photography to blend the art of storytelling and

objective science, aesthetic sensitivity and journalistic objectivity, and realistic and romantic dimensions.

15 As for the coverage of the national parks, National Geographic has often perpetuated romantic stereotypes, for example that of picturesque nature photography (American wilderness images as ceremonial objects) or the photographer in the field as a hero (a professional adventurer seeking memorable views). But it seems that the idea of photographs as secular icons and the possibility of experiencing a “romance of the real” through the photographer's lens are being challenged by technological innovations and the consequent (supposed) democratization in seeing, creating and diffusing images. In 1981, the president editor of National Geographic Melville Bell Grosvenor still distinguished between photographs “made for publication” by professional photographers and amateur photographs “made to preserve memories” [11], while today members are asked to share their favorite views of national parks on “yourshot.ngm.com” (and not just of grand landscapes but also of daily life, people and animals). Another example is the one-year trip to visit all 59 national parks that was undertaken by National Geographic photographer Jonathan Irish[12] , as well as by the “ordinary couple” Elizabeth and Cole Donelson (with careers in teaching and health care IT) [13]: both stories have had the same space and type of coverage in the magazine.

16 While these recent examples show the rapprochement between professional and amateur photography, the photographer Stephen Wilkes reverses the idea of the wilderness icon with his composed vistas of national parks that were featured in the January 2016 issue of National Geographic. He realized the dream of “compressing the best parts of a day and night into a single photograph”, making a seamless composite image of spectacular scenery and magical moments for people. For his Yosemite vista he took 1035 photos over 26 hours, then digitally combined the images to make the panorama; for Old Faithful in Yellowstone he made 2625 images, then put both sunrise and moonrise into a composite; for the Grand Canyon Desert View Watchtower he took 2282 photos over 27 hours and said that “the tourist put into perspective just how big the canyon is”.[14]

17 “One of the duties of the National Park Service,” Albright wrote in 1929, “is to present wild life ‘as a spectacle.’”[15]

18 Starting from the 70s a growing awareness in ecology and the pressure of the environmental groups have changed the priorities from human recreation to wildness preservation (from anthropocentrism to biocentrism), and today’s new concerns about the Anthropocene and the climate change bring a new light to the importance of preserving entire ecosystems (like the “Greater Yellowstone System”) rather than parts of landscape, and to consider the interconnectedness of wildlife and wildness.

19 To know more about the eating habits and habitat use of bears some experts attached special cameras to the tracking collars of two grizzlies and two black bears in Yellowstone: this will give biologists a bear's-eye perspective they didn't have before, 20 seconds at a time, and a basis of comparison to see how bears might shift their diet as the climate changes.

20 “For the first time, trek into the wild backcountry of America's first national park and see what it looks like from a bear's point of view”. The project has been published on the National Geographic website, in the form of a platform that allows and invites to choose a bear and an itinerary through maps, drawings, photographs and videos.[16]

21 From science to vicarious travel through art: "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people".

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NOTES

1. Quoted in Grosvenor, Melville Bell, *Today and Tomorrow in Our National Parks*, National Geographic, July 1966.
2. "The nation that leads the world in feverish business activity requires playgrounds as well as workshops", George Otis Smith quoted in Mitchell, Elliott, *A New National Park*, National Geographic, March 1910.
3. Nature's healing and renewal powers, since the Greek concept of a "fifth essence", are celebrated by philosophers and psychologists as antidotes to modern life. The National Park Service director Conrad L. Wirth said that national parks have the power to "strengthen bodies, refresh minds, uplift the spirits... enrich leisure", in *The New America's Wonderlands. Our National Parks*, National Geographic, 1975.
4. "You own this national park. This is part of your heritage as Americans.", David Vela quoted in Ouammen, David, *Yellowstone's Future Hangs on a Question: Who Owns the West?*, http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/05/.

5. The national park system is considered as a uniquely American idea, "something never before tested in the arch of human history" that will be copied by nations all over the world, said Kim Heacox in *The national parks. An Illustrated History*, National Geographic, 2015.
6. AA.VV., *Yellowstone. The battle for the American West, National Geographic*, May 2016.
7. http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/features/20-twentysomethings-in-national-parks/see-america-art-and-activism/.
8. AA.VV., *Our big trees saved*, National Geographic, January 1917.
9. Some references are the 1993 study of Lutz, Catherine A. – Collins, Jane L., *Reading National Geographic* Rothenberg, and the more recent (2007) Tamar Y., *Presenting America's World. Strategies of Innocence in* National Geographic Magazine, *1888-1945*.
10. Hawkins, Stephanie L., *American Iconographic. National Geographic, Global Culture, and the Visual Imagination*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London, 2010.
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13. http://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/travel-interests/active-and-adventure/pictures-national-parks-road-trip/59-national-parks-52-weeks/.
14. AA.VV., *The power of the parks. A yearlong celebration of our common ground*, National Geographic. January 2016
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