

**NATIONAL PARK SITING AND
HUMAN GEOGRAPHY**

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ABSTRACT The choice of a site for a national park includes an evaluation of the natural beauty and value of the physical geography as well as socioeconomic conditions in the surrounding area. For some parks, consideration of the human geography was of little import because of the sparse population, but in other cases (primarily in the East), whole communities were displaced to create the park. This paper compares the importance of the human geography in the siting of selected parks; it also examines how the existence of the parks may have changed the socioeconomic features of the environs.

Five national parks of the eastern United States, Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains, Mammoth Cave, Hot Springs, and Acadia, were established between 1919 and 1941. This paper will discuss how political and human-environmental forces that affected their origins have continued to shape their development, including:

1. The necessity of a truly national park system.
2. Compensation for insufficient federal funding through local boosterism, private support, and state and local money.
3. Sacrifices of individual property for the common good.
4. Importance of cheap labor in park development.
5. The need for a continuing evaluation of the role of our national parks.
6. Pervasive problems of air and water pollution from sources outside the parks.
7. Influence of the parks on the socioeconomic characteristics of adjacent areas.

The purpose of the National Park Service, as defined by the Congress in 1916, is to "conserve the natural and historic objects in such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." In 1919, all national parks, except Acadia in Maine, were located in the West. The formation of Acadia, our first seacoast park, initially as a national monument and later as a national park, included some factors involved in the development of the other national parks decades later.

First settled by French colonists in the 1600s, the area gained prominence as a resort in the mid-nineteenth century as wealthy families started building summer homes around Bar Harbor. By the turn of the century, several prominent men, including Charles Eliot (the President of Harvard), George Dorr (a Boston Brahmin), and William Lawrence (Bishop of Massachusetts) believed the area was becoming too commercialized. They bought parcels of land with their own money and then persuaded the State of Maine to set the land aside as a preserve. In 1916, when Maine appeared to be unwilling to continue to preserve the land, President Wilson made the area the Sieur de Monts National Monument. The land which had been bought by private individuals was donated to a private organization, the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations, which then donated it to the state, who then donated it to the federal government. This practice of private donation to the state, with the state then donating this new public land to the federal government, was repeated in the other eastern parks.

The monument was changed into a national park in 1919, with the new name of Lafayette National Park, in honor of the first settlers and our ally during the First World War. In 1929, the name was changed to Acadia, because English donors of Schoodic Point, a large area of seacoast, did not want their land and the park to be named after Lafayette, a Frenchman.

IMPORTANCE OF A NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

In the early twentieth century, most of the national parks were in the West and attracted mostly western visitors as long-distance travel was expensive and difficult. The appropriations which supported them, however, came largely from the East, where much of the country's population and wealth lay. Even though there had been calls for other eastern parks for several decades, Acadia remained the only national park in the East until Steven Mather served as Park Service Director from 1917 to 1928. In 1923, the Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, formed the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission, which set forth several requirements for a national park in the East:

1. It should cover at least 500 square miles, so that visitors could be accommodated without overcrowding.

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2. A substantial part of the area should have forests, shrubs, flowers, streams and cascades in a natural state.
3. It should have springs and streams for camping and fishing.
4. It should offer opportunities for wildlife protection, and be a natural museum preserving the outstanding features of the Southern Appalachians as they appeared in early pioneer days.
5. It should be accessible by rail and highway (Ise 253).

To meet these requirements, obstacles not present in the establishment of western parks, including acquisition of private lands, financing, and displacement of property owners, had to be overcome. Congress had to approve a site fitting the criteria of a national park; an underlying factor for the establishment of early western parks was *monumentalism* or *cultural nationalism*--an idea that the cultural worth of the nation could be proven through its physical characteristics. (The spectacular natural wonders and scenery of America were seen as competitive with the history of cultural achievements of Western Europe in proving the greatness of America.) The Appalachian Mountains were considered demonstrative of this monumentalism and so were chosen as a site worthy of Congressional protection. The specific location involved state and local rivalries. By 1925, Congress passed legislation to establish three parks, each with its own unique feature--Shenandoah--the Blue Ridge Mountains; Great Smoky Mountains--forests representing the variety of those found throughout the North American continent; and Mammoth Cave--which would prove to be the world's longest cave. (Since the formation of Hot Springs would follow a different path, these three national parks are considered first.)

The next step, acquiring the land, was a long, slow, and complicated process. The parks in the West had been carved out of existing public lands; these eastern parks involved acquiring and *paying for* private lands. Congress at first refused to provide any funds save a few thousand dollars for federal commissions, and state legislatures were also reluctant to spend money. Over the years, both the Congress and the state legislatures changed their attitudes and contributed funding; Congress also lessened the need for funds by reducing acreage requirements.

Area residents, organizations, and some government officers lobbied their state governments, set up state agencies, and raised money. But these were generally not grass-roots projects, and many of the local people whose families had lived in the proposed park lands, sometimes for generations, had to be forced off their land. The residents of the two park areas of the eastern Appalachians differed in income and racial composition. The population of the Tennessee and North Carolina area that was to become Great Smoky was more homogeneous, and owned more expensive homes, than those in the Virginia area designated for Shenandoah (although the house values in both areas were considerably below the median values for their respective states) (U.S. Census, 1930). The residents of the proposed Shenandoah area were described by Conrad Wirth, the assistant director in charge of the Interior Department's Branch of Lands, as "poor, generally uneducated and suffering from the damages of inbreeding." Their property boundaries were ill-defined; the state put a blanket condemnation on all the property and planned to compensate the land owners "according to appraisals based on property lines recognized and established by the courts." (Wirth, 51). A November 1935 Supreme Court decision upheld this land compensation procedure, and in December 1935 Virginia presented the land so acquired to the Secretary of the Interior, thereby establishing Shenandoah National Park. In contrast, people living within the boundaries designated for Great Smoky were "strong, intelligent, and in good health, with no apparent problems of inbreeding", more willing to sell their land (Wirth, 51). A few of the thousands of families were allowed to stay or move back; the rest moved elsewhere, either with or without governmental aid (Heatwole, 39). Thus, the formation of these two national parks involved the sacrifice of the few for the benefit of the many, as families were forced from their homes, even if they were compensated. Nowadays, park rangers describe the former residents as happy but poor people who had overexploited their resources (no mention is made of inbreeding). One wonders what public reaction would be today to evicting such citizens to create parks.

Mammoth Cave National Park, located in the hills of Kentucky, was also created by the state and its people buying private land. The cave itself was a commercial tourist attraction and was expensive to buy. Many considered Mammoth Cave not to be a true national park because the main attraction was the cave, and its associated sensationalism; the surface offered little of the monumentalism of the west. To facilitate the establishment of the park, Congress lowered the acreage requirements. As with the other parks, Congress reconsidered its intent not to fund the acquisition of land and contributed some money.

When Mammoth Cave officially became a national park in 1941, forty miles of the cave itself had been mapped. Over the years, Congress purchased more caves. On exploration, these have turned out to be extensions of Mammoth Cave, which at more than 320 miles is the longest cave in the world (Palmer, 34).

If Mammoth Cave was considered by many to be unsuited to the title of national park, the establishment of Hot Springs expands even more the limits of the definition. Hot Springs National Park is a relatively small 4,800 acres, and unlike any other national park it is in the center of a small city, Hot Springs, Arkansas. The springs were long recognized as valuable, and were said to provide cures for such ailments as liver disease or syphilis. To protect the springs and prevent their control by individuals, Hot Springs was made a national reservation in 1832, long before the country had national parks. Conflicts continued between the federal government and landowners and in the 1870s, through the courts, the federal government gained the right to control the springs and to set aside land

as federal property. Hot Springs popularity as a spa, as a destination for vacationers as well as those seeking cures in the days before antibiotics, and its location in the southeast all contributed to its becoming a national park in 1921.

IMPORTANCE OF CHEAP LABOR

We have now seen the impact of the first three factors (importance of a national park system, local funding, and individual sacrifice) in the formation the parks; the fourth factor was cheap labor. The parks were developed for public use largely through labor of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression. The CCC was established by the Roosevelt Administration in 1933 to provide jobs for many unemployed men and boys. They received room and board, but one dollar a day in wages. The CCC helped to build Skyline Drive along the crest of the Blue Ridge, created improved walkways within Mammoth Cave (by moving tons of limestone), and built innumerable paths and roads in other parks. Thus, the parks were largely a creation of the Depression; today their costs would probably be prohibitive.

CONTINUING EVALUATION: ARE THESE REAL NATIONAL PARKS?

One should note that none of these four parks fits the requirements set by the Southern Appalachian Commission. Only Great Smoky National Park matches the "image" of a "traditional" (western) national park. Shenandoah's narrow width does not give it the same "wilderness" feel of Great Smoky. Towns and farms are visible from the park. On the other hand, Shenandoah's Skyline Drive provides beautiful vistas of the surrounding valleys, and the park contains over 100 species of trees and 1,200 flowering plants, as well as abundant wildlife, including deer (whose population is becoming too high for the carrying capacity of the area). Shenandoah's value as a national park has changed over the years. It was built because of its geology and topography; it is now valued much more for its flora and fauna. Its proximity to Washington and more densely settled areas of the Northeast has enhanced its value. Hot Springs National Park has been transformed more into a historical and geological curiosity with sociological overtones than a setting for wilderness. In fact, many of the plants currently found there are actually exotic to the area, planted to enhance the appearance of the setting.

Mammoth Cave's major attraction continues to be the cave itself, including not only its geological characteristics, but also the history of the sensationalism associated with nineteenth century cave exploration. However, the park rangers also emphasize the surface features of the park, including native American history, hiking trails, and biota.

Acadia is used largely as seacoast park, with excess demand in the summer for camping sites. The interior parts of the park are little used, as most visitors are attracted to the beach or the rocky coast. The topography of Acadia is not unique to the park itself, but it is one of the few parts of the central Maine coast that is accessible to the public.

The eastern national parks do not have the same expansiveness of many western parks, but they do protect wildlife and allow visitors to enjoy the beauty of nature with very few intrusions from the modern world. In some ways, Shenandoah and Great Smoky can be considered more spectacular than the western parks, because they demonstrate the effect of 60 years of nature taking back its own: it is hard now to visualize the farms and cleared forests that once covered the Blue Ridge and the Great Smokies.

Thus, in a less grandiose manner, these national parks nevertheless meet the criteria for national parks set by Congress, and they contribute to our appreciation and preservation of the natural world.

THE PARKS IN TODAY'S WORLD: DISTANT AND NEAR POLLUTION

The overuse and commercialization of our national parks as a whole has been well-publicized; these eastern parks present a slightly different aspect of this pervasive problem--pollution from outside the parks. The Great Smokies were chosen as the site for a national park partly because of the natural haze that hung over the mountains and gave them their name. The mountains are still hazy, but the haze now is denser and less natural, caused by pollutants from outside the park. Similarly, the air around the Blue Ridge Mountains and around Mammoth Cave is contaminated by pollutants. The Green River, which contributed to the formation of Mammoth Cave, is polluted as well. Acadia's seacoast remains relatively clean, although littering does occur.

CONNECTIONS WITH ADJACENT AREAS

The national parks do not exist in a vacuum. In some cases, as with Great Smoky, Hot Springs, and Mammoth Cave, the economy of adjacent areas is very much interdependent with the parks; in the case of Shenandoah, the economies are more distinct. A majority of visitors come from nearby areas. All the areas surrounding the parks have changed since the parks' establishment; agriculture had employed the most people in all adjacent counties, but now, paralleling the change in the nation's economy as a whole, retailing, wholesaling, professional and other services, and manufacturing have become more important. The value of homes in the

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two counties adjacent to Great Smoky in Tennessee have risen a bit above the state median; the Shenandoah Virginia counties (generally) have remained poorer. Counties for the other parks have a mixed pattern (U.S. Census, 1930 and 1990).

Some of the adjacent areas have become commercialized. For example, the city of Gatlinburg, adjacent to Great Smoky, has the appearance of an amusement park--the main street, which leads directly into the park, is dominated by resort hotels and many souvenir shops. Gatlinburg exists in stark contrast to the tranquility of the park. On the other side, Cherokee, North Carolina is less commercialized, but has many souvenir shops; it also contains some cultural-educational establishments associated with the Cherokee.

The road leading to Acadia is also characterized by commercial activities, but of lower density than Great Smoky as the road is many miles long. Many small communities line this road, and Bar Harbor, still a major tourist attraction, is nearby.

Mammoth Cave is located in the midst of farms and karst topography. However, the road leading to the park is dotted with signs, some of which even mimic the brown color of official park signs, designed to mislead travellers and attract them to other caves.

Hot Springs makes little pretense of separating the natural from the commercial. Instead, one side of the main street, not part of the park, is a typical twentieth century tourist strip, while the other side, part of the park, is a series of preserved nineteenth century bathhouses and related facilities. Outside the resort city which surrounds the park are hills, farms and forests cultivated by a commercial lumber company.

The region around Shenandoah is largely farmland. In contrast to the other parks, strip development is relatively sparse.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The land uses around these five national parks do not follow identical patterns. Their physical interconnections with their environs vary from honky-tonk commercialism to bucolic tranquility. Despite these differences, the parks themselves are valuable parts of our national parks system as a whole, enhancing their natural and physical environments and attracting millions of visitors. They are the product of decades of political maneuverings by local interests, and federal, state and local government bodies. Planners and land use managers as well as ordinary citizens might consider studying their history as a way of understanding and managing human interaction with the physical environment.

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