

National Park System: What Do the Different Park Titles Signify?

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Summary

Congress names individual units of the National Park System in the enabling legislation for each unit. In so doing, Congress establishes the range of titles used in the park system. The system's 423 units currently bear a wide range of titles—national park, national monument, national preserve, national historic site, national recreation area, national battlefield, and many others. This report addresses the significance of the different designations and discusses potential advantages and disadvantages of systemwide recommendations to simplify park nomenclature.

Legislators are concerned with park titles in several ways. First, Congress must determine appropriate designations for individual units when parks are established. Although the laws, regulations, and policies governing the National Park System generally apply to all units regardless of title, some meaningful differences nonetheless exist among the designations. Congress has grouped similar units under similar titles and has authorized resource-intensive activities, such as sport hunting or off-road vehicle use, in some types of units more than in others. In particular, Congress has been reluctant to allow such activities in national parks, but has authorized them in national preserves, national recreation areas, and national seashores and lakeshores, among other areas. A few unit titles are further associated with specific statutory authorities that govern their creation or development. National monuments, for example, can be proclaimed by the President under the Antiquities Act of 1906 (whereas other types of units cannot). National scenic trails and wild and scenic rivers are subject to requirements of the National Trails System Act of 1968 (P.L. 90-543) and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 (P.L. 90-542), respectively, as well as general park authorities.

In addition to naming units when they are established, Congress considers proposals to retitle existing park units. For example, in the 117th Congress, H.R. 2626 and S. 1344 propose to redesignate the Pullman National Monument as a national historical park, H.R. 6451 and S. 1320 would redesignate the Chiricahua National Monument as a national park, and H.R. 5384 would redesignate Rock Creek Park as a national park. Laws enacted in the 116th Congress (P.L. 116-6, P.L. 116-9, P.L. 116-260, P.L. 116-328, P.L. 116-341) redesignated several units as national historical parks, one unit as a national historic site, one unit as a national park, and one unit as a national park and preserve. Among other things, such proposals may aim to increase visitation at a given unit and thus to boost local and regional economies. In particular, some studies have suggested that the “national park” title may attract visitors and bring economic benefits. Those opposing redesignations may be concerned that unwanted restrictions would be pursued along with a change in title.

Some observers have suggested the current wide array of park titles should be consolidated. The House Natural Resources Committee explored this question in 2010 hearings. The National Parks Second Century Commission, and the National Park Service (NPS) itself, have recommended reducing the number of park titles to better “brand” the units and make them more recognizable as part of the park system. Such branding could potentially bring more visitors to under-recognized units and thus help businesses in surrounding communities. Some also contend that, by drawing visitors to lesser-known parks, a strategy of title consolidation could help reduce overcrowding at better-known parks. On the other hand, the current, more loosely structured system maximizes Congress's flexibility to title units to reflect their unique features.

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The 423 units of the National Park System bear a wide range of titles—national park, national monument, national preserve, national historic site, national recreation area, and national battlefield, among many others. What is indicated by these different titles? Are the units managed differently under different designations? Do some types of units receive more protection with respect to use or development? This report addresses questions that legislators have asked about park unit titles, when considering proposals to establish new park units, redesignate existing units, or change provisions governing a unit.¹ It also discusses potential advantages and disadvantages of systemwide recommendations to simplify park nomenclature.

There are no definitive criteria for naming a park unit. Bills to designate new units of the National Park System, or to rename existing units, may specify any title, even one not previously used in the park system. The statutory authorities and management policies of the National Park Service (NPS) generally apply to all park system units, regardless of title.² Also regardless of title, Congress may specify exceptions to NPS laws, regulations, and policies in a given unit—for example, Congress may authorize hunting or mining, generally prohibited in the National Park System, in a particular unit.

While few statutory distinctions exist among the designations, their differences can nonetheless be meaningful. In practice, Congress has grouped similar units under similar titles, and often has followed precedents regarding the activities authorized in particular types of units. The designations thus have developed distinctive characteristics. In addition, a park's title can influence public perceptions of the park. Changes in designation may affect visitation patterns, which may have local and regional economic repercussions. Finally, a few designations indicate that units, in addition to being in the National Park System, also are part of other legislatively established systems that confer their own protections.

What Are the Park Titles?

The units of the National Park System vary widely in their physical features and the purposes for which they were designated. These differences are reflected in the names Congress has bestowed when creating units. More than 20 different designations have been used.

- **National parks.** The 63 national parks contain some of the country's best-known natural attractions. They typically are large, diverse areas with outstanding natural features and ecological resources. They tend to be among the most strictly protected park units, in that Congress has historically been reluctant to authorize consumptive activities such as mining or hunting in the national parks.
- **National monuments.** National monuments may be established by Congress or proclaimed by the President under the Antiquities Act of 1906.³ Many of the park system's 84 national monuments contain historical or archaeological artifacts, but others are notable for their natural features or recreational opportunities.

¹ For information on the process for establishing new park units, see CRS Report RS20158, *National Park System: Establishing New Units*, by Laura B. Comay.

² See National Park Service, *Management Policies 2006*, p. 2, as well as Introduction, Section 1.4.3.1, and Section 2.2, at <http://www.nps.gov/policy/mp2006.pdf>. Also see National Park Service Act of 1916 (16 U.S.C. §1) and National Park Service General Authorities Act of 1970 (16 U.S.C. §1a-1), which reinforced that all park units have equal legal standing in terms of resource protection and are part of a single, unified system.

³ 54 U.S.C. §§320301-320303. For more information, see CRS Report R41330, *National Monuments and the Antiquities Act*, by Carol Hardy Vincent. Agencies other than the Park Service, including the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service, also administer national monuments.

- **National preserves.** The 19 national preserves are similar to national parks in their size and natural features but typically allow uses (such as hunting or oil and gas exploration) that Congress considered incompatible with national park designation. Many preserves adjoin and share a name with a national park (e.g., Denali National Park and Preserve).
- **National reserves.** The two national reserves are similar to national preserves except that both are managed in partnership with state, local, or private entities.⁴
- **National recreation areas.** NPS manages 18 national recreation areas.⁵ This designation originally was given to areas that surround Bureau of Reclamation reservoirs and feature water-based recreation; it has since been used for recreational units in or near urban centers. Activities such as boating, fishing, or hunting may be explicitly authorized in establishing legislation.
- **National lakeshores and national seashores.** The 10 national seashores are on the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts, and the 3 national lakeshores are on the Great Lakes. Both recreation and natural resource preservation are prioritized in these units. A number of national seashores and lakeshores permit hunting.
- **National rivers and wild and scenic rivers.** Under the Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR) Act of 1968, Congress has preserved rivers in a free-flowing state (unaltered by dams or channels).⁶ The National Park Service manages 10 wild and scenic rivers as stand-alone park units, and others as parts of broader units. Also, four national rivers or riverways were designated outside the WSR Act. The rivers offer hiking, canoeing, and other outdoor activities (sometimes including hunting).
- **National trails.** Congress has established national trails under the National Trails System Act of 1968.⁷ NPS manages three national trails as full park units; all are designated as “national scenic trails” and wind through multiple states. The trails are managed for recreational use, primarily hiking. Other national scenic and historic trails are managed by NPS as parts of other units.
- **National parkways.** The four national parkways encompass roads and surrounding parkland. Sites of cultural interest lie along their routes. The parkways were designed for recreational driving through scenic countryside, although the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Virginia has become a heavily used commuter route.
- **National and international historic sites.** The 74 national historic sites and 1 international historic site designate places significant to U.S. history.⁸ Many are structures of historical interest, such as the homes of notable Americans, or buildings where important events occurred.

⁴ National Park Service, *The National Parks: Index 2012-2016* (Washington, DC, 2016), p. 9, at <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/upload/NPIndex2012-2016.pdf>; hereinafter referred to as NPS, *Index 2012-2016*.

⁵ The U.S. Forest Service also administers many national recreation areas. For more information, see CRS Report R41285, *Congressionally Designated Special Management Areas in the National Forest System*, by Katie Hoover.

⁶ P.L. 90-542. For more information, see CRS Report R45890, *Wild and Scenic Rivers: Designation, Management, and Funding*, by Anne A. Riddle.

⁷ P.L. 90-543. For more information, see CRS Report R43868, *The National Trails System: A Brief Overview*, by Mark K. DeSantis and Sandra L. Johnson.

⁸ The international historic site is St. Croix Island, site of an early French settlement on the Canadian border. NPS manages the unit in cooperation with Parks Canada, and parts of the park lie on both sides of the border.

- **National historical parks.** Like historic sites, the 61 national historical parks are notable for their connection with events or people of historical interest. These entities usually extend beyond a single building or property.
- **National battlefields, national battlefield sites, national battlefield parks, and national military parks.** The 11 national battlefields, 1 national battlefield site, 4 national battlefield parks, and 9 national military parks all designate locations of significant military actions. They include landscapes where battles occurred (primarily during the American Revolution and the Civil War) and military and civil structures in those areas.
- **National memorials.** National memorials need not be located at historically significant sites. Instead, many of the 31 national memorials, such as the Washington Monument or the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, are structures erected to commemorate people or events.
- **Other designations.** The National Park Service administers a number of areas in the Washington, DC, region that do not fit into the above classifications. The Park Service classifies these 11 units as having “other designations” than the standard types, and they bear a variety of names.⁹

What Do the Titles Mean?

For the most part, the different park titles signify different types of resources and attractions: a visitor expects to find historic buildings at a national historic site, natural attractions at a national park, and recreational opportunities at a national recreation area. In some cases, the title also may signal information about who established the unit (Congress or the President), who manages it, and what activities Congress has permitted or prohibited in the unit. Within each designation, the characteristics of units may vary considerably, complicating a clear meaning for any designation.

Type and Size of Resource

Most designations give a sense of the type of attraction to be found in the park unit, whether primarily natural (e.g., national parks or preserves), historical (e.g., national historic sites or historical parks), military (e.g., national battlefields or battlefield parks), or recreational (e.g., national recreation areas). However, these distinctions are not absolute; units set aside primarily for one type of attraction may also contain other types. Many national parks, for example, are notable for their historical and cultural artifacts and recreational opportunities as well as for their natural features.

The National Park Service has recognized this mix of resources in park units. At one point in its history, the Park Service had separate management tracks for primarily “natural” areas, primarily “recreational” areas, and primarily “historical” areas. These were abolished in favor of an integrated approach that focuses on all park resources, regardless of a park’s title or the way in which it became part of the National Park System.¹⁰

⁹ NPS, *National Park System*, at <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/national-park-system.htm>. The 11 areas are Constitution Gardens, the National Capital Parks, the National Mall, Rock Creek Park, and the White House, all in the District of Columbia; Catoctin Mountain Park, Fort Washington Park, Greenbelt Park, and Piscataway Park in Maryland; and Prince William Forest Park and Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts in Virginia.

¹⁰ The system of three separate management tracks was in use during the 1960s. It was abolished after passage of the General Authorities Act of 1970, which emphasized the uniformity of the park system. See Richard West Sellars,

Some of the finer title distinctions may signal differences in the size of otherwise similar park units. For example, a national historical park generally is larger than a national historic site. The single national battlefield site is smaller than most national battlefields,¹¹ whereas the four national battlefield parks are larger. However, these size distinctions are far from absolute. Certain national historical parks, for example, are less than 10 acres in size,¹² while a few national historic sites are unusually large, exceeding the size of many national historical parks.¹³ Similarly, while the “national park” designation usually has been used for large natural areas, Gateway Arch National Park—a former national memorial redesignated by an act of Congress in 2018—is smaller than many national historical parks and some national historic sites.¹⁴

A Part of the National Park System?

NPS’s main responsibility is to administer the 423 units of the National Park System, but it also manages or assists other areas outside the system (often nonfederally owned) that are “linked in importance and purpose” to the National Park System.¹⁵ In most cases, an area’s title indicates whether it is part of the National Park System or one of these “related areas.” In other cases, it may not be possible to tell from the title whether the area is in the park system, because the title applies to both park system units and related areas. Separately, some NPS designations also are used for sites managed by other federal agencies, such as the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. **Table 1** lists selected park titles and indicates whether they refer to units of the National Park System and/or other areas.

Table 1. Selected Titles Within and Outside the National Park System

Are sites with this title units of the National Park System?	... NPS related areas?	... managed by federal agencies other than NPS?
National Battlefield	x		
National Battlefield Park	x		
National Battlefield Site	x		
National Heritage Area ^a		x	
National Historic Site	x	x	x ^b
National Historical Park	x		
National Lakeshore	x		

Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), Chapter 6, subsection on “Policies: New and Old,” at https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/sellars/chap6.htm; and National Park Service, “Resource Topics for Parklands: Parks Etc.” (brochure, undated). For the current policy, see National Park Service, *Management Policies 2006*, p. 2, at https://www.nps.gov/subjects/policy/upload/MP_2006.pdf.

¹¹ Mississippi’s Brices Cross Roads National Battlefield Site contains only one building.

¹² For example, Louisiana’s New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park occupies 5 acres, and New York’s Women’s Rights National Historical Park occupies 7 acres.

¹³ Examples include Montana’s Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site (1,618 acres), North Dakota’s Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site (1,751 acres), and Colorado’s Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site (12,583 acres).

¹⁴ P.L. 115-128 redesignated the 193-acre Jefferson National Expansion Memorial as Gateway Arch National Park.

¹⁵ For more information on NPS’s involvement in areas outside the National Park System, see CRS In Focus IF11281, *National Park Service Affiliated Areas: An Overview*, by Mark K. DeSantis; and CRS Report RL33462, *Heritage Areas: Background, Proposals, and Current Issues*, by Mark K. DeSantis.

Are sites with this title units of the National Park System?	... NPS related areas?	... managed by federal agencies other than NPS?
National Memorial	x	x	x ^c
National Military Park	x		
National Monument	x		x
National Park	x		
National Parkway	x		
National Preserve	x ^d		
National Recreation Area	x		x ^e
National Reserve	x	x ^f	
National River	x		
National Seashore	x		
National Trail ^g	x	x	x
National Wild and Scenic River ^h	x	x	x

Source: CRS. For more information on these and other federal land designations, see CRS Report R45340, *Federal Land Designations: A Brief Guide*, coordinated by Laura B. Comay.

- a. For more on national heritage areas, see CRS Report RL33462, *Heritage Areas: Background, Proposals, and Current Issues*, by Mark K. DeSantis.
- b. Grey Towers National Historic Site in Pennsylvania is administered by the U.S. Forest Service as part of the National Forest System.
- c. For discussion of national memorials administered by various federal agencies, see CRS Report R45741, *Memorials and Commemorative Works Outside Washington, DC: Background, Federal Role, and Options for Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus and Laura B. Comay.
- d. Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico was formerly administered by the U.S. Forest Service but was established as a unit of the National Park System, under NPS management, by P.L. 113-291.
- e. For discussion of national recreation areas managed by the U.S. Forest Service, see CRS Report R41285, *Congressionally Designated Special Management Areas in the National Forest System*, by Katie Hoover.
- f. The Pinelands National Reserve in New Jersey is a nonfederally managed NPS “affiliated area.”
- g. For discussion of national trails, see CRS Report R43868, *The National Trails System: A Brief Overview*, by Mark K. DeSantis and Sandra L. Johnson.
- h. For discussion of wild and scenic rivers, see CRS Report R45890, *Wild and Scenic Rivers: Designation, Management, and Funding*, by Anne A. Riddle.

Authority to Establish the Unit

Today, only one type of National Park System unit may be established by an entity other than Congress. National monuments may be proclaimed on federal lands by the President, under the Antiquities Act of 1906, as well as by Congress.¹⁶ Some other types of park units were

¹⁶ 16 U.S.C. §§431-433. For more information on presidentially proclaimed monuments, see CRS Report R41330, *National Monuments and the Antiquities Act*, by Carol Hardy Vincent. Some presidentially proclaimed monuments are administered by agencies other than NPS. In some cases Congress has affirmed presidential monument protections by reestablishing monuments in legislation as national parks or other types of NPS units. Among other examples, Grand Canyon National Park, Olympic National Park, and Joshua Tree National Park all initially were presidentially

established in the past by entities other than Congress or the President. The Secretary of the Interior designated some national historic sites under authority of the Historic Sites Act of 1935.¹⁷ This authority was limited in 1992 by an amendment to the act stipulating that Congress must authorize the appropriation of any funds used to carry out secretarial designations. Also in the past, some units were administratively transferred to NPS from other agencies. For example, some national recreation areas were originally established through interagency agreements with the Bureau of Reclamation.¹⁸

Permitted and Prohibited Uses

National Park System units are among the most strictly protected federal lands, as compared to those administered by other agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service. Under laws applying to all National Park System units, park administrators must manage activities in the parks to avoid derogation or impairment of park resources. Thus, activities that may consume or damage resources—including hunting, grazing, mining, logging, aircraft overflights, and off-road vehicle use, among others—generally are limited or prohibited.¹⁹ However, Congress may authorize a desired activity at a specific unit, typically by including provisions in the unit’s enabling legislation to permit the activity.²⁰

Although Congress may authorize specific land uses in any type of park unit, in practice, activities that might damage or consume resources (sometimes called “consumptive” activities) are more often permitted in some types of units than in others. In particular, Congress has tended against allowing consumptive uses in national parks. For example, Congress has not authorized sport hunting in any national park, whereas this activity is authorized in some other types of units, including some national recreation areas, national preserves, national rivers, national monuments, and national seashores and lakeshores.²¹ Similarly, off-road vehicle use typically is not permitted in national parks, although it may be allowed in national recreation areas, national seashores and lakeshores, and national preserves.²²

proclaimed monuments.

¹⁷ 54 U.S.C. Chapter 3201.

¹⁸ P.L. 79-633 of 1946 provided general authority for NPS to manage national recreation areas added to the system through cooperative agreements with other agencies.

¹⁹ Various laws, regulations, executive orders, departmental directives, and management policies govern specific activities within the parks. The Park Service’s *Management Policies 2006*, Chapter 8, at <http://www.nps.gov/policy/mp2006.pdf>, allow hunting and trapping only when specifically authorized or mandated by law (§8.2.2.6). Fishing is allowed if not specifically prohibited by law and if determined by NPS to be “appropriate” (§8.2.2.5). Agricultural grazing is allowed when authorized by law or under certain other conditions, such as when it is necessary to maintain “an historic scene” (§8.6.8.2). Mineral exploration is allowed for operators that hold rights to valid mining claims, federal mineral leases, or nonfederally owned minerals, but new mining claims are typically prohibited (§8.7). Commercial logging, a resource use on some other federal lands, is not permitted in the National Park System and is not specifically covered in the *Management Policies*.

²⁰ Such provisions might apply to all park visitors or might be restricted to parties who were using the land prior to its addition to the park system. For example, those with existing grazing or mining leases might be accommodated, while any new activity might be prohibited.

²¹ Although *sport* hunting is not authorized in any national parks, some national parks (in Alaska) allow *subsistence* hunting by local residents. Also, where animal overpopulation is a problem, a controlled hunt may be authorized.

²² National Park Service regulations, at 36 C.F.R. §4.10(b), limit off-road vehicle use to these four types of park units. For more information, see CRS Report R42955, *Motorized Recreation on National Park Service Lands*, by Laura B. Comay, Carol Hardy Vincent, and Kristina Alexander.

Congress has been especially open to consumptive uses in certain types of park units. The main example is the national preserves. Many of the preserves adjoin national parks and might have been incorporated in the parks were it not for interest in activities such as hunting, trapping, and oil and gas exploration on the land. Congress has accommodated such activities in the enabling legislation for national preserves, in distinction from the more restrictive national parks. Some park types also explicitly encourage general recreational development and use, as seen in the enabling statutes for national recreation areas, national seashores, and national lakeshores.²³

Management Arrangements

Traditionally, units of the National Park System are managed solely by NPS, but Congress also has legislated partnership management arrangements with both federal and nonfederal land managers in some units.²⁴ Although such legislation has spanned multiple unit types, NPS has noted that one type of park, the national reserve, is specifically associated with management partnerships with state, local, and/or private entities.²⁵ At some national recreation areas and national seashores, NPS manages units in cooperation with federal agency partners.²⁶

Relation to Other Land Management Systems

All NPS units are part of the National Park System, but a few types of units also belong to other land management systems with their own requirements and protections. Units titled “wild and scenic rivers” are established under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, which preserves free-flowing rivers in their natural state (i.e., without new dams or diversions).²⁷ Depending on how the river is classified—as wild, scenic, or recreational—the act restricts development and protects water rights on the river to a greater or lesser degree. Not all wild and scenic rivers are assigned to NPS, and of those that are, only three constitute full park units; others are contained within larger park units and managed as part of those units.²⁸

The three park system units titled “national scenic trails” were established under the National Trails System Act of 1968.²⁹ This law provides for four categories of trails: scenic trails, historic

²³ For example, the statute for Lake Mead National Recreation Area (P.L. 88-639, §§4 and 5) states that the unit “shall be administered by the Secretary of the Interior for general purposes of public recreation, benefit, and use, and in a manner that will preserve, develop, and enhance, so far as practicable, the recreation potential.” In addition to “general recreation use, such as bathing, boating, camping, and picnicking,” the legislation specifically authorizes hunting, fishing, trapping, grazing, mineral leasing, and use of vacation cabins. Also see, for example, provisions for Canaveral National Seashore (16 U.S.C. §459j-3), Assateague Island National Seashore (16 U.S.C. §459f-4), Cape Lookout National Seashore (16 U.S.C. §459g-3), and Apostle Islands National Lakeshore (16 U.S.C. §460w-4).

²⁴ For more information, see CRS Report R42125, *National Park System: Units Managed Through Partnerships*, by Laura B. Comay.

²⁵ NPS, *Index 2012-2016*, p. 9. There are only two national reserves in the park system (City of Rocks National Reserve in Idaho and Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve in Washington).

²⁶ Lake Mead, Curecanti, and Lake Meredith National Recreation Areas, among others, are co-managed with the Bureau of Reclamation. Assateague Island and Cape Hatteras National Seashores encompass national wildlife refuges managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

²⁷ P.L. 90-542; 16 U.S.C. §§1271 et seq. For more information on the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, see CRS Report R45890, *Wild and Scenic Rivers: Designation, Management, and Funding*, by Anne A. Riddle; and CRS Report R46369, *Section 7 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act: In Brief*, by Anne A. Riddle.

²⁸ The Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service also manage wild and scenic rivers. Additionally, the act allows rivers to be nominated by state governors and approved by the Secretary of the Interior; these rivers are managed by the states.

²⁹ P.L. 90-543; 16 U.S.C. §§1241 et seq. For more information on the National Trails System, see CRS Report R43868,

trails, recreational trails, and connecting or side trails. Depending on the type of trail, certain activities may be prohibited (e.g., use of motorized vehicles) or encouraged (e.g., trail development for hiking, biking, horseback riding, or cross-country skiing). As with wild and scenic rivers, trails designated under the act are not necessarily managed by NPS.³⁰ NPS manages three trails as full park units, and manages other trails within broader units or as “related areas.”

Finally, in some park units, special protections to restrict development are provided by wilderness designation.³¹ Federal lands designated as wilderness areas under the 1964 Wilderness Act generally prohibit commercial activities, roads and motorized access, and structures and facilities. Congress can designate wilderness in any type of park unit, as well as on federal lands outside the park system. A high number of national parks contain wilderness areas, but not all do, and other types of park units—including some national monuments, national preserves, and national seashores—also have designated wilderness areas.

How and Why Are Park Titles Changed?

A change to the title of a park unit requires an act of Congress. Bills to change unit designations—for example, to redesignate a national monument as a national park—are common. In the 117th Congress, H.R. 2626 and S. 1344 propose to redesignate the Pullman National Monument as a national historical park, H.R. 6451 and S. 1320 would redesignate the Chiricahua National Monument as a national park, and H.R. 5384 would redesignate Rock Creek Park as a national park. Laws enacted in the 116th Congress (P.L. 116-6, P.L. 116-9, P.L. 116-260, P.L. 116-328, P.L. 116-341) redesignated several units as national historical parks, one unit as a national historic site, one unit as a national park, and one unit as a national park and preserve. Previous Congresses have made similar title changes to other units.

Why Change a Park Title?

In many cases, the motivation to redesignate a unit under a new title may be economic. This is especially the case with measures to adopt the title “national park” for units that have previously borne other titles. Many of the country’s best-known natural attractions lie in national parks, and visitors planning travel itineraries often target the national parks over other units of the park system. Members of Congress and other stakeholders may seek to retitle a unit as a national park to draw more visitors to the site and to give surrounding communities a financial boost.

For example, when P.L. 116-260 redesignated the former New River Gorge National River as the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, congressional supporters stated, “This National Park and Preserve designation will bring in visitors from across the country to experience the beauty and rich history of the New River Gorge, while also contributing to local economies.”³² Concerning P.L. 112-245, which redesignated the former Pinnacles National Monument as a national park, a supporting Senator stated, “Now we will attract even more Americans and

The National Trails System: A Brief Overview, by Mark K. DeSantis and Sandra L. Johnson.

³⁰ Other trails are administered by the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management, depending, in part, on which agencies’ lands are traversed by the trails.

³¹ Wilderness Act, P.L. 88-577, 16 U.S.C. §§1131-1136. For more information, see CRS Report RL31447, *Wilderness: Overview, Management, and Statistics*, by Anne A. Riddle and Katie Hoover.

³² Senators Shelley Moore Capito and Joe Manchin, “Capito, Manchin Unveil New Sign at New River Gorge National Park and Preserve,” press release, May 5, 2021, at https://www.capito.senate.gov/news/press-releases/capito-manchin-unveil-new-sign-at_new-river-gorge-national-park-and-preserve.

visitors from around the world.... This bill will ensure that [the park] gets the recognition it deserves while also boosting the area's tourism economy."³³ Stakeholders may hope that the change will benefit the park itself, as well as the surrounding community. One House Member suggested that "renaming Rock Creek Park as 'Rock Creek National Park' would help recognize the national status of the park and would assist us in getting Congress to revitalize this remarkable resource in the nation's capital."³⁴

Evidence is mixed as to the effectiveness of this strategy as a way of increasing tourism at a unit and in surrounding communities. On the one hand, NPS visitor statistics show that national parks indeed receive more visitors on average than most other types of units.³⁵ On the other hand, units redesignated as national parks have not always shown subsequent increases in visitation. One in-depth study of eight national monuments that were redesignated as national parks found that the name change accounted for an additional 13,000 visitors annually per site, on average, when controlling for other variables.³⁶ (To put an increase of 13,000 visitors in context, visits to these eight national parks ranged between 120,000 and 2.4 million in 2020.) However, gains from a name change did not always make up for losses from other factors, so overall visitation did not always increase. A more recent study found "no clear distinct designation effect such as immediately increased visits after redesignation" but found higher visitation on average across the system for national parks than for national monuments, as well as higher overnight visits and spending per visitor. Further, this study found that from 2000 to 2016, recreation visits to national parks increased while visits to national monuments decreased.³⁷

Beyond economic incentives, there may be other reasons for changing park unit designations. For example, when reestablishing national monuments originally proclaimed by Presidents, Congress often has used a different title that more clearly signals the type of attraction to be found in the

³³ Senator Barbara Boxer, "Boxer Praises Passage of Legislation Creating Pinnacles National Park," press release, December 30, 2012.

³⁴ Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, "Norton Introduces Bill to Rename Rock Creek Park as 'Rock Creek National Park,'" press release, September 27, 2021, at <https://norton.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/norton-introduces-bill-to-rename-rock-creek-park-as-rock-creek-national>.

³⁵ Analysis of NPS visitor statistics for 2020, the most recent year available (see <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/>, report on "Annual Visitation by Park Type or Region"), shows that national parks received an average of 1.1 million visitors per unit, whereas most other types of units received fewer, including national monuments (average of 0.1 million visitors per unit), national memorials (0.5 million), national historical parks (0.7 million), national historic sites (0.4 million), national preserves (0.4 million), national battlefields (0.2 million), and national military parks (0.4 million), among others. A few types of units received as many or more average visitors per unit than national parks, including national recreation areas (2.7 million), national seashores (1.8 million), and national parkways (7.0 million).

³⁶ Stephan Weiler, *A Park by Any Other Name: National Park Designation as a Natural Experiment in Signaling*, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, Economic Research Development, RWP 05-09, December 2005, at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094119006000143>. The eight parks examined were Biscayne National Park (FL), Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (CO), Channel Islands National Park (CA), Death Valley National Park (CA), Great Basin National Park (NV), Great Sand Dunes National Park (CO), Joshua Tree National Park (CA), and Saguaro National Park (AZ). Also see Sarah A. Cline, Stephan Weiler, and Ayse Aydin, "The Value of a Name: Estimating the Economic Impact of Public Land Designation," *Social Science Journal* 48, 2011, pp. 681-692; and Stephan Weiler and Andrew Seidl, "What's in a Name? Extracting Econometric Drivers to Assess the Impact of National Park Designation," *Journal of Regional Science* 44 (2), 2004, pp. 245-262.

³⁷ Headwaters Economics, *National Monuments Redesignated as National Parks: Insights for White Sands National Monument*, May 2018, p. 27, at <https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/national-monuments-redesignated-national-parks-white-sands.pdf>. The study, aimed at assessing the potential economic effects of redesignating White Sands National Monument as a national park (which later occurred with P.L. 116-92), suggested that such a redesignation could increase visitor spending, local jobs, and labor income. The study found both increases and decreases in visitation at national monuments that had been redesignated as national parks, with the variations likely influenced by other factors (which the study did not control for) in addition to the name change.

unit. Former national monuments have become national parks, national preserves, national historic sites, national historical parks, in one case a national battlefield, and in another a national scenic trail.

Concerns in Changing Park Titles

Measures to redesignate park units may face several challenges. In the case of attempts to adopt the “national park” title, supporters may need to make a case that the attractions of the unit are outstanding enough to warrant the national park label, which has traditionally been reserved for the “crown jewels” of the National Park System. For instance, the National Park Service at one point argued against redesignating Pinnacles as a national park, stating that the unit “does not include the full range of resources usually found in national parks.”³⁸ Similarly, NPS suggested the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial should be redesignated as Gateway Arch National Monument rather than Gateway Arch National Park, stating, “We believe that the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial is too small and limited in the range of resources the site protects and interprets to be called a national park.”³⁹

Another concern is that measures to rename units could potentially be paired with other, more controversial proposed changes, such as changes to park boundaries or management policies, or wilderness designation. A redesignation in itself rarely changes the laws, regulations, and policies governing a unit’s management.⁴⁰ However, Congress may choose to change other provisions in conjunction with a title change. For example, in discussions of the 116th Congress redesignation of the New River Gorge National River as a national park, some stakeholders reportedly expressed concerns about provisions in the legislation to change the amount of land available for hunting in the unit.⁴¹ When stakeholders sought a redesignation of Colorado National Monument as a national park, concerns were expressed about whether this would bring new limits on road access for local residents, and whether stricter air quality standards would be applied.⁴² (Redesignation as a national park would not inherently affect a unit’s classification under Clean Air Act requirements for the prevention of significant deterioration of air quality, absent other steps to pursue a new classification.)⁴³ An initiative to redesignate Washington’s Mt. St. Helens

³⁸ The Park Service later expressed support for the redesignation. See U.S. Congress, House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, hearing on H.R. 3444, 111th Cong., 1st sess., November 17, 2009; and U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, hearing on S. 3744, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., September 29, 2010.

³⁹ NPS testimony in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, legislative hearing, July 19, 2017, S.Hrg. 115-417, at <https://www.congress.gov/115/chrg/CHRG-115shrg26868/CHRG-115shrg26868.pdf>. The unit was, however, redesignated as a national park in P.L. 115-128.

⁴⁰ There are a few exceptions, in which regulations do vary by the type of park unit. For example, under 36 C.F.R. §1.3(a), a violation in a national park is punishable by fines or imprisonment of not more than six months, while, under 36 C.F.R. §1.3(b), the same violation occurring in a national monument is punishable by fines or imprisonment of not more than three months. Also see footnote 22.

⁴¹ See, for example, “Crowd Mostly Favors Bill to Redesignate New River Gorge,” *Greenwire*, October 11, 2019, at <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2019/10/11/crowd-mostly-favors-bill-to-redesignate-new-river-gorge-023519>. The unit was redesignated as a national park in P.L. 116-260.

⁴² For concerns about road access, see Jack Healy, “Disputing Whether a Treasure Needs a Name Upgrade,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2012, at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/us/debating-if-colorado-national-monument-should-be-a-national-park.html?_r=0. For concerns about new air quality regulations, see Bobby Magill, “Could a Name Change Put a Colorado Landmark on the National Radar?” *NewWest.Net*, November 25, 2010; and Judith Kohler, “Supporters Tout Colorado Monument as National Park,” *Aspen Times*, December 12, 2010, at <https://www.aspentimes.com/news/supporters-tout-colorado-monument-as-national-park/#>.

⁴³ For more information on Clean Air Act regulations, see CRS In Focus IF10496, *Protecting Clean Air in National Parks and Wilderness Areas*, by James E. McCarthy and Laura B. Comay.

National Volcanic Monument as a national park was opposed by some congressional, state, and local leaders because the change would transfer administrative responsibilities from the Forest Service to NPS, with potential implications for management (including policies on hunting).⁴⁴

Are Multiple Park Titles Necessary?

An issue faced by Congress is whether to continue using the current wide variety of park titles. The National Parks Second Century Commission expressed concern that the range of park titles is confusing to visitors, and recommended reducing the number of titles in order to enhance recognition of the parks.⁴⁵ In May 2010 testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee, then-NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis also supported a simplified naming system:

People do not have a problem identifying Yosemite National Park or Yellowstone National Park as parts of the national park system. But many people would be surprised to learn that the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, and Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway are also parts of the system. One of the recommendations of the Second Century Commission that we believe has merit is to substantially reduce the more than two dozen different park titles currently used for units of the national park system. We feel strongly that a nomenclature with fewer titles would make the public more aware of the national park system as a whole.⁴⁶

Recommendations to consolidate park titles have been discussed along with other tools to increase park visitation, such as use of the National Park System logo or public awareness campaigns.⁴⁷ In this view, increased recognition of the National Park System “brand” could potentially boost visitation at under-recognized units, bringing consumers and jobs to surrounding communities. Correspondingly, some observers have recommended title consolidation—in particular, using the national park title for more units—as a way to address overcrowding in the current set of national parks, by drawing visitors away from the best-known national parks toward newly branded ones.⁴⁸

On the other hand, it could be argued that a stricter nomenclature might reduce Congress’s flexibility to choose park names that reflect a unit’s unique features. In certain units, prescribed

⁴⁴ Barbara LaBoe, “Herrera Beutler won’t pursue national park study for Mount St. Helens,” *The Daily News* (WA), December 5, 2012, at http://tdn.com/news/local/herrera-beutler-won-t-pursue-national-park-study-for-mount/article_f83540c8-3f2d-11e2-8e0c-001a4bcf887a.html; Eric Florip, “Herrera Beutler Won’t Back National Park Study for Volcano: She Says Her Constituents Want Forest Service to Maintain Role,” *The Columbian* (WA), December 5, 2012, at <http://www.columbian.com/news/2012/dec/05/herrera-beutler-wont-back-national-park-study-for/>.

⁴⁵ National Parks Second Century Commission, *Advancing the National Park Idea*, 2009, pp. 14, 43, at https://www.nps.gov/civic/resources/commission_report.pdf. The Second Century Commission was an independent commission convened by the National Parks Conservation Association that worked to develop a 21st-century vision for the National Park System. Some park user groups have also endorsed consolidation of park titles; see, for example, National Parks Traveler, “What We’d Like to See Across the National Park System in 2010,” at <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2010/01/what-wed-see-across-national-park-system-20105154>.

⁴⁶ Statement of Jonathan B. Jarvis, Director, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands of the House Natural Resources Committee, May 25, 2010, at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111hhrg56648/pdf/CHRG-111hhrg56648.pdf>.

⁴⁷ See, for example, National Parks Second Century Commission, *Future Shape of the National Park System Committee Report*, p. 6; and *Advancing the National Park Idea*, 2009, p. 14, at https://www.nps.gov/civic/resources/commission_report.pdf.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Kyle Paoletta, “Give the People What They Clearly Need: More National Parks,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2021, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/28/opinion/national-park-nature.html>.

designations might not adequately convey to the public the full set of attractions to be found.⁴⁹ A few nonstandard names of park units—for example, the White House or the Washington Monument—are iconic American symbols, and efforts to tailor them to a prescribed set of park designations could prove unpopular. Moreover, as discussed above, opponents of efforts to rename individual parks often express concern that unwanted restrictions could accompany title changes. If, in consolidating park titles systematically, Congress also made new determinations about what activities could take place in certain types of units, or altered other management arrangements, these changes could potentially provoke opposition.

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⁴⁹ For example, the Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve, located in the Virgin Islands, conveys in its name both the park's historical interest (it is the only known site where the Columbus expedition set foot in what would become U.S. territory) and its natural attractions (including mangrove forests and estuaries).