

Discovering National Parks

How does art contribute to the environmental activism of National Parks?

Grades 6-8 Lesson: Discovering National Parks

Grade Band: 6-8

Arts Subject: Media Arts

Other Subject: English & Literature, Social Studies & Civics

SUMMARY

In this 6-8 lesson, students will create an ad campaign designed to promote America's national parks. They will learn about the history of America's national parks and learn about the role that artists played in their creation and maintenance. Students will explore the connection between the arts and environmental/political activism.

PREPARATION

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Gather information about the creation of the U.S. National Park Service.
- Investigate the role that artists played in the decision to preserve the nation's natural areas.
- Discuss conflicting arguments for and against preserving and protecting natural resources.
- Develop an ad campaign to convince U.S. Congress and the public to preserve the national parks.

Standards Alignment

National Core Arts Standards

[MA:Cr1.1.6](#) Formulate variations of goals and solutions for media artworks by practicing chosen creative processes, such as sketching, improvising and brainstorming.

[MA:Cr1.1.7](#) Produce a variety of ideas and solutions for media artworks through application of chosen inventive processes, such as concept modeling and prototyping.

[MA:Cr1.1.8](#) Generate ideas, goals, and solutions for original media artworks through application of focused creative processes, such as divergent thinking and experimenting.

[MA:Cr3.1.6 a](#) Experiment with multiple approaches to produce content and components for determined purpose and meaning in media arts productions, utilizing a range of associated principles, such as point of view and perspective.

[MA:Cr3.1.7a](#) Coordinate production processes to integrate content and components for determined purpose and meaning in media arts productions, demonstrating understanding of associated principles, such as narrative structures and composition.

[MA:Cr3.1.8a](#) Implement production processes to integrate content and stylistic conventions for determined meaning in media arts productions, demonstrating understanding of associated principles, such as theme and unity.



[MA:Pr6.1.6](#) Analyze various presentation formats and fulfill various tasks and defined processes in the presentation and/or distribution of media artworks.

[MA:Pr6.1.7](#) Evaluate various presentation formats in order to fulfill various tasks and defined processes in the presentation and/or distribution of media artworks.

[MA:Pr6.1.6](#) Design the presentation and distribution of media artworks through multiple formats and/or contexts.

Common Core State Standards

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.3](#) Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.7](#) Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.8](#) Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3](#) Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.7](#) Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium's portrayal of the subject (e.g., how the delivery of a speech affects the impact of the words).

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.8](#) Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient to support the claims.

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3](#) Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7](#) Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

[ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.8](#) Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

Recommended Student Materials

Editable Documents: *Before sharing these resources with students, you must first save them to your Google account by opening them, and selecting "Make a copy" from the File menu. Check out [Sharing Tips](#) or [Instructional Benefits](#) when implementing Google Docs and Google Slides with students.*

- [George Catlin and the Dream of the National Park](#)
- [Slide: George Catlin's Paintings](#)
- [Slide: National Parks](#)
- [National Parks Portfolio Assignment](#)

Websites



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- [“America the Beautiful”](#)
- [Ken Burns PBS Documentary](#)
- [The National Parks: American’s Best Idea](#)
- [The Hidden Worlds of the National Parks](#)
- [National Parks Portfolio](#)
- [National Parks Collection](#)
- [Stephen Mather’s Mountain Party](#)
- [Stephen Mather Tributes](#)
- [Ansel Adams Biography](#)

Teacher Background

Teachers should examine the important role that artists and writers played in the development of Americans’ desire to preserve their nation’s natural beauty, students will learn about the history of the National Park Service and those involved in this movement.

Student Prerequisites

Students should be familiar with National Parks, media campaigns, and environmental protectionism.

Accessibility Notes

Modify handouts, text, and utilize assistive technologies as needed. Provide preferential seating for visual presentations and allow extra time for task completion.

INSTRUCTION

Engage

1. Share or display the lyrics of [“America the Beautiful.”](#) along with several images or posters of national parks.

2. Engage students in a discussion. *Ask students: What do you think our community looked like before people started developing on the land? What would it look like if there were no buildings, streets, cars, billboards, etc.? Would it look like a forest? A desert? A swamp? Why do you think people decided to build a community in the area? Is it near water? Is it an outgrowth of a large urban area? Are there any areas in our community that are still undeveloped? (a forest, a park, etc.) What would you do with the undeveloped areas? Would you build housing or businesses? Would you try to attract tourists to visit the area? Would you simply leave it alone? Have students explain their reasons.*

Build

1. Tell students that they already have ownership over some of the most beautiful land in the United States. Explain that the national parks are owned by the American people and were established to ensure that we could enjoy the country’s breathtaking natural areas. Introduce students to the U.S. National Park Service.

2. Show students the clip from the [Ken Burns PBS documentary, *The National Parks: American's Best Idea*](#).

3. Have students read [George Catlin and the Dream of the National Park](#) and analyze the [Slide: George Catlin's Paintings](#). Allow time for students to read the text and explore the images. Allow students to briefly share their thoughts and opinions about George Catlin's work.

4. Ask students to recall (and, if possible, add to) the reasons that people were not initially responsive to the idea of national parks. Initially, people wanted to move to the West and take advantage of the natural resources available there. They felt a responsibility to "tame" the wilderness, etc. Note: If the students' community is undergoing rapid development, draw parallels to local debates regarding highway construction, the building of new housing, encroachment on local forests, etc.

5. Explain that other artists and writers, in addition to George Catlin, had a role in changing this mindset. Writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau celebrated nature in literature, and painters such as Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and Frederick Edwin Church (1826–1900) produced beautiful images of American scenery. Moreover, explorers and scientists like Clarence Dutton (1841–1912), Ferdinand V. Hayden (1829–1886), Clarence King (1842–1901), John Muir, and John Wesley Powell, wrote exciting and descriptive accounts of the scenic western United States.

6. Explain that the work of these writers and artists spurred the public's imagination about the West, and they helped influence Congress, in 1864, to set aside the land in Yosemite Valley as a state park " . . . for public use, resort, and recreation . . . inalienable for all time." Eventually, California returned Yosemite to the federal government and it became a national park. In 1872, the Yellowstone area in Wyoming and Montana was declared the first national park. Nearly two million acres were preserved from settlement or development. Note that not everyone in Congress supported the action; during the debate to pass the legislation, Sen. Cornelius Cole of California said, "The geysers will remain, no matter where the ownership of the land may be, and I do not know why settlers should be excluded from a tract of land forty miles square . . . in the Rocky mountains or any other place." Throughout the next decade, many other spectacular areas were declared national parks, including Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, and Glacier Park.

7. Explain that the goal of establishing national parks was not just to preserve and protect the environment; it was also to promote tourism. *Ask students: Why would the government want to promote tourism?* (The government wanted to help the economy of the surrounding areas.) Other people wanted to use the natural resources on a limited basis; for example, some groups argued that the government should allow them to dam rivers in order to produce power and enable irrigation. This philosophy was called "utilitarian conservationism."

The debate on how to use the land in the national parks continued even after the land was set aside.

Apply

1. Divide the class into thirds. Assign each group a position: *absolute protection of the environment, using natural areas for tourism and recreation, utilitarian conservation*. Each third of the class must conduct research to support their position. Have them generate a list of pros and cons to present to the class. Students can work in groups or individually. After students have conducted research, have them share their findings. Keep a running list of the pros and cons of each position on the board.

2. Have students imagine that they were members of Congress in the early 1800s. Tell them that they are going to decide how to use the areas now considered national parks. Take a vote on the various approaches.

3. Show the students images from the [Slide: National Parks](#). Also offer students an option to take a virtual reality tour of the National Parks downloading the app, Expeditions or view the 360° virtual tour, [The Hidden Worlds of the National Parks](#). Ask students: *How does seeing these national park images change or support position? What position would you vote for?*

4. Tell students that at the turn of the century, a businessman from Chicago named Stephen T. Mather was concerned that the national parks were being mismanaged. He wanted Congress to establish a governmental department to oversee the national parks. Together with his assistant, Horace M. Albright, Mather launched a public relations campaign to garner public support for the creation of a National Parks Bureau.

Supportive articles were published in popular magazines like National Geographic and The Saturday Evening Post. Additionally, Mather raised funds to publish the [National Parks Portfolio](#), which contained beautiful illustrations and photographs of the national parks. This publication was distributed to every member of Congress. Ultimately, in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson established the National Park Service. Today, national parks exist in twenty-five states as well as the U.S. Virgin Islands. Students should explore and review one of the articles from PBS's [National Parks Collection](#).

5. Show students the following two clips about Stephen Mather from the Ken Burns documentary: [Stephen Mather's Mountain Party](#) and [Stephen Mather Tributes](#). Ask students: *Do you think the images from the national parks had any influence on Congress? Has your opinion ever been influenced by an image, a piece of music, a poem, or a slogan? Have them brainstorm a list of images that influenced them. (Students will likely suggest examples from pop culture or advertising, but try to focus on non-commercial examples.)*

6. Engage students in a discussion. *Ask students: Why was your opinion influenced? How did the item stir your emotions? Did it clarify a problem? Did it make you see another side of an issue? Why do you think art has the power to influence people? Does this make an artist powerful?*

7. Share and read the [Ansel Adams Biography](#) by The Art Story. Have students view the “Artworks” tab and respond to a writing prompt: *Why was Ansel Adams such an effective advocate for the national parks? How did his photography help his conservation efforts?*

Reflect

1. Share and review the [National Parks Portfolio Assignment](#) resource. Clarify any questions about the “Scenario” and “Getting Started” sections. Students will research a park and create a portfolio campaign to protect the parks.

2. Assess students’ knowledge by having them present their portfolio. *Ask students: Why is your portfolio an effective resource for protecting parks? What effect does art have when conveying a message?*

Extend

1. Have students research the ways that the government did or did not protect the way of life of American Indians. George Catlin was not only concerned with preserving wildlife and wilderness, but also with protecting the native peoples who lived in the west. Have them specifically research Catlin’s efforts to draw attention to the American Indians and their ways.

2. Have students research a local debate over land usage. (The debate may encompass the development of natural areas, zoning laws, environmental issues, etc.) Through research, students should develop a position on the debate. Have them produce a piece of art to represent their position. It may or may not take the same form as the poster outlined in the main lesson’s Independent Activity section. If possible, have the students present their pieces to a local government official and “lobby” for their position.

3. Arrange a field trip to a national park and have students produce a piece of art reflecting their impressions of the experience.

Credits

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Sources

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O'Brien, Bob R. *Our National Parks and the Search for Sustainability*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Stegner, Wallace. "The Best Idea We Ever Had." *Marking the Sparrow's Fall: The Making of the American West*. Edited by Page Stegner. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, p. 137.

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Pitcaithley, Dwight T. "A Dignified Exploitation: The Growth of Tourism in the National Parks." *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*. Edited by David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001.