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The cover image is of Pike Island at Fort Snelling State Park in Minnesota, looking west, showing the Mississippi River. Photographer Brett Whaley. (CC BY-NC 2.0)

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IN REVIEW

NATIONAL PARKS: CAN "AMERICA'S BEST IDEA" ADJUST TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

By Patrick Nunnally

National Parks are often referred to as "America's best idea." Recent scholarship and well-publicized difficulties within the agency have shown that, perhaps inevitably, the National Park Service and the extensive system that it manages, has taken on important characteristics of the society of which it is a part, for better or worse. It's increasingly difficult, to

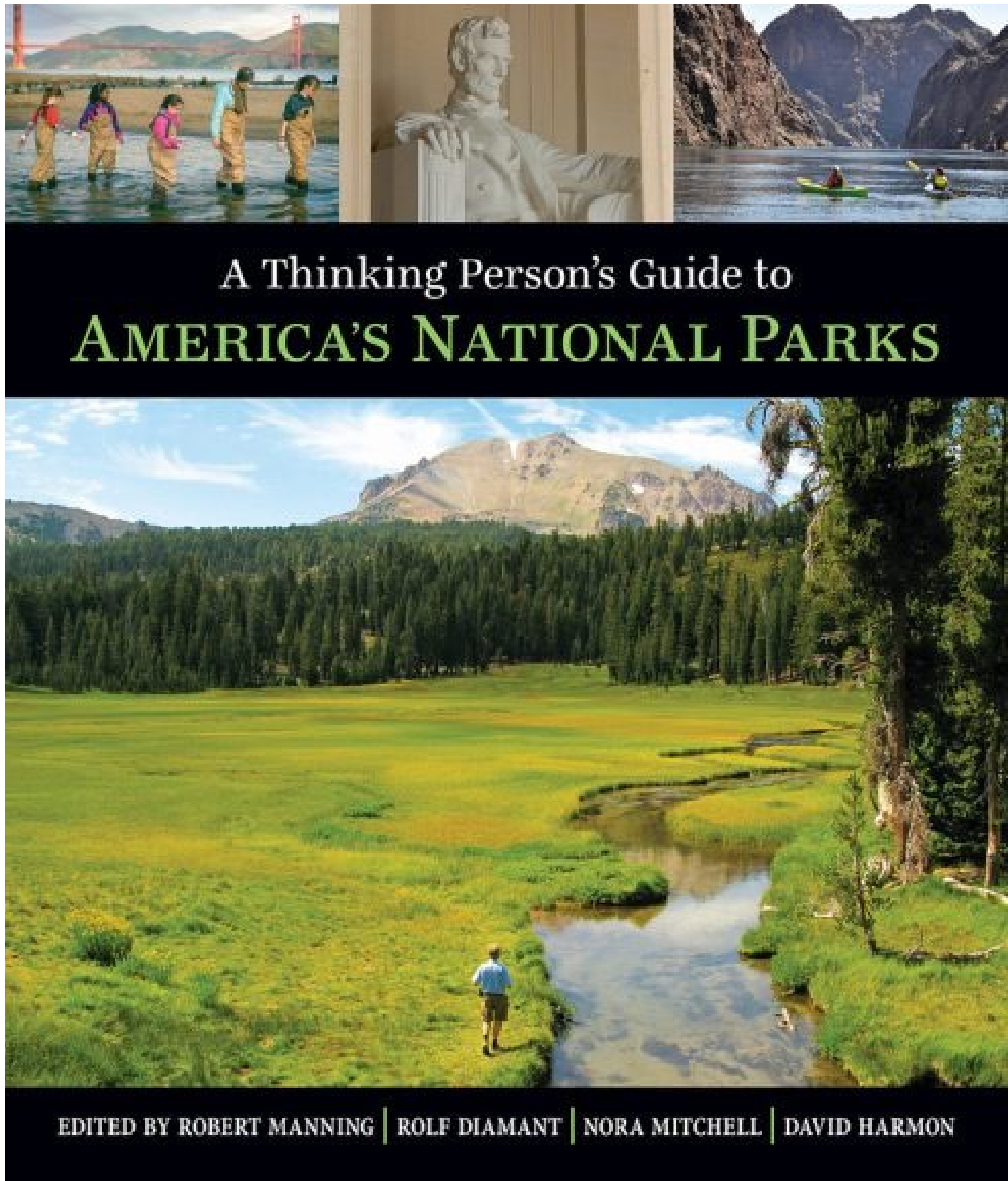
Iron sculpture by Native American artist Colleen Cutschall commemorates the Native Americans (Crow tribe) who died fighting for their homelands in the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn. The monument is located at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

borrow a phrase, to make the argument for "NPS Exceptionalism," as if the parks and the service that manages them are somehow lifted above all of the messy society, history, and humanity in which they are embedded.

Still, though, there is something uplifting for many of the service's staff, and certainly the millions of users, about the national parks, whether iconic spots such as Yellowstone or Glacier, or the smaller, more tightly focused places that depict so much of the nation's history. The year 2016 marked the centennial of the National Park Service; one of the commemorative projects marking the occasion was the development and publication of a book, *A Thinking Person's Guide to America's National Parks*. This volume, and the issues raised by the some two dozen contributors, provide an important jumping-off point for a number of significant inquiries into the nature, meaning, and future of national parks. The book has an overall celebratory tone, but is very clear in its message that the national park system still has a ways to go before it can live up to its potential as "our great public commons" (262).

Frankly, the book's title requires comment. As the editors explain in the first chapter, they intend to distinguish this volume from the dozens, if not hundreds, of travelers' guides to national parks. Those are certainly important resources, but this book is written for an audience already familiar with the broad confines of the park service's history, mission, and overall structure. This is a

Lake MacDonald at Glacier National Park. In 1850, there were 150 active glaciers in the area that became the park. Today, there are 25; researchers predict they will be gone by 2030. Image courtesy of Phyllis Mauch Messenger.



Robert Manning, Rolf Diamant, Nora Mitchell, and David Harmon, eds. 2016. A Thinking Person's Guide to America's National Parks. New York: George Braziller Publishers. $24.95, paper, 2-304, illustrations, "Sources and Resources" list.

book designed for repeated use and exploration, for readers who want to understand particular issues and questions about the system as a whole more deeply.

Accordingly, the book consists of 23 chapters, each of which has a similar structure. The chapter author or authors write about their introduction to, and experience with, the subject at hand, then address the broad framing of how this issue has emerged and is part of the park system today. Finally, they close with brief assessments of key parks where this particular idea can be most readily understood. Given the very broad range of subjects chosen, this approach works well for the most part. Some chapters, such as those that focus on the parks as recreation resources, as places for lifelong learning, or as oases of biodiversity, are readily recognizable national park subjects. Others may surprise readers who have a more traditional sense of the parks; partnership parks, parks as sites for difficult conversations and parks in urban areas all are not perhaps what come immediately to mind when thinking "national parks." The authors, generally longtime NPS staffers, academics, or nonprofit leaders, can't mention every single one of the 400+ units of the national park system, but many of them recur throughout the book. These are stories

A quarry pit, where catlinite for the sacred pipes is quarried by hand at Pipestone National Monument, Minnesota. Image via National Park Service.

about Golden Gate National Recreation Area just as much as they are about Grand Canyon.

On the whole, the book works as an exploration of a number of very important themes and topics. Every chapter offers good insights and would reward coming back to in order to refresh a reader's thinking. An accompanying web site is valuable, particularly for the college- level syllabus that has been drawn up to accompany the book. The syllabus groups topics and themes, from chapters on the history of the American conservation movement and the National Park Service through overviews of the park system's preservation of recreational opportunity, natural spaces, historic sites, and broader trans-park themes such as education in the parks, parks as sites for scientific study, and parks as sites of engagement with the broader community. The syllabus strategy of grouping two to six chapters according to an even broader idea allows the individual chapters to appear more connected, less as atomized individual units. The book would perhaps have been better if it had been grouped likewise.

The final substantial course theme, which opens with the book chapter on "Indigenous Voices," has the most to offer for people engaged with new thinking about rivers and community. It's important to note that Indigenous issues are mentioned throughout the book, but it is welcome to see the inclusion of a chapter, by Melia Lane-Kamahele (Native Hawaiian), focused

Cottonwoods and bison along the Lamar River in Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone is referred to as the world's first national park and is known for its geysers and wild animals, including bison and grizzly bears. Image via National Park Service. Photographer Neal Herbert.

on the fraught relationships between Indigenous people and the park system. Lane-Kamahele lists two "must do" tasks with respect to Native Americans: first, create genuine collaboration with Indigenous communities, and, second, "help non-Native people realize that their understanding of America can never be complete until Native viewpoints are included" (121). These two goals, one of which addresses part of the violent heritage on which national parks are built in the first place, and the other as a model for relationship-oriented, integrated understanding, might actually be seen as essential for the National Park Service to move fully into the twenty-first century and achieve its potential as a central institution for all of the country.

Let's take Lane-Kamahele's goals up sequentially. For the NPS to create genuine collaboration with Indigenous communities, it will have to acknowledge that many of the iconic large Western parks were created specifically through the violent removal of Indigenous populations. Furthermore, this realization adds nuance and resonance to the needed awareness that the "nature" managed by the NPS is not a static set of plants, animals, and

Scene of barrack homes at this War Relocation Authority Center for evacuees of Japanese ancestry at Manzanar. A hot windstorm brings dust from the surrounding desert. Photographer Dorothea Lange, 1942.

landscapes, which can be managed or restored solely to suit human desires.

The second point, that we won't fully understand our country until we understand the perspectives of the people who inhabited these lands first, leads to a similar set of consequential relations. The NPS uses the term "civic engagement" to address the concept that parks are sites for complex stories about issues in the country's past that are still vexed, controversial. Many traditional park users seek a "triumphalist" narrative at NPS sites, where conflict and difficulty are all located in the distant past, and where "it all turns out well in the end." Increasingly, parks are resisting the pressure to tell safe simple stories, sometimes by developing new interpretation at longstanding sites, and sometimes by bringing into the system new sites, such as Manzanar National Historic Site, a California location of a World War II-era Japanese internment camp. As the NPS brings American Indians back into the "national story" that it tells in the parks, that effort opens the way for inclusion to become the default mode for understanding the populations of the country.

The last chapter of *A Thinking Person's Guide to America's National Parks* does indeed give readers much to think about. Iconic "natural" landscapes such as Yosemite, Glacier, and the Great Smoky Mountains are being irrevocably altered by a changing climate. Parks as many remember them will not be the same in 50 years. At the same time, the population of park users and visitors is changing, just as rapidly and irrevocably as the park's physical landscapes.

The Ford Parkway Bridge across the Mississippi connecting Minneapolis and Saint Paul in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. Image via National Park Service.

Park users are urban; some may not have the resources to travel far to large “natural space” parks far from home, and they are quite likely to ask different things of their parks than previous generations. Importantly, studies are showing that the lack of stories by and about “people who look like me” is a hindrance to attracting a more diverse constituency to the many national parks.

Water—rivers, lakes, streams, and the ocean—forms the heart of many of the country’s best-known and most-used national parks. Managing those watery spaces, and making them more accessible and meaningful to a broader array of the country’s population, would be a very significant step in the continuing evolution of the national park system as truly “America’s common ground.” The national park system enters its second century with a very strong base on which to build a twenty-first century system, one that is more evidently welcoming to broader segments of the population and that serves as a demonstration lab for responses to a changing climate. For people who will be leading that effort, or who will be supporting it from positions outside the National Park Service, this book shows the way.

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About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and was one of the lead scholars for the University’s John E. Sawyer Seminar, “Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond,” funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.