

# Inside Philanthropy

## Why Philanthropy Should Recommit to America's National Parks

Will Shafroth, Guest Contributor | July 30, 2024



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In recent years, and particularly in the last few weeks, we have witnessed tangible impacts of the polarizing and divisive discourse heard all too frequently. And in an era when people often emphasize what divides us, we must not forget the power of what we share — our American story.

To truly honor all that America is, we must recognize the natural beauty and inspiring stories that shape our American identity. We owe it to ourselves to explore and embrace what we hold in common, rather than what drives us apart. There is no better place to do that than in America's national parks.

Often referred to as America's "best idea," our national parks tangibly represent our democratic ideals. We all share these awe-inspiring places where each of us can connect to nature, to history and heritage, and to one another. More than a century in the making, national parks serve as America's largest classroom, preserving and sharing historical and cultural lessons.

Last year alone, more than 325 million people visited national parks. Yet despite the tremendous popularity of these places, federal funding for the National Park Service has remained flat. This

impedes vital conservation efforts, delays much-needed facility upgrades and diminishes the visitor experience — all while placing increasing demands on more than 20,000 dedicated Park Service employees.

What we choose to preserve says a lot about what we value as a society; recommitting to protecting national parks is an easy call for me to make. Places like the iconic Lincoln Memorial and the historic birth and life homes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and hundreds of national park sites across the country help tell the story of pivotal figures who have shaped the story of America.

Fortunately, funding the parks has never been the job of government alone. With every generation, the American people have come together to care for the natural landscapes and heritage we share. For more than a century, philanthropists, foundations, corporations and people from all walks of life have found common cause in supporting our common ground.

Robust investment is essential to support national parks now and for future generations. Private partnerships and individual donations are more crucial than ever to take care of these national treasures.

The good news is that over the past decade, private support for our national parks has dramatically increased, helping the National Park Service to accomplish much more than otherwise would be possible.

For example, private funding is helping to modernize the visitor experience at our most iconic national park sites so parkgoers can now enjoy upgraded campgrounds and plan their visits through a single app. Private donors are even chipping in to build new homes and renovate existing housing for park employees so these dedicated public servants have a quality place they can call home.

Donors are also supporting the Park Service to tell a more complete story of America, including collecting and sharing the stories of immigrant Latina and Filipina women who contributed to the American labor movement, shared at César Chávez National Monument. Contributions from private foundations were also used to establish the new Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument, and recently, the Blackwell School National Historic Site.

Additionally, the donor community and park partners play a crucial role in building connections with tribal communities that have deep ancestral ties to national park lands. This work recognizes and respects the value of collaboration with tribes, and with it, a sharing of knowledge and the co-stewardship and conservation of park lands.

But there is still so much more to be done. Without donors — big and small — we risk losing both biodiverse havens and crucial aspects of our country's story. By giving to and investing in our national parks, we can support innovative public-private partnerships that are bringing more resources to our parks and our people.

Let's celebrate our common ground and renew our commitment to the conservation of national parks and our sense of optimism for the future of America's still unfolding story with all its triumphs, challenges and possibilities.

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