

Why People Need Parks, And Why Parks Need People  
By Isolde Edminster-Genet  
Age 17

Last summer, I took a backpacking trip with Ironwood Tree Experience from Tucson, Arizona to Missoula, Montana. On our way, we made a stop in Idaho for a night. My friends and I decided to explore our campsite, and resolved that the best way to do that was to climb to the top of a hill to get a better vantage point. However, we underestimated both the height and the steepness of that hill, and after an hour of slipping on eroded soil, shedding numerous layers of sweaters and jackets, and nearly fainting out of exhaustion, we sat for a moment and wondered if it was worth it to go on. Fortunately, our ambition got the better of us, and as we saw the crest of the hill, our stamina kicked into overdrive and we raced to the top. When we did get to the top, our lungs aching and hearts about to burst, we all gave a collective cry of wonderment. All around us was a sprawling, pristine-green landscape, reaching as far as our eyes could see. The setting sun was casting a soft glow and the air was more pure than any I had ever breathed; it was the most beautiful thing I had ever experienced. In that moment, I think we all shared a moment of catharsis. I felt that my life had culminated to this point, and I felt a stronger connection to the Earth and to my peers than I had ever felt before.

In the world that we live in, it is astonishingly easy to sink into a cycle of monotonous routine; we wake up, we take care of our responsibilities, try to make some time to see our friends, and retire to our beds. Seldom do any of us take time to think about anything outside of our own lives. Humans have done so much in such a short period of time that we forget that we've only been around for 200,000 of the 4.6 billion years for which the Earth has existed. In a minuscule amount of time, we have explored and conquered nearly every inch of the Earth's surface. We have trampled on ecosystems and decimated our resources, completely forgetting

that the well-being of our planet is directly correlated to the well-being of our species. The worst part is, we've made it incredibly easy to forget. With such rapid introduction of modern technology, our worlds are getting smaller and smaller- we can live our lives virtually, locked away in our rooms, enclosed by the artificiality of cities. But something that I have learned through the experience of being connected with the environment is that our lives, when disconnected from nature, are fundamentally lacking - and that is why we need parks.

Being surrounded by untouched nature is one of the most humbling and restorative things to experience. Not only is a person's sense of empathy to their surroundings heightened, but, coincidentally, so is one's self-awareness; something that is desperately necessary for the people of today's society. So many people's lives consist of working in order to survive and seeking gratification through material objects and social media. Being a teenager in this decade, I am all-too familiar with this way of living, and let me tell you: it does a greater deal of harm to the human psyche than many of us know. Studies have shown that the amount at which teenagers are consuming social media today has caused an increase in depression among young people. We as a society have slowly lost control over our priorities and mental liberty throughout a long history of materialism and the ever-present, unanimous desire to be able to function as a normal piece of society. But this way of thinking is detrimental, and it's beginning to make us complacent (as can be observed in shocking recent events). Something that parks provide is a way by which people can free themselves from the distractions and stressors that society and technology present, thereby re-orienting their priorities. In nature, we are reminded that so much exists outside of human life. There is so much to be learned from simply being a part of the great outdoors, and so few ways for people to be able to do so, aside from experiencing it firsthand; something which, without the National Park Service, people in America would not have the opportunity to do.

Without parks, we as a society might lose touch completely with the ecosystems that have existed for billions of years, effectively losing sight of the health of the planet and ourselves.

Parks are what I believe to be the saving-grace of humanity. The fact that people have come together in order to preserve wildlands shows something promising about humans that is being greatly leaned upon and will continue to be in the following years. Our Earth is in the most dire state that it has ever been in; something that I was able to observe when travelling to Glacier National Park in Montana. When speaking to several people who were familiar with the environmental changes that have occurred in the park over previous years, we learned that glacial ice is melting at an alarming rate, and that if it does at some point disappear altogether, it will affect nearly every aspect of the ecosystem, from the fish, to the birds, to the bears. People need parks in order to increase their awareness and empathy surrounding these impending issues. More than that, the relationship between people and parks needs to be symbiotic; in exchange for educational, emotional, and mental enrichment and release, people must provide the protection the environment requires - something that, in and of itself, can be infinitely rewarding.

By designating and sustaining places for ecological sanctuary we do services to both ourselves and the environment. If more people could only see the difference that learning about and connecting with their natural surroundings could make, there might be hope yet for our diminishing resources. It is therefore the responsibility of those who have already established such a connection to make to encourage others to seek it out for themselves. It may be difficult, but in order to create a change in our downward trajectory, we *must* put the importance of the human-nature relationship in the forefront of our minds. We must make it known that we really do need parks, and that parks really do need us.