Sample Exam Questions

*A Thinking Person’s Guide to America’s National Parks*

[Note: In these questions, the term “national parks” refers to all of the more than 400 units of the national park system.]

1. National parks were first established in the US in the mid-to-late nineteenth century to preserve the monumental scenery of the American West. Since then, national parks have been established to protect many other values, such as biodiversity, historic places and events, and recreation opportunities. Trace the evolution of national park values using specific national parks to illustrate your answer.
2. Conservationist and writer Wallace Stegner famously wrote that national parks are “America’s best idea.” What did he mean by that? What do you think some Native Americans might think about this?
3. The birth of the national park idea has been associated with the protection of Yellowstone and Yosemite. How did the establishment of each park advance the concept of national parks in America? Support your answer by tracing the history of both parks.
4. The Antiquities Act of 1906 has been referred to as the “first Organic Act” and used extensively to protect many areas of national significance. Briefly describe the Antiquities Act and its relationship to the national park system. Illustrate your answer by using specific national monuments and parks.
5. The more than 400 units of the national park system including more than two dozen different categories of parks, such as national seashores, national military battlefields, and national historic sites. Many people have criticized this system of nomenclature as confusing to the public. Identify ten other categories of parks, using an example in each case. Do you support the continued use of these categories of parks, or should all units of the national park system simply be called “National Parks”? Explain your reasoning.
6. Some national parks have been established to commemorate and celebrate America’s long struggle over civil rights. Identify five of these national parks and briefly explain their contribution.
7. Many people are surprised to learn that there are many national parks in or proximate to many large cities. Identify five of these urban national parks and briefly explain ways they add value to the national park system.
8. Shortly after creation of the National Park Service, a program was established to help educate park visitors about what they were seeing and experiencing. This program is traditionally called “interpretation.” Briefly trace the evolution of this program, including its recent expansion to schools and through social media.
9. The Conservation Movement of the turn of the twentieth century and the more recent Environmental Movement have been instrumental in contributing to protection of the environment. How has the national park system contributed to this? Illustrate your answer with specific national parks.
10. Choose five of the following people and briefly describe their contributions to the national park system.
    1. Mary Jane Colter
    2. Marjory Stoneman Douglas
    3. Claire Marie Hodges
    4. John Lacy
    5. Stephen Mather
    6. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
    7. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.
    8. John Muir
    9. Franklin D. Roosevelt
    10. Theodore Roosevelt
    11. Roxanne Quimby
    12. George Melendez Wright
11. Proposals to construct major dams in national parks have helped shape the national park system and America’s thinking about conservation. Briefly explain and illustrate this issue using Hetch Hetchy and Echo Park as examples. How does the removal of dams on the Elwha River in Olympic National Park bring this issue full circle?
12. Management of the national park system is the most obvious work of the National Park Service. But the NPS contributes to national conservation efforts in many other ways. Briefly describe five of these programs and use examples to illustrate your answer.
13. The Organic Act of the National Park Service specifies that the agency will “conserve the scenery and the natural historic objects and the wildlife” in the parks and will also “provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Some readers of this mandate suggest that it leads to an inherent conflict between use and preservation of the national parks; others suggest that the framers of the 1916 Organic Act were not intentionally creating an “inherent conflict” but were rather trying to articulate an expansive mission for the new agency. Briefly explain these points of view. Use three examples to illustrate your answer. How has subsequent legislation (e.g., 1935 Historic Sites Act, 1970 General Authorities Act, 1978 Redwoods Act) informed this subject?
14. Many observers suggest that climate change may be the biggest threat to the integrity of the national park system. In what ways does climate change threaten the national parks? Use specific parks to illustrate your answer. What opportunities exist in national parks for public engagement on this critical issue and helping people consider and respond to climate change in their home communities?
15. A proposal recently has been advanced to substantially increase entry fees to many national parks. Briefly debate the merits of this proposal. Do you support or oppose this proposal? Why?
16. Scientific understanding of ecology suggests that nature is dynamic, not static. What are some examples of this? How has this affected management of many national parks? Use three national parks to illustrate your answer.
17. Wolves are an iconic species in several national parks. How has NPS management of wolves evolved? What has caused this change in thinking? Use the example of Yellowstone National Park to illustrate your answer.
18. Delicate Arch is an iconic feature of Arches National Park. This arch was formed by erosion over a very long period of time. As the arch continues to erode, it may collapse in the next decade or two. What should the NPS do about this and why?
19. The national parks are an increasingly important scientific resource. Briefly describe (1) how science in the national parks can be used to enhance our understanding of the world, and (2) how science can be used to help manage national parks in a more informed way. Consider both natural and social science in your answer.
20. Nearly half the area of the national park system has been officially designated “wilderness.” What does this mean and how does this affect management of these areas? Use a few national parks to illustrate your answer.
21. Some observers have suggested that designation of wilderness areas in the national parks ignores the historical presence of Native Americans. Briefly explain what this means and how this might affect national park management. Use a few national parks to illustrate your answer.
22. “Cultural landscapes” are now recognized as a new type of cultural resource. Briefly define this term and use some examples to illustrate your answer. How does this affect national park management?
23. Partners and volunteers add value to the national park system in a variety of ways. Give five examples of NPS partners and how they contribute to the national park system.
24. The monumental Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) specified that some national parks or portions thereof allow for “subsistence use” by indigenous people. Briefly describe ANILCA and its impact on the national park system. What is meant by subsistence use?
25. National parks are broadly representative of the nation’s history, including narratives we are not proud of. For example, Manzanar National Historic Site tells the story of Japanese-American internment during most of World War II. Identify three other national parks that include a focus on such similarly painful episodes in American history. How has the NPS attempted to address these issues through a process of “civic engagement”?
26. It’s not widely recognized that many national parks help tell the story of American industry and technology. Identify and describe five national parks that contribute to this important component of American history.
27. Some national parks have been designated as World Heritage Sites. What does this mean? Use three national parks to illustrate your answer.
28. The NPS manages nearly 50 national heritage areas. These areas are examples of another “model” of national parks. Identify three examples of national heritage areas and how they are similar and different from conventional American national parks.
29. The NPS and the national park system include a number of important links to other countries and the international community at large. Identify and describe five examples of these international connections.
30. Some national parks are now being managed to protect “natural quiet” and “natural darkness.” What is meant by these terms? Why are natural quiet and natural darkness important, both ecologically and experientially? How are national parks being managed to protect natural quiet and natural darkness? Use at least three national parks to illustrate your answer.
31. Many national parks are now managed to protect “ecosystem services.” What does this term mean? What are some examples of ecosystem services? How can the national parks be managed to help protect the provision of ecosystem services?
32. Recent studies have documented that national parks and related areas can help improve human heath, and this has given rise to the expression “healthy parks, healthy people.” How can national parks help improve human health? Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.
33. People of color are historically underrepresented in the stories and visitation at many national parks. Why do you think this is so? What should be done about it?
34. Management of many national parks includes programs and actions to demonstrate sustainability. These activities advance models of sustainability that park visitors can take back to their homes and communities. Briefly describe five national parks where sustainable activities are potentially transferable to communities outside the park, using specific parks to illustrate your answer.
35. The national park system includes over 400 areas. Would you consider the national parks system “complete”? If not, suggest some additional national parks that would contribute in meaningful ways to the national park system. Will the national park system ever be truly “complete”?
36. The national parks face many issues now and into the future. What do you think the most important issues and what can be done about them? How can you contribute to the resolution of these issues?
37. Many national parks are hosting BioBlitzes. What are BioBlitzes? Illustrate your answer with specific examples. BioBlitzes are considered examples of “citizen science”; briefly explain what this means and the potential benefits it holds for both parks and people.
38. The NPS works with a variety of “partners” in managing the national park system.  Drawing from at least three chapters, identify some of these partners and briefly describe how these partnerships contribute to the national park system.
39. The National Park Service works with the public in many ways and on many issues.  Drawing from at least three chapters, briefly describe this process of “civic engagement.”
40. Ideally, the national park system tells the story of America.  Using what you've learned from *A Thinking Person's Guide to America's National Parks,* are there important elements of America's natural and cultural history that are not adequately represented in the national park system?  If so, briefly describe some additions to the national park system that you would recommend.
41. In what ways has the national park system contributed to American society?  Use examples from at least three chapters to illustrate your answer.  How do you think America would be different if we had not created a system of national parks?