

Welcome to Civil Discourse. This podcast will use government documents to illuminate the workings of the American Government and offer contexts around the effects of government agencies in your everyday life. Now your hosts, Nia Rodgers, Public Affairs Librarian and Dr. John Aughenbaugh, Political Science Professor.

Nia Rodgers: Hey Aughe.

John Aughenbaugh: Good morning, Nia. How are you?

Nia Rodgers: I'm good. How are you?

John Aughenbaugh: I'm terribly excited, because we get to go ahead and talk about the national parks for yet another episode.

Nia Rodgers: Yes, we do.

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah. Listeners, joining us for a second episode is our good friend Eric Johnson, who also works at the library. In a previous episode, we touched upon how the national parks generally conceptualized or rose here in the United States. We talked about the history of how both presidents and finally the United States Congress went ahead and created, if you will, a legal structure and legal authority. Today, we're going to segue into this. Yes.

Nia Rodgers: Wait, before we talk about going to a national park, which I do want to talk about, I have a question for you though, Eric, about something you talked about in the last episode.

Eric Johnson: Sure.

Nia Rodgers: Which is, not all parks are managed by the National Park Service, and not all parks are national park. My question is terribly confused, but you mentioned the Marine Park, which is actually, like you said, was the size of Alaska, which having been to Alaska, that's big. That's really big.

Eric Johnson: Very large

Nia Rodgers: Right.

Eric Johnson: Right

Nia Rodgers: But it's not managed by the National Park Service, it's managed, as you said, by NOAA.

Eric Johnson: Right. Yeah, NOAA and the Fish and Wildlife Service, interestingly.

Nia Rodgers: Are the shore parks sometimes managed by Fish and Wildlife, because that's what's affected. Is that how or it's just random?

Eric Johnson: In a way you could say it's random. The national parks are National Park Service. These other units or other national lands, which may have the same names, that's where it becomes confusing, can sometimes be managed by other departments.

Nia Rodgers: Okay.

Eric Johnson: It all has to do with the specifics of what gave rise to this particular legislation to protect this particular area. Generally, whoever approximately used to manage it, became the manager when it become a formalized area. That's a loose way to look at it. Mostly now as things become parks, they are just very clearly designated parks or other National Park Service managed units like national historic sites, or monuments, or memorials. That's all just spelled out in enabling legislation.

Nia Rodgers: Now we've gotten to the point where we do actually designate who's going to be. What we're talking about is a historical problem, not a current problem. The current problem has been cleared up with. Now we put an agency in charge of the thing that we're building, or creating, or recognizing, or what happens.

Eric Johnson: Right. Yeah. There are national forests as another form of public land which is not managed by the Park Service at all. Typically, again, there's sometimes partnerships, which again, make it more confusing.

Nia Rodgers: Who manages the national forest?

Eric Johnson: The Department of Forestry.

Nia Rodgers: Okay.

Eric Johnson: I start getting confused about what's a Virginia Department versus a National Department.

Nia Rodgers: That's everything I was going to ask is state parks versus national parks. Because you said Yosemite, which by the way, I grew up thinking was called Yosemite until somebody pronounced it properly for me, which just goes to show you that syllables, what can you do with them?

Eric Johnson: Well, that just goes to show you're a reader.

Nia Rodgers: Exactly. That was managed, you said, by California. The United States said, "That's a great park. Here at California, take care of our park for us," and California was like, "Oh, man." Because I'm sure there was money involved in having to do that. If they said, "We've decided to declare the entirety of Richmond a national monument," Which I don't know, the drama of that would be untold. But let's just say that they decided to do that, and then they said, "Here, Virginia, you take care of it." Virginia would then have to pay for the maintenance of it, is that?

Eric Johnson: That would be your unfunded mandate, right?

Nia Rodgers: Okay.

Eric Johnson: Yeah. That is very unlikely at this point because of course now it is more of a.

Nia Rodgers: They would build it into the legislation.

Eric Johnson: Building in, but even that isn't always the case. A lot of times things get designated. Like there are five or six things that are currently in the works that say this will become a park unit of some nature once somebody donates the land, or once we get enough support, we have enough money given. Because historically, some parks came through donations and so it didn't cost the federal government anything until they took over management of it. But then subsequently we started acquiring property. Often it is still basically a donation or some agreement with a non-profit that has obtained acreage and transfers it to the federal.

Nia Rodgers: Or a rich person says, "I have bought this arch, I would like for you to keep an eye on it for me."

Eric Johnson: Right.

Nia Rodgers: Okay. Then state parks are different. They're not part of this system, right?

Eric Johnson: Right. State parks are managed by individual states. A similar idea, the state has decided actually natural bridge has its own really interesting history because it was private for a very long time. The owners would assess a natural bridge here in Virginia in the Shenandoah valley. It was managed privately as just an attraction. People paid to go visit it. In the past few years, there has been movement to try to turn it into a state park, which now it is owned technically by a non-profit organization, but managed by the Virginia State Parks. Eventually, I hope and plan is to just shift it entirely over. Virginia will be the owner and will also be able to run it.

Nia Rodgers: It gets complicated.

Eric Johnson: It does. Yeah.

John Aughenbaugh: Well, and also too, Eric just mentioned non-profits may own land, or tourist sites, or attraction sites, and you might go ahead and think, well, why don't they turn that land over to either a state government, or the federal government. But non-profits will at times be skeptical of how well-managed the land would be if it was turned over to the government. You've got that battle. Nia to your question to Eric about, well, which part of the federal government manages a particular piece of land? Again, a lot of that is historical as Eric mentioned, but also it reflects bureaucratic battles. If you're talking about a National Battlefield, historically, as Eric pointed out, National Battlefield sites were managed by first the Department of War within the Defense Department. You might wonder, well, why wouldn't DOD, the Department of Defense, want to manage a battlefield site? Well, they may not want to, but what comes with managing the site? Money from Congress.

Nia Rodgers: Oh, I see.

Eric Johnson: Right.

John Aughenbaugh: Now you're talking about you got variety bureaucratic turf battle.

Nia Rodgers: Just happens to be over a piece of land that was a battlefield, or maybe a cemetery, or maybe.

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah. I know we're only going to tangentially touch upon this. But one of the battles that have been fought for years about national park lands is the extent to which the National Park Service specifically, but the Interior Department, broadly, will allow commercial and recreational activities on national park lands.

Nia Rodgers: We can't even get into the whole ranching question and the water question because the drama out west that that brings, unbelievable. People in the east don't really understand what those battles are about, I think.

John Aughenbaugh: Also too, because in our most previous episode, we talked about the origin; the creation of the National Park Service. Their culture is to go ahead and preserve land so that others can view and enjoy it, which is not the same thing as the culture and values that you might see in commercial enterprises, in capitalism with large, so we have this tension.

Eric Johnson: Right.

John Aughenbaugh: Some of the most pitched battles about whether or not a beautiful, scenic piece of land should be labeled a park is about, well, what restrictions will be placed on x activities, whether be ranching?

Nia Rodgers: Exactly. Will there be grazing rights? Will there be water rights? Diversion.

John Aughenbaugh: Recreation activities.

Nia Rodgers: Yeah. Can people camp on it?

John Aughenbaugh: Or use ATVs on it, All-terrain vehicles, etc.

Eric Johnson: Yeah.

John Aughenbaugh: Again, for those of us here on the east, we're probably not as familiar with those battles.

Nia Rodgers: Yeah, hardly ever do we graze things on the Eastern National Park. I mean, generally we don't because we don't have a lot of grazing here. We have pig farms in the east, but we don't generally

have a huge amount of grazing. I think people in the east don't realize when people talk about grazing out west and they talk about a head of cattle, what they mean are thousands of cows in one spot not six cows like we have here. If six cows went to Acadia National Park and ate for five days, nobody would notice, there just wouldn't even be a thing. But 1,000 cows for six days, they're going to clear off a pretty nice chunk of change land-wise. Then who's going to recover the land? Who's going to fix it or heal it or whatever?

John Aughenbaugh: I know my background is in political side so I oftentimes see politics where there's not politics. But what we're talking about here is politics one on one. Who gets what, when, and how, right?

Nia Rodgers: Yes.

Eric Johnson: Right.

John Aughenbaugh: Because land is a resource. How you define it as a resource is where we see politics, right?

Eric Johnson: Right.

Nia Rodgers: Right.

John Aughenbaugh: Where states say no, no, no, no. Mister or Madam President, we don't want you to designate this land as a national park, and some people are like, well, why don't they?

Nia Rodgers: Right. The commercial interests in their state are political.

John Aughenbaugh: Yes, right.

Nia Rodgers: You go to Texas and tell ranchers they can't do something. It was nice knowing you, but you won't be a politician anymore and you may not be alive anymore. Like that's not a thing. Well, you get the whole pipelines and the land under pipeline.

John Aughenbaugh: I mean, we talked about Yosemite a number of times. You tell Southern Californians that the federal government is going to restrict water that flows from Yosemite to parts in Southern California, they will push back, right? They will push back and push back hard.

Nia Rodgers: That is their livelihood.

Eric Johnson: Yes. I mean, the first big environmental fight was about a dam that was going to go into Yosemite, into that park, so the Hetch Hetchy valley because Southern California really needed a water reservoir and that is geologically perfect. But there's big conflict with people who want to preserve it. In this case, preservation lost.

Nia Rodgers: I'm just going to say, they did go ahead and flood whatever that was to make the dam. Then you get things like the Hoover, which is in middle of nowhere and dams up and make-cities in the desert that shouldn't exist, but that's a whole separate issue. If people wanted to go to a park and there's a park near them, it may be a state park, it may be a national park, is there a difference in how you go to them? I mean, other than your muffin stamps mentioned earlier, like for competitive purposes.

Eric Johnson: Yes.

Nia Rodgers: There's a difference, but for people who aren't in your family and aren't competing for the trophy.

Eric Johnson: Who ignore state parks because who cares if you don't get a stamp for that. Actually you can, there are of course like state park passport.

Nia Rodgers: Are there? Okay.

Eric Johnson: Yes, there are. Yes, in fact, I got an annual pass for my 50th birthday from my wife to all of Virginia's state parks.

Nia Rodgers: For all of the Virginia?

Eric Johnson: The Virginia's state parks.

Nia Rodgers: You just said pass, so does it costs money to go to the national parks, to any other parks?

Eric Johnson: Yes. Basically, yes and no, depending. Yes, the national parks, that's our focus. National park units. Again, you know, 423 national park units, which are all different sites run by the Park Service versus 63 national parks. Anyway, there's just over 100 of them do charge entrance fees. Usually, they'll do or take a couple of different approaches. Usually it's the bigger parks who are doing that. Small local national park, things like here in Richmond we have the Maggie Walker historic house, I don't believe there's an entrance fee for Maggie Walker. It's a relatively local small thing. But generally speaking, when you're going to these bigger sites, they'll do either a carload like per car fee.

Nia Rodgers: Which is great if you take a van and you're going across country.

Eric Johnson: Right. Exactly.

Nia Rodgers: Carrying 30 people in there and you can all go in for, you know.

Eric Johnson: Right. Exactly. They'll do a per-person fee if you're an individual or on a motorcycle. But yeah, it's usually basically \$20-\$30 per vehicle or \$10-\$15 per person. But there are also annual passes that somebody could buy, that if you're planning on hitting a lot of sites, especially if you're going out west where a lot of every park has its entrance fee, quickly becomes a pretty reasonable way to go. If

you are in your minivan with your family and going out to the five big national parks in Utah and it's 30 bucks a park, that's \$150 or I could spend \$80 and get an annual pass.

Nia Rodgers: I'll put that on the research guide. You can help me find the link for that.

Eric Johnson: Absolutely, yes. There's a link. There's actually several different kinds of passes, some of which are free, depending. Military people can have an annual free pass. I love the fact that they include Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard and Space Force on their list.

Nia Rodgers: I'm going to be the librarian for the Space Force. Yes, that's my total [inaudible].

John Aughenbaugh: Eric, you just made Nia's Day for the inclusion of the Space Force.

Nia Rodgers: Just as an aside for people who are looking at more of a local thing, a lot of these state parks are free. You can walk in, some of them you can camp in. I know in Virginia, we have Pocahontas where you can camp but then we have city parks where you really can't camp and the police will tell you not to.

John Aughenbaugh: Eric, This is a huge issue in regards to the attendance at parks. Because there are people who are even park supporters who are like, it's a public good but it's also a private good and the park should be able to generate a certain percentage of income every year to offset the costs of managing them, right?

Eric Johnson: Right. That is part of its budgeting. Is taking into consideration, yes there are congressional appropriations for the Park Service as part of the Department of the Interior budget. I want to say and I should double-check, I apologize, I think it's about 70 percent of parks annual costs is covered by congressional appropriation and then the rest are entrance fees, restaurant sales, shopping at the park.

Nia Rodgers: Gift shop?

Eric Johnson: Gift shop. Yes.

Nia Rodgers: If you get out of Yellowstone National Park without buying something, you should get some award.

Eric Johnson: I haven't really been there.

Nia Rodgers: It's amazing. For the most part, you pay to get in, is that also your parking fee and you're camping fee if you have a tent?

Eric Johnson: That is generally your entrance fee to just get to it. If you want to do some of the additional activities like camping, there is often a fee and of course, again, it always depends. What I would certainly recommend is anybody who's planning to go to a park, look at the park that you're interested in visiting because every park is going to be a little bit different. The costs are going to be a

little bit different for these things. I mean, generally, camping is like 15-25 or \$30 a night, either RV camping or tent camping onsite.

Nia Rodgers: Which is way cheaper than a hotel.

Eric Johnson: Which is way cheaper than a hotel. Some of the big parks have lodges, like hotel basically, kind of a big fancy lodge, and some of those are way expensive. It's like \$500 a night at peak season. I mean, varying costs, varying seasons like every hotel. The nature of the room will make a difference. We got a cabin when we went to Bryce Canyon, I think, in Utah in 2016, which was, as we know now from the last episode, the 100th anniversary of the Park Service. My wife and I went to Utah to hit the five big national parks out there and did glamping. We stayed at a cabin on the rim but next to the river canyon. Cabin, less expensive than a big fancy lodge. There are a lot of different possibilities. Again, tent camping would not be an expensive way at all, so go visit a park, again, especially if you have an annual pass and can just go into every park without having to pay any entrance fees.

Nia Rodgers: If you were going to spend the summer doing that, you're right, it would be in your financial best interest to look at a larger scale.

John Aughenbaugh: Eric, I got to ask this question. Of all the parks you've been to here in the United States, what was the one amenity that just blew your mind? That even if you knew it existed when you came across it, you were like wow.

Eric Johnson: This is going to seem like such a lame [inaudible] . The thing that blows me away continually is actually ranger programs and that seems like such a lame answer. You're setting that up for this glorious thing.

Nia Rodgers: That was a 1,000 foot at water fall. The herd of bison.

Eric Johnson: In terms of views, that's a whole separate, like what's your favorite park, is so hard to say. For me personally, I think the place that I most want to go back to because I was so amazed by what we did see and much of it was on this trip in 99 was Glacier National Park. It was just one of the most beautiful places I have ever been in my life, probably the most beautiful place I've ever been and I would love to go. Instead of spending a day, there, I'd love to spend a week there. In terms of what is the Park Service giving me, I would say that the amenity in that regard is the range of programs are always incredible because they have just like infinite font knowledge park ranger or people interpretive ranger. There are two different park rangers, one is interpretive, one is law enforcement. These are typically what they call interpretive rangers. Then the thing that we get entertained by all the time are National Park movies, because every park has its like; first thing, go watch the movie, then maybe poke around the museum area, then go out and see the park. That pattern. They're just great. They vary so tremendously from clearly this locally made little like intern had put together this start movie. When you go, you sit in a room in the historic house and somebody comes in and hits play on the DVD player on the TV screen. Then you go to see the Yellowstone and it's theater and it's this beautiful, huge thing.

John Aughenbaugh: The one on Yellowstone's like an IMAX experience.

Nia Rodgers: It is produced by Spielberg and it got the facts and all that stuff.

John Aughenbaugh: I went to that one and I hate to say this, Yellowstone's pale in comparison to the movie experience. I almost felt we got it wrong.

Nia Rodgers: You should have gone down to the park and then come back and see the movie.

John Aughenbaugh: Eric, [inaudible] were like quite obviously, I've not been to as many national parks as you've been, but what you basically described is what I and my friends have done, which is, we go there, we see the movie. We go to the museum, we might sign up for one or two of the interpretive park ranger experiences. But then we go ahead and explore on our own. But the one at Yellowstone, I was just like, "Wait a minute. How is Yellowstone going to go ahead and compare it to what we just experienced?"

Eric Johnson: This is America in a nutshell, that's the problem. Multimedia experience.

John Aughenbaugh: I was just like come on we did this wrong.

Nia Rodgers: Can I just throw out that Soarin at Disney World makes California seem fantastic. I'm like, "Be careful though Disney because you setting California up for a fall because I've been in traffic on the I-5, and I know it's not this fabulous."

Eric Johnson: You're not soaring down the I-5.

Nia Rodgers: Yeah. There's no orange blossoms bursting in your face on the I-5. There's just tears of sadness that go on. I've been to a few things where the rangers have or the park service folk have really made the place come alive like the way they story tell. A lot of times around monuments and stuff they gave you a lot of knowledge. I've always been with student groups when I was a kid, we're going on a field trip, children, we're going to fill in the blank monument thing where the poor guide has to deal with 30, 5th graders who are all trying to look in different directions. There's a talent that comes in that; in keeping people interested and being able to answer any question from any weirdo in the group that say, "What about aliens?" You're like, "Tell me about your question." They do an amazing job. I agree with you, and sense of humor that I think they have to have with dealing with what I think of as us the public or us the unwashed mass.

Eric Johnson: Yeah, the very phrase I was going to say the unwashed masses.

Nia Rodgers: Where we just roll up in there, "Yeah, I'm going to camp and I've never even set fire to anything before. I don't know how to cook food outside and it is going to be great."

Eric Johnson: "What's a bear?"

Nia Rodgers: Exactly, "What's a bear? What do you mean I can't cook bacon on this and just leave it overnight," all that stuff. But I think sometimes people think that there's just camping. There's a lot more to the park systems. There's a lot more, there are guided tours, there's all stuff.

Eric Johnson: Trail rides. Depending on where you are there's all kinds; hiking obviously is a big [inaudible] and backpacking. But every park has its set of amenities of all different kinds. There's swimming, in some not typically swimming pools, but like actually just out in the river, in the waterhole, you can go there and stuff like that. If you are interested in activity x, what I might recommend is go either to nps.gov, which is the mass park services site. There's a link right on the homepage called Find your park. In this search, you can select an amenity that is of interest to you and find parks that offer that. If you're interested in astronomical programs like you could say astronomy, like [inaudible] if you want to see living history, check that one off and you can see what parks do that. There's also a brand new this year launched National Park Service app, which I believe is available on Android and IOS devices, where you could do the same kind of search. Of course, because it's on your smartphone, you could be like find park near me and it will just tell you how far you are from the nearest National Park Service units and you can save your list of preferred ones or that kind of thing too. But yeah, there's probably 30 or 40 different amenities and activities that people could do in a park depending on what Park or Park unit they're interested in visiting. If you are activity-based rather than location-based, you could definitely do a search by that.

Nia Rodgers: If you're willing to go to Montana, you can stare at the sky.

Eric Johnson: Staring at skies. One of the amenities.

John Aughenbaugh: I've been to a couple where they've had horseback riding. For somebody who spent a significant number of years working on the family farm. I was just like, "Wow." These were well-trained, well-fed horses and it was a great way to go ahead and see both of the parks.

Nia Rodgers: You can take a burrow to the bottom of the Grand Canyon if you long to do such a thing.

Eric Johnson: You could hike down if you would like to, but take the burrow down.

Nia Rodgers: Or you can take the burrow down and hike backup if you realize that's not something you enjoy. The going down.

Eric Johnson: When we went to Denali a couple of years ago in Alaska and one of the programs there was actually about dog sled training. They showed how there because when it's winter, that is actually how the park rangers go out into the park because they'll just take dog sleds. Because a lot of times of course they're trying to not have noisy snowmobile. I feel like there's could be a huge future in somebody creating a silent electric snowmobile. Because so many of these parks would be awesome to visit in winter if you could get there without slogging through six feet of snow. But a lot of times the snowmobiles are of course, a terrible polluting, noisy wildlife, frightening things. I'm sure it's out there, probably some listeners like, yeah, "Don't you know, we have this here and here." I'm showing my Eastern suburban routes by saying this.

Nia Rodgers: But there's a park for everybody?

Eric Johnson: There is.

Nia Rodgers: Basically, there's a park for anything that you want to go experience. That's what I like about the park system. I've only been to a few, I know you've been to thousands. Well, you can't have been to thousands because there's only four hundred and sixty-something. How many have you been to?

Eric Johnson: I was afraid you're going to ask that, I think it's about a 120.

Nia Rodgers: Okay, so you are a quarter in?

Eric Johnson: Yeah. It may even be by now more approaching 150, and I had hoped to re-tally it all, because we have that passport book, and there's a little non-profit group of nerds that are park stamp people. parkstamps.org is the website for people. These are like completionists.

John Aughenbaugh: Of course, there's applications for your smartphone.

Eric Johnson: Yeah.

Nia Rodgers: [inaudible] pictures or it didn't happen. I'm sure you have to take a picture next to wherever you are. But before we wrap up, there's something that you mentioned and it's tickling the back of my brain and I want to say it before we get too far away. You said that the guy who basically was the head of the National Park Service was a salesman?

Eric Johnson: Yeah, Steven Mather.

Nia Rodgers: Mr. Albright, his assistant, was an Uber marketer? When do we get Smokey the Bear?

Eric Johnson: No, Smokey is an interest. Actually, I'm like casting my mind back to my old days as an employee at the National Zoo, which I was in high school, that was my summer job. Actually speaking also of other places that I think the series will visit, the National Zoo. So Smokey Bear, who was officially Smokey Bear, not Smokey the Bear-

Nia Rodgers: Oh, okay.

Eric Johnson: -originally was actually a Department of Forestry.

John Aughenbaugh: Yes.

Eric Johnson: Ultimately marketing kind of thing and Smokey Bear ended up at the National Zoo, but what is funny is somewhere in their marketing decisions, they basically gave him a park ranger hat.

Nia Rodgers: Yeah, they put the hat on him.

Eric Johnson: It feels like a national park thing, but he's actually a Department of Forestry thing and saying it all, only you can prevent forest fires.

Nia Rodgers: He's an impostor.

Eric Johnson: Yeah, exactly.

Nia Rodgers: He's not a park ranger.

Eric Johnson: I should correct slightly one of the things that you said. The big marketer was the big guy, Steven Mather. He was the marketing genius, his assistant was Horace Albright, was more the behind-the-scenes competent-

Nia Rodgers: Got you.

Eric Johnson: -doer, getter of things done, manager type of person. I mean, he was very successful at also expanding the Park Service once he became director.

John Aughenbaugh: Albright, at least according to some publications, was the one who was willing to work with Congress. Whereas Mather had the big ideas. Albright was the one who was behind the scenes showing members of Congress, but also various presidential administrations, why developing the park service was good for the federal government.

Eric Johnson: Right.

John Aughenbaugh: I mean, even if one doesn't buy into the hyperbole of the PBS special.

Nia Rodgers: It's beautiful wonderness.

John Aughenbaugh: What was it that the PBS special said? It was like, the one good thing that the US government has actually done, I was just like, I wouldn't go there.

Nia Rodgers: That seems a little extreme.

Eric Johnson: That seems a little hyperbolic.

John Aughenbaugh: That's a little extreme, right? Again, think about what kind of political chops you have to have if you're a Horace Albright.

Eric Johnson: Right.

John Aughenbaugh: To go ahead and convince a federal government, particularly as we move into the 1930s, to spend money on something that was not necessarily going to immediately address the Great Depression, right?

Nia Rodgers: How do you look people in the eye and say we're spending money on something that's not food and shelter and whatever for people, and it's because we're saying we're looking into the future, because this will end, and we want to have a country afterwards that still has these special places and still has this wealth of beauty and conservation.

Eric Johnson: One of the big things that he did right at the end of his term, Horace Albright, in 1933, was basically helped facilitate this transfer of 56 more national monuments in military sites. Like moving from the Forest Service and the War Department to the National Park Service. We touched on that a little bit last episode, but this idea of consolidating sites managed by other departments, we've touched on at the beginning of this episode too. That was a huge leap of size of the park service and its portfolio. All these other sites managed by other departments pulling that into the park service and again bringing that all under that umbrella, and that was Horace Albright's [inaudible] and then he retired.

Nia Rodgers: Talk about setting the groundwork. This is now a thing we just all accept as a good thing. Aside from the issues that we have, the tensions that we have in some of the parks with usage for commercial purposes. There are very few people in the United States as far as I can tell, who just say, down with national parks, we shouldn't have any of them, fire upon them.

Eric Johnson: It's a stupid idea.

Nia Rodgers: Right? It's a terrible idea. Why would you want to conserve things? That battle has actually been won, in the sense of there is this sort of acceptance. What did you say? Little bears?

Eric Johnson: Bear ears.

Nia Rodgers: Bear ears. That was controversial, right? That they wanted to let some of that be made smaller. That says that the argument is that people will assume the entrenches of the goodness of having a park, and you have to tell me why you want to make it smaller. You know what I mean, not why the heck do you want your silly park in the first place?

Eric Johnson: Right. Every part has its negotiation [inaudible] the world of political science when it's being created, there's this big local conversation about it, and then like the rest of us are like, why wouldn't you have a park [inaudible] ? Of course, a lot of people won't resent that. The local people who want control will resent this sort of broad idea, but it is fascinating that that broad idea, I think you're right, is out in the world now. We generally are pretty positive, it's like being positive about NASA, which is the only other good thing I guess the federal government has ever done.

Nia Rodgers: On Mars, hello. That's a pretty spiffy thing. Whoever said that was being a little dramatic, I guess. But I like the idea that these guys entrenched it in the American thought process.

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah, it's part of the psyche, it's part of the culture. Right?

Eric Johnson: Yeah.

Nia Rodgers: Those things are ours as a nation. We share them as a group. I don't know if we were the first country to do it, but we seem to be a leader in doing this thing. In making these spots where we say, "No, we're going to keep this as pristine as we can. Or if it's not pristine, we're going to clean it up because it needs to be better than it is." I think it's a positive thing. It seems to me a positive thing, but-

Eric Johnson: I like it.

Nia Rodgers: I want to ask a brass tacks question. Are people going to parks?

Eric Johnson: They are, interestingly. There was definitely a decline in 2020. The highest I think.

Nia Rodgers: People were afraid to go outside-.

Eric Johnson: Why exactly?

Nia Rodgers: Let alone to a park. I'm not going out my front door, let alone going to Yellowstone.

Eric Johnson: There were something on the order of 330 million park and visits in 2016, 2017, and that was down to about 237 million visitations in 2020.

Nia Rodgers: Can I say that that's averaging one per person?

Eric Johnson: Yeah, it's pretty impressive actually.

Nia Rodgers: Because our population is only 336 million.

Eric Johnson: Officially.

Nia Rodgers: Officially with the census. That's pretty good. I mean, obviously, I didn't visit one at all, and you visit more than one.

Eric Johnson: Terrible. I got you covered.

Nia Rodgers: Thank you. Do you think that now that people are going, "I got to get out of this house," that they're going to be out now?

Eric Johnson: That is clearly happening. Instead there was a lot of parks close during the early part of the pandemic, which of course was its own problem because there wasn't anybody to keep folks from going to them.

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah. I was going to go ahead and mention. I recall reading the articles in the newspaper about how because there wasn't staff at some of the parks, people were going to the parks, and basically behaving poorly.

Nia Rodgers: Joshua Tree.

Eric Johnson: Joshua Tree is the big one that people kept talking about.

Nia Rodgers: And lot of damage.

Eric Johnson: Just leaving donuts out the desert and stuff.

Nia Rodgers: What is wrong with people?

Eric Johnson: People are terrible.

Nia Rodgers: Individuals are not, but people in general are. Did they just close because they were trying to limit proximity or?

Eric Johnson: Of course, cast your mind back. That was really very much the concern. We just didn't know what groups [inaudible]

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah. We didn't want large groups of people showing up when we were still actually trying to figure out how COVID was being transmitted, and that was the issue.

Eric Johnson: Part of the challenge is that a lot of these sites, you could be outdoors, but if everybody is supposed to be on the trail, that means you're all in this little narrow corridor. You're not all just dispersed evenly on hundreds of thousands of acres.

Nia Rodgers: Let's say it's a 5000 acre park, but the trail is only 50 acres, that one is the number of people who are [inaudible]

John Aughenbaugh: Also think too Nia, one of the ways we have historically counted visitors is that they all have to go to the park entrance. That's part of the difficulty when you don't know how a virus spreads, is that all these people who might want to use the park, at some point are going to have to be at the metaphorical front door of the park, right?

Nia Rodgers: In proximity to each other, and to rangers.

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah.

Nia Rodgers: Okay.

Eric Johnson: Now what we're seeing of course, is the realization that being outside is a good thing and that people can still do that gather. Visitation has spiked upward again. While they're counts were down for the totality of 2020, a lot of individual parks saw a drop and then a huge spike again towards the end of the year as people were starting to visit more. In fact, several parks still made record, like they had record years in terms of attendance. I am pleased to admit most visited park unit, I'm pleased to say is a Virginian, was the Blue Ridge Parkway, had 14.1 million people in 2020. Of course, that's easy because you're out on this parkway, it's driving. That's the reason why the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina, Tennessee border, has historically since 1944, been the most visited park in the country, because people can just drive and see some of it. People will hate me if they're associated with that park at all. I just wonder; is that counting highways that cut through it? That's just a visit because you've driven past. I mean I don't actually know that to be true. It's more than that.

John Aughenbaugh: Yeah, that's a good question. For those of you who like to look at the change of leaf color in the fall, the parkway is just absolutely gorgeous. By the way, you ought to take a look at the history of the building of that parkway, because it is utterly fascinating.

Eric Johnson: Totally fascinating. I was going to say the same thing actually.

Nia Rodgers: Is that something you'd be willing to come back and talk to us about on a future episode?

Eric Johnson: Yeah. I'd be delighted.

John Aughenbaugh: Nia, the politics behind that. Good Lord.

Eric Johnson: Booting people who had lived on the mountains for generations off their land to build this scenic Parkway. Same with the Shenandoah National Park, similar challenges. Yeah, it's totally nothing.

Nia Rodgers: I'm assuming eminent domain plays a part in a lot of things like building the pipelines and doing things like that. But also, if you're at the edge of one of these national parks, when they decide to create the national park, you may very well be caught up in something like that. We've seen that that's been the case in these federal governments like, "Hey, it's really nice that you like this view, but so do a lot of other people, so we're going to have to move you along." "I live here." "No, you don't. Not anymore." Exactly.

John Aughenbaugh: That's for another episode.

Nia Rodgers: That's for another episode. We will talk about because that's really interesting. Final thoughts about the park.

Eric Johnson: My big thought is always, "Go visit because they are our parks." This is something that we all have a role in helping to create and sustain. It is heritage, meaning something handed down from the past to the future. It's natural heritage, it's historic and cultural heritage. It is the classic Wallace Stegner expression, that it's America's best idea. His phrasing was the best idea America ever had. Again, hyperbolic, but does capture some of the real sense of it. One of the big reasons I think too, as Nia you

touched on, is to say that there is a park for everybody. Whatever your interests may be, you are extremely likely to find yourself fulfilled visiting some national park.

Nia Rodgers: Well, I have big news. I am going to Acadia Park in September.

Eric Johnson: My sister's favorite park.

Nia Rodgers: I will get a stamp, because I will go get a passport, so that I have one.

Eric Johnson: That's going to be great.

Nia Rodgers: I'm excited to go and apparently that is a beautiful time of year to be in Maine.

Eric Johnson: I was just going to say fall in New England. How much worse could it be? It seems like a nightmare.

Nia Rodgers: Exciting for me. But I'm taking to heart this idea of going because I've never been, and I've heard of it and want to see it. But I like the idea of what you're talking about with this common good, that it's ours in a very purposeful way. A lot of things are ours because they're mistakes that we have to carry on from generation to generation. Unfortunately, this is one of those good things that we get to carry on from generation to generation.

Eric Johnson: Absolutely.

Nia Rodgers: Cool. Thank you so much for visiting with us and we will bring you back for an episode about the Blue Ridge Parkway because I'm fascinated by that.

Eric Johnson: Would love to help out. Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

John Aughenbaugh: We enjoyed it Eric, we enjoyed it.

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