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What Are National Parks?

Tourism and conservation

Today, there are about 8,000 zones protecting fauna worldwide, plus 40,000 sites protecting the habitat. Together they make for 10% of the Earth's surface. National parks, through their basic concept, combine protection and tourism. They go from coral reefs (like the Australian Great Barrier or Belize Coral Barrier) to all kinds of terrestrial relief. A national park can vary from a few hectares to 70 million (as much as France and UK combined), the surface of the Greenland National Park. The first national park was Yellowstone, named as such on the 1st of March, 1872. If in a natural reserve usually only scientists are allowed, the national parks are designed for tourism, but not for other human activities, like agriculture, animal growing, industry, trade, dam, high tension lines, and communication buildings, logging and mining, commercial hunting and fishing. A park can comprise an area of total protection, forming a natural or scientific reserve, with buffering zones where many activities are forbidden. For tourists, the natural parks are designed for relaxing and having a close contact with pristine nature. But a national park is not only about flora and fauna, but also about special reliefs or geological phenomenons. The parks have trails and not modernized roads (the asphalt stops at the entrance to the park), lodges and even hotels. In some African parks controlled hunting is allowed and in some even grazing (like Tsavo or Serengeti). In Japan, there are parks comprising small cult settlements, and in India spa arrangements. Here is a short list of some of the most famous national parks in the world. The Greenland National Park is located in northeastern Greenland. Its huge area is due to the fact that the zone is uninhabited; next largest national parks do not have more than 5-6 million hectares. On the African continent, parks and reserves make 850,000 square km (as much as Alaska plus California). Tourists bring over \$1 billion annually to see the spectacular African fauna. Salonga (3,600,000 hectares), Garamba and Maiko (1,000,000 ha) from Zaire protect sections of high biodiversity from the African rain forest. Serengeti (1,450,000 hectares) from Tanzania and the neighboring Masai Mara (150,000 hectares) from Kenya harbor the largest populations of wild animals in the world: 1,700,000 wildebeests, 500,000 gazelles, 200,000 zebras, 18,000 eland antelopes and many elephants, lions and cheetahs. This was the landscape seen by the first explorers of Africa. Famous African parks are also Comoe (1,500,000 ha) from Ivory Coast, Tsavo (2,100,000 ha) from Kenya, Kruger (1,817,500 ha) from South Africa, Virunga (809,000 ha) from Zaire (which protects forests, savanna and alpine pastures). This one, together with Gorilla from Uganda protect mountain gorillas. Nairobi National Park (11,700 ha) lies near the limits of Kenya's capital city, Nairobi. It is the first national park established in Eastern Africa in 16th of December, 1946. The main entrance is located at less than 10 km (6 mi) from Nairobi's city center. It is a rare contrast between the fast developing city of Nairobi and the African bush. Tourists can arrive at the park within minutes from the hotel in the city. The small size allows the visitor to meet most of the large African mammals, except the elephant (but including the black rhino, ostriches, cheetahs, leopards, buffaloes, giraffes, crocodiles, hippopotamuses), in a higher concentration than in expansive parks and reserves. During the dry season (February-March and August-September) large herds of migratory beasts, like wildebeests can be seen around the many pools that collect in the park. 6 % of the park is made of a forest that receives 700-1,100 mm of rainfall annually and includes Cape chestnut and beautiful croton. The rest of the park, with a rainfall of 500-700 mm comprises oat grass, desert dates, arrow-poison tree and acacias. The closeness to city exposes the park to contamination while the partially fenced park represents an important migratory route for the animals. Ngorongoro in Tanzania is a volcanic crater located close to Kilimanjaro. The depression has a diameter of 24 km (15 mi). It is a mix of lakes, forests and savannas harboring all the large mammals of Eastern Africa. In South America, Amazon Natural Park, in the heart of the Amazonian forest, has 1,000,000 ha. The same area has Macarena from Columbia, in the basin of Amazon-Orinoco. In the Amazon slope of the Andes are located Isiboro-Secure (1,200,000 ha) from Bolivia, and Manu (1,532,806 ha) in Peru, from 200 m (660 ft) to 4,000 m (13,330 ft) in altitude. Galapagos, belonging to Ecuador, protects the endemic fauna of these islands, comprising giant tortoises and marine iguanas. Los Glaciares from Argentina comprises 47 Andean glaciers. In North America the most famous are Yellowstone (888,708 ha) from US and

Wood Buffalo (4,480,700 ha) from Canada, one of the largest in the world, on the plains south of the Lake of the Slaves, harboring the world's sole herd of wood bison. In Canada we find Jasper (1,087,800 ha), Banff (655,000 ha) and Nahanni (476,960 ha). Other famous American parks are Wrangell-Saint Elias (5,018,106 ha), Gates of the Arctic (3,277,957 ha), Glacier (405,251 ha), Everglades (560,213 ha), Yosemite (304,380 ha), Grand Canyon (296,439 ha), Sequoia (which protects the huge redwood trees), Mammoth Cave and others. Grand Canyon, on the middle course of the Colorado River, is 349 km (215 mi) long, 6-30 km (4-19 mi) wide, with a maximum depth of 2,133 m (7,110 ft). The National Park embarks its most spectacular area, with many lateral smaller canyons, with gaps, than erosion phenomenon and slope pouring, which realized beautiful patterns; to all these adds the color hues that change from a geological layer to another, marking out each geological era. Annually about 2 million tourists visit this park. The largest Australian parks are Kosciuszko (627,200 ha) and Kakadu (1,980,000 ha). In New Zealand the largest is Fiordland (1,223,650 ha) (it is the only place where takahe bird still survives). Kinabalu in Borneo protects orangutans, gibbons and the extremely endangered Sumatran rhinoceros. King George V (456,000 ha) from Malaysia protects elephants, tapirs, tigers, and gaurs (Asian wild cattle). Gunung Loser from Indonesia also protects the Sumatran rhinoceros. Wolong National Nature Reserve from Sichuan province, China, harbors about 200 pandas, and many mountain species. Wuyi Natural Reserve from Wuyi Mountains, Fujian, China, harbors huge rocks with odd forms, 72 caves, and many interesting fauna and flora species, from rectangular stemmed bamboo to horned frogs, leopard, clouded leopard and many pheasants. In Europe, natural parks are much smaller, not bypassing tens of thousands of hectares, due to the high demographic density. Bialowieza, (between Poland and Belarus), of about 25,000 hectares, saved the last wisents (European bisons). Hortobagy from Hungary protects the largest grassland in central Europe, while the Danube Delta the largest European wetland. Some parks may protect not only nature and landscape, but also historic monuments or art, like Karatepe-Aslantas from Turkey, Angkor from Cambodia or Mesa Verde from US, conserving old settlements of the Pueblo Indians.