

Unprecedented Good: National Parks and the Power of Story

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presented to Boulder County Nature Association Ecosystem Symposium
Public Lands in Public Hands for the Public Good

April 4, 2026

Unprecedented Good: National Parks and the Power of Story

ENTERING
ROCKY MOUNTAIN
NATIONAL PARK



ranger (n.)

late 14c., "gamekeeper, sworn officer of a forest whose work is to walk through it and protect it," (etymonline).



Unprecedented



Agenda

- Staffing story
- Stories being erased
- Story of parks, public lands, and the American mind and democracy
- Story of hope





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A Former Ranger Joins Protest Over Cuts To National Park Service

By Adam Auerbach
 February 21, 2025

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A crowd gathered at the Beaver Meadows entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park to protest cuts to the National Park Service. Adam Auerbach

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Elk grazing in Estes Park, outside Rocky Mountain National Park (Photo: Logan Gutierrez / Unsplash)

GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT

THE RANGERS ARE NOT ALRIGHT

Here's what happens when the dedicated employees of Rocky Mountain National Park start to break down.

By [Fred Dreier](#) • Oct 22, 2025

- Historic understaffing
- Impacts at Rocky
- Impacts at other parks



Human Impacts

“Services are and processes are still running at pretty much full capacity, just at the cost of employees’ mental and physical wellbeing.”

I have worked as an employee for NPS 12 seasons, 11 at Rocky. I have also worked for the BLM, USFS, USF&W and as a state park ranger for several seasons. In other words, I’ve been around the block a few times. In all this time I have never worked in an agency or situation that was so understaffed as Rocky is this season.

I believe because of this staffing shortage, safety (visitor and employee) resource protection, and customer service has been greatly compromised. The park is operating at full capacity with a skeleton crew.



Mission



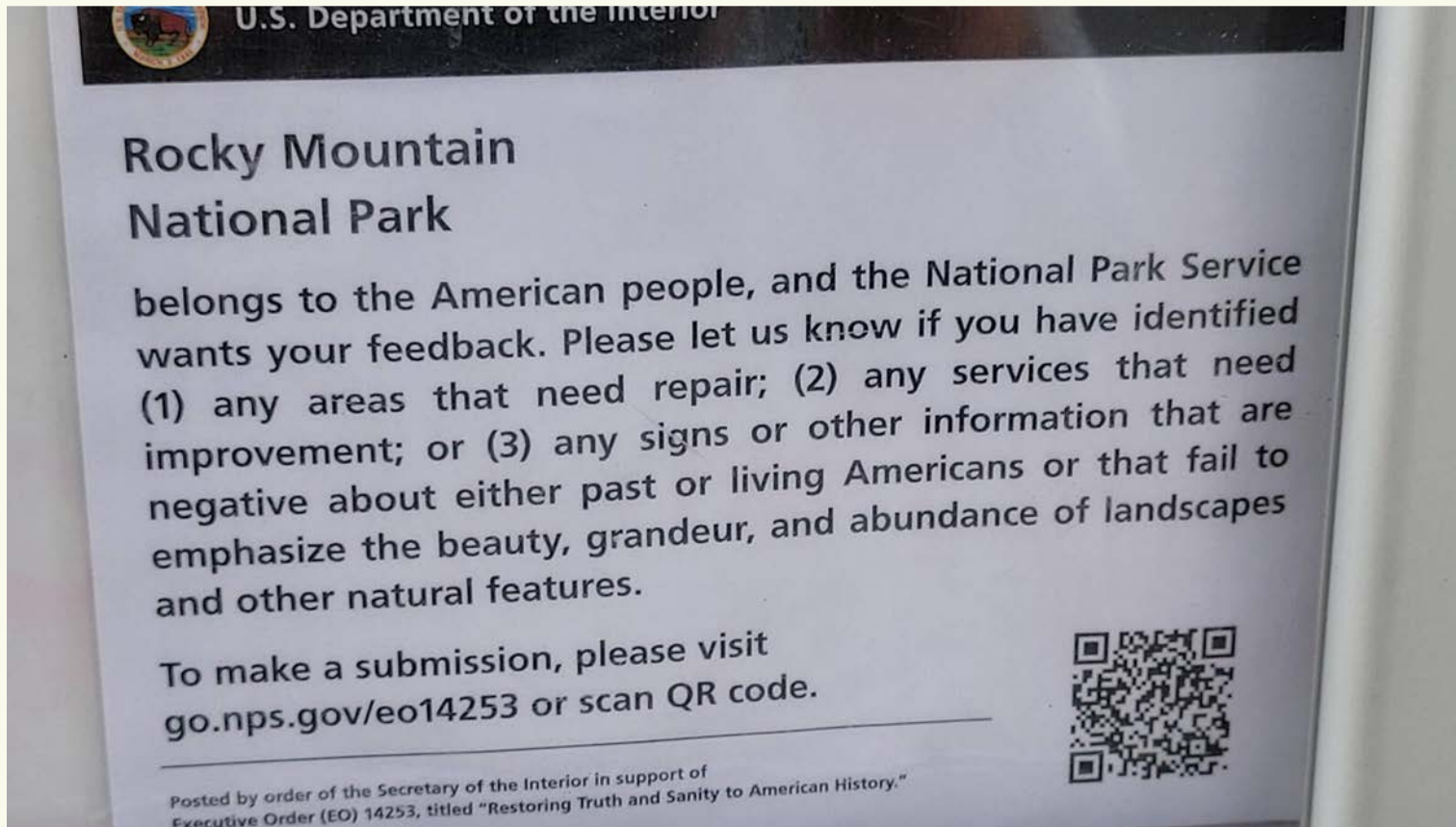
The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.



Privatization



Stories Being Erased





Changing Times



Climate Change on the Alpine Ridge Trail

Just because Rocky Mountain National Park has a distinct boundary on a map, doesn't mean it's immune to change. Taking place on our planet, over the last century, the average temperature in the park has risen by 2.4 degrees Fahrenheit. Scientists have also tracked an earlier onset of spring snowmelt.

This is the view from here in late winter. What might it mean for typical alpine summer and fall if snow melts earlier and more quickly? Here might first affect plants, animals, and humans that depend on this water. As changing climate, invasive plants and pests, and air pollution are just a few of the challenges facing special places like this, scientists are studying how the park's landscape, plants, and animals are affected by these challenges.

PIKA RISK FREEZING TO DEATH IN WINTER:

Changing conditions over the years may mean that the risk of winter and a potential freezing and without enough snow cover could be harmful to a number of them.

WINTER HAY PILES SHRINK AS SUMMER TEMPERATURES CLIMB:

As temperatures rise, the snowmelt that once piled up in their hay piles to keep them warm in winter is now melting away. This means they have less food to eat in the winter.



American Pika

These specialized animals live on high, rocky mountainsides and are very sensitive to temperature extremes.

CHICKS IN TROUBLE?

Mountain and valley birds like chickadees and titmice may have trouble finding enough food to feed their young. As snowmelt occurs earlier, the birds may have to leave their nests before the food is available.



White-tailed Ptarmigan

Timing of snow accumulation and snowmelt, as well as when alpine plants green up and produce flowers and seeds, is critical to this bird that spends its entire life in the alpine.

CAUGHT WITH YOUR FEATHERS DOWN:



White-tailed Ptarmigan

Ptarmigan change colors to correspond to the seasons.

As snow gathers, soft ptarmigan may find themselves the wrong color to blend with their surroundings, making them more vulnerable to predators.





Mountain Pine Beetle



Adult Mountain Pine Beetle
(actual size, 1/8 to 1/3 inch)



Yellow pitch marks a tree attacked by bark beetles.



Throughout western U.S., mountain pine beetle infestation of trees are being killed by a tree-killing pest. In western sections of western bark beetles are found frequently and in the Rocky Mountain National Park, all have died off with local forests. Burrowing through the outer bark of western, bark beetles lay eggs which hatch into hungry beetle larvae. A serotinous tree being eaten bark of trees.

Recent warm winters and prolonged fire precipitation have contributed to bark beetle and resulted in more extensive trees. Hard winters with cold low temperatures can kill beetle eggs and larvae wintering under a tree's outer bark. Yagouage may be several climate warming, average winter snowfall above in the South's Mountains have been higher than normal over the past decade. These more mild temperatures have aided a widespread outbreak of beetles during a time when trees were weakened by drought.

Locally, bark beetles are a significant threat to the death of many of the larger lodgepole pines. The bark beetles are spreading throughout the pine forests of the Front Range of Colorado.

While there is little that can be done on a broad scale, the park is taking action in affected areas most used by park visitors. Where feasible, high value trees in prominent park areas are being sprayed with insecticide. Dead hazard trees are being removed in developed park areas, and where the park adjoins neighboring homes. **Watch for falling trees while hiking, picnicking or camping in the park.**



The bark beetle infestation is throughout western forests from Canada to Mexico, and has occurred several times previously in the past 500 years.



Rocky Mountain National Park

[Download spreadsheet of images from Rocky Mountain National Park](#)



Exploitation of the Park's resources has escalated with each passing culture



Wild Basin



A group of explorers...



Abner Sprague



Changing Times



Riparian Habitat



The Kawuneeche Valley



The Park is Being Recycled



Old Fall River Road Detail 1



Preservation or use? No easy answers!



Never Summer Mountains



Mountain Pine Beetle



Mountain Pine Beetle



Rocky Mountain National Park



Tundra Patterns



A Hike to the Top



Continental Divide



The march of forests up the mountains...



A Legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright



Map Finder

There are a lot of parks in the National Park Service! Zoom into Guam, American Samoa, Hawaii, Alaska, the contiguous 48 states, or Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands to see specific parks, or search within the map.



The Story of Public Lands, the American Mind, and Democracy



The Story of Hope & Unprecedented Good



The Story of Hope & Unprecedented Good



NEPA.GOV
NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT





Closing



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A screenshot of a mobile application interface for CO-PLACE Public Lands. The app features a logo at the top with a mountain, sun, and trees. Below the logo, the text reads "CO-PLACE Public Lands". The app is developed by "Colorado Public Lands Advocacy & Conservation Expertise, LLC". The main content area displays a list of items, each with a small icon and a title, followed by a three-dot menu icon. The items listed are: "Adam's Informal Front Range Public Lands Email List", "Outside - The Rangers Are Not Alright", "Snitch Signs | Resistance Rangers", "Missing Park History", "Save Our Signs", "Look West - Center for Western Priorities", and "Colorado Creator Collective - Event 5/3".