



PBS

PBS TO AIR KEN BURNS'S "THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA," A NEW SIX-PART SERIES ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL PARKS, IN FALL 2009

Los Angeles, CA – July 14, 2008 – PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) announced today that it will air the new Ken Burns documentary series, **THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA**, in fall 2009. The 12-hour, six-part documentary series, directed by Burns and co-produced with his longtime colleague, Dayton Duncan, who also wrote the script, is the story of an idea as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical: that the most special places in the nation should be preserved, not for royalty or the rich, but for everyone. As such, it follows in the tradition of Burns's exploration of other American inventions, such as baseball and jazz.

Filmed over the course of more than six years in some of nature's most spectacular locales — from Acadia to Yosemite, Yellowstone to the Grand Canyon, the Everglades of Florida to the Gates of the Arctic in Alaska — the documentary is nonetheless a story of people from every conceivable background — rich and poor; famous and unknown; soldiers and scientists; natives and newcomers; idealists, artists and entrepreneurs; people who were willing to devote themselves to saving some precious portion of the land they loved, and in doing so reminded their fellow citizens of the full meaning of democracy. It is a story of struggle and conflict, high ideals and crass opportunism, stirring adventure and enduring inspiration — set against breathtaking backdrops.

"Just as many of the lands that make up today's national parks were the spiritual homes for the indigenous tribes who lived there, they had a profound and often spiritual impact on the settlers who first saw them and on the visionaries who fought tirelessly to preserve them as the common property of the American people," said Ken Burns. "They saw in them a visual, tangible representation of God's majesty. Our film celebrates the beauty of these parks and the vision and foresight of the men and women who made sure that this land would be preserved."

The narrative traces the birth of the national park idea in the mid-1800s and follows its evolution for nearly 150 years. Using archival photographs, first-person accounts of historical characters, personal memories and analysis from more than 40 interviews, and what Burns believes is the most stunning cinematography in Florentine Films' history, the series chronicles the steady addition of new parks through the stories of the people who helped create them and save them from destruction. It is simultaneously a biography of compelling characters and a biography of the American landscape.

"Making this film was one of the greatest joys of my life," said Dayton Duncan, who has visited all but one of America's 58 national parks and who is the author of the companion book, to be published by Alfred Knopf. "Each park is unique and has its own fascinating historical story. But they are all connected by the transformative idea that they belong to each of us, providing a shared place that lives in the memory of every individual and every family that has visited them over the years. And they are connected by the notion that individual Americans, in the best possible example of democracy, worked to make sure that future generations could enjoy them."

With 391 units (58 national parks, plus 333 national monuments, historic sites and other units), the National Park Service has a presence in 49 of the 50 states (Delaware is the sole exception). Like the idea of freedom itself, the national park idea has been constantly tested, is constantly evolving and is inherently full of contradictory tensions: between individual rights and the community, the local and the national; between preservation and exploitation, the sacred and the profitable; between one generation's immediate desires and the next generation's legacy.

As America expanded westward, pioneers would "discover" landscapes of such breathtaking and unusual beauty that written descriptions of the lands were sometimes assumed by people in the east to be works of fiction. Eventually, there emerged a belief that these special places should be kept untarnished by development and commerce so that they could be experienced by all people.

"There was a sense that in Europe, you had the Roman coliseum or Notre Dame or the Cologne cathedral, but we didn't have anything like that in America," said Dayton Duncan. "But we did have these spectacular natural landscapes that were as unique and ancient as anything in the Old World. So they would become our treasures. They would be the source of our national pride. But unlike in Europe, they did not belong to monarchs or nobility. They belong to everyone."

Wallace Stegner called the national parks "the best idea we ever had," and no activity of the federal government engenders such universal support and public loyalty; yet the story of how these special places became preserved as parks, the role of individual citizens in creating them and the powerful stories of people's emotional connection to them remains relatively unknown.

Among the lengthy cast of characters profiled in the series is James Mason Hutchings, a magazine publisher who was one of the first people to promote Yosemite and who sought to develop a resort hotel on the land; John Muir, a deeply religious mountain prophet who found inspiration in Yosemite and then inspired generations of parks enthusiasts; George Masa, a Japanese immigrant whose photographs of the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina and Tennessee served in the fight to protect the region as a national park; Chiura Obata, another Japanese immigrant, whose highly-acclaimed paintings of Yosemite gave Americans a fresh perspective through which to see their beloved landmarks; Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who persuaded Congress that a swamp in southern Florida, the Everglades, should be set aside as a national park; George Melendez Wright, a park ranger from San Francisco who recognized the need to preserve the parks' wildlife in its natural state; Adolph Murie, a young biologist and protégé of Wright who was instrumental in reforming park policy so that wildlife — even predators — would have the same protections as the land itself; and Stephen Mather, a wealthy businessman who used his personal fortune and genius for promotion to create a National Park Service.

These historical accounts are paralleled with contemporary stories of people who continue to be transformed and inspired by the parks today. They include Shelton Johnson, an African-American who grew up in Detroit, where the national parks seemed distant, unreachable places until he later became a park ranger; Gerard Baker, a Native-American park superintendent whose tribe has long considered the land sacred; Tuan Luong, a Paris-born Vietnamese rock climber and photographer who fell in love with the parks and dedicated himself to photographing all 58 national parks with a large format camera; and Juan Lujan, who grew up in west Texas during the Depression and joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, with which he would help develop Big Bend National Park in Texas. Also included in the film are interviews with best-selling author Nevada Barr, a former park ranger; writer and environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams; historians William Cronon, Paul Schullery and Alfred Runte; and many others.

Over six years in the making, **THE NATIONAL PARKS** is a visual feast, featuring some of the most extensive, breathtaking images of the national parks system ever captured on film. It contains the most

contemporary footage of any Ken Burns film since “Lewis and Clark,” shot principally by chief cinematographer Buddy Squires (who has photographed all of Burns’s films), long-time Florentine cameraman Allen Moore, Lincoln Else (who also is a former ranger at Yosemite) and Burns himself.

“It’s easy to be in awe of the scenic beauty of our national parks and lose sight of their context within our nation’s history,” said John F. Wilson, PBS Sr. Vice President and Chief TV Programming Executive. “**THE NATIONAL PARKS** brings to life what the national parks say about our character as a nation and a people. The film surfaces hidden histories of passionate and visionary individuals who persevered in preserving these majestic lands and historic sites for the public’s enrichment for generations to come. Beginning with public television stations’ broad audience and continuing with powerful new media, we’re confident that this film, like all of Ken’s films, will grip our country’s attention and spark a dialogue about the importance of these sites and the need for on-going preservation and education.”

As with all of Burns’s films, there will be an extensive educational component, an interactive Web site that provides more information about the film, the parks and related issues, as well as a large-scale community engagement initiative. Four years ago, WETA and Florentine Films, with generous support from the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, launched the *Untold Stories* project, designed to bring to light stories from the national parks focusing on the role of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans in the creation and protection of individual parks and to engage new and traditionally underserved audiences in the educational richness of the national parks.

Accompanying the series will be a companion book, written by Dayton Duncan and introduced by Ken Burns, which will be published by Alfred A. Knopf, Burns’ longtime publisher. “**THE NATIONAL PARKS**, like our previous collaborations with Ken Burns, will be a signature publishing event,” said Sonny Mehta, Chairman of the Knopf Publishing Group. “It is the first accounting of the national parks to weave together dramatic narrative, personal testimony and breathtaking images. Indeed, of all the books we have published in partnership with Ken, this may be the most visually spectacular.”

PBS Home Video is producing a complete DVD box set that will feature “making of” footage and an interview with Burns and others involved in the film.

In addition to Peter Coyote’s narration, **THE NATIONAL PARKS** features first-person voices read by some of America’s greatest actors. Tom Hanks reads the voices of several characters in the film, including Congressman John F. Lacey, who helped push a bill through Congress to protect Yellowstone’s last wild buffalo herd. Other voices include Andy Garcia, Josh Lucas, Eli Wallach, Campbell Scott, Sam Waterston, John Lithgow, George Takei, Philip Bosco, Carolyn McCormick, Adam Arkin and Kevin Conway.

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA’S BEST IDEA is a production of Florentine Films and WETA Washington, DC. Director/producer: Ken Burns. Producer/Writer: Dayton Duncan. Co-producers: Craig Mellish, Julie Dunfey and David McMahon. Supervising Editor: Paul Barnes. Episode Editors: Paul Barnes, Erik Ewers and Craig Mellish. Cinematography: Buddy Squires, with Allen Moore, Lincoln Else and Ken Burns. Narrator: Peter Coyote.

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For more information and photos go to pbs.org/pressroom.

About WETA

WETA Washington, DC, is the third-largest producing station for public television and the flagship public broadcaster in the nation's capital. WETA productions and co-productions include THE NEWS HOUR WITH JIM LEHRER, WASHINGTON WEEK WITH GWEN IFILL AND *NATIONAL JOURNAL*, AMERICA AT A CROSSROADS and IN PERFORMANCE AT THE WHITE HOUSE. Additionally, for more than 20 years, WETA has partnered with filmmaker Ken Burns to bring his landmark documentaries to the nation via public television, including the 2007 film THE WAR. Sharon Percy Rockefeller is president and CEO of WETA. More information on WETA and its programs and services is available at www.weta.org.

About PBS

PBS, with its 356 member stations, offers all Americans – from every walk of life – the opportunity to explore new ideas and new worlds through television and online content. Each week, PBS reaches more than 65 million people and invites them to experience the worlds of science, history, nature and public affairs; hear diverse viewpoints; and take front row seats to world-class drama and performances. PBS' broad array of programs has been consistently honored by the industry's most coveted award competitions. Teachers of children from pre-K through 12th grade turn to PBS for digital content and services that help bring classroom lessons to life. PBS' premier children's TV programming and Web site, pbskids.org, are parents' and teachers' most trusted partners in inspiring and nurturing curiosity and love of learning in children. More information about PBS is available at www.pbs.org, one of the leading dot-org Web sites on the Internet.

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