

A FILM BY KEN BURNS
THE NATIONAL PARKS
America's Best Idea

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA
LESSON PLANS

THIS IS AMERICA

For more information, visit

www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/

THIS IS AMERICA

Overview

The story of our national parks is a long and complicated one, full of competing demands between utterly American impulses – between preservation and exploitation, the sacred and the profitable; between the immediate desires of one generation and its obligation and promise to the next. **THIS IS AMERICA** is a complete 45-minute film that tells the story of the national park idea through the prism of our nation's diverse population, weaving together stories of extraordinary people from a wide variety of backgrounds who devoted their lives to the national park ideal – to preserve and protect these special places for everyone, for all time – and helped it broaden and evolve over the course of 150 years. In this lesson, students will examine the challenges these individuals faced, their contributions and the personal qualities they each possessed. Then they will consider issues and problems at a national park near them and develop an action plan to address those or other community needs.

Objectives

The student will:

- understand that the story of the national parks is one that contains the contributions of many Americans from all walks of life
- review the contributions of individuals who have made major contributions to the national parks over its history
- comment on which individual they feel was most challenged in making his contribution to the park system
- review the contributions of present-day individuals who are making contributions to the park system
- develop an action plan to address a problem or issue they see in their community

Estimated Time

- 1-2 class periods for Part 1
- 1 class period for Part 2
- Teacher determined for Part 3 (class project)

Materials Needed

- Student Handouts:
 - Video Segment 1 Graphic Organizer
 - Video Segment 2 Graphic Organizer
 - Create your Action Plan
- Internet access
- Poster paper, display board, pens, pencils, markers
- Digital slide presentation software
- Computers, printers

Activity/Procedure

Part 1: Contributors from the Past

1. Divide students into six groups and assign each group one of the stories featured in the first part of the film **THIS IS AMERICA** (pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/lesson-plans/#this):
 - a. Captain Charles Young
 - b. George Masa and Horace Kephart
 - c. George Melendez Wright
 - d. Chiura Obata
 - e. Lancelot Jones and Juanita Greene
 - f. Federico Sisneros
2. Distribute the Video Segment 1 Graphic Organizer to each student and have them take notes. Group members can share note-taking responsibilities in their group by dividing up the chart sections among the different members.
3. Show the class the first half of **THIS IS AMERICA** and have groups complete their charts. Additional information on most individuals can be found at pbs.org/nationalparks/people
4. After students have completed their charts, they should share their information with each member of their group to make sure their charts are complete.
5. Then ask each group to react to the following debriefing questions:
 - a. What was the biggest challenge facing your assigned individual(s) and why?
 - b. Describe the contribution the individual(s) made to preserve the region “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”
 - c. Imagine you were placed in a situation similar to the one of your assigned individual(s). What qualities do you have that might help resolve the problem(s) or challenges they faced, and how would you apply those qualities to their situation?
6. Have groups present their reactions to the class and then individually write a brief essay on the question, “Which individual(s) do you think had the greatest challenge to address the problem or concern they faced? What was that challenge? Why was it a great challenge? How did they address it?” Students should support their answer with evidence from the film and research.

Part 2: Contributors of the Present

1. Divide students into five groups and assign each group one of the following people:
 - a. Shelton Johnson
 - b. Gerard Baker
 - c. Ernest Ortega
 - d. Robert Stanton
 - e. John Hope Franklin
2. Distribute the Video Segment 2 Graphic Organizer to each student.
3. Watch the second half of the film **THIS IS AMERICA** (pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/lesson-plans/#this). Have students keep in mind their person’s background and quote and take notes as they view.
4. Then ask students to react to the following debriefing questions:

- a. Review the contributions, accomplishment, and/or statements made by the individual. How might have each individual's background played a role in his or her endeavors?
 - b. What was the main point the individual made from the quote on the chart?
 - c. Do you agree with the individual or not? Explain.
 - d. What would you add or change to the individual's comment?
5. Have students write an essay on the question, "What contribution could you make to the national parks?"

Part 3: Civic Action Plan

In this activity, students identify a problem or area of concern in a national park, monument, historical site or elsewhere in their community and develop an effective civic action plan to address the problem.

The first step is for students to identify an area of concern. You can ask students initially to brainstorm ways they might contribute to a national park or identify a need in the community. To prepare for the lesson, have students do some research on a national park or a community issue online, in the newspaper or by asking friends and neighbors.

1. Have students meet as a full class. Write the following questions on the front board or overhead and list their answers.
 - a. What type of issues or concerns do you have about national parks, local parks or your community in general?
 - b. What do you need to know about this issue?
 - c. What are some of the problems or difficulties you might have in addressing this problem?
 - d. What kinds of things can you do to overcome these problems or difficulties?
2. Once students have identified some of the items, they will need to focus on which ones they want to address.
 - a. Categorize the issues. As a group or in pairs, have students make clusters of items they see as related and label the clusters. When complete, discuss with students the process they used to identify their categories. This helps students see how others see these issues and helps narrow the number of issues the group will eventually address.
 - b. Prioritize the issues. This can be done in a number of ways. One is to use the "dot voting" method. This gives students several choices and develops a consensus of the class's interest. Give each student three colored adhesive dots and ask them to place the dots on the items listed on the front board they like the most. They can place all their dots on one item or distribute their dots over any combination of items. At this point you can determine if you would like the entire class to work on one project or have students form small groups of 4-5 students and develop an action plan on their own. Select the top one for a full class project or assign to students projects they favored.
 - c. Focus on the issue. Now that students have identified an item or items of interest, have them look at the item in terms of manageability. Discuss the following questions:
 - i. How is the issue a concern to you?
 - ii. What change do you want to see?
 - iii. What actions can you take?

- iv. What would this action look like?
3. Students should do some preliminary research to know more about their topic:
 - a. What do you already know about this issue?
 - b. What is the history of this issue?
 - c. What else do you think you need to know?
 - d. How can you find out more information? Who do you need to contact? People? Organizations? Library or Internet resources?
4. Create the Action Plan. Once students feel they have a good understanding of the problem or concern and have identified interested parties, people or organizations that are involved and might be able to help them, it is time to design the Action Plan. Have students fill out the Action Plan Chart.

[Note: Depending on your time and students' ability, you can contact the park, agency or organization yourself and share students' Action Plans with them to see how they might get involved, or you can have students do this. It is also a good idea to inform your administrator and school district office of your project.]

5. After students have completed their project, debrief the activity with a simple post-mortem assessment: What went well? What needs improvement? What would you do differently? Students can also document their experiences in an oral report, slide presentation or online presentation.

Related Academic Subjects

This lesson meets the following curriculum standards set by McREL – Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning:

Civics

- Standard 28: understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.
- Standard 29: understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy.

Working with Others

- Standard 1: Contributes to the overall effort of a group
- Standard 2: Uses conflict-resolution techniques
- Standard 3: Works well with diverse individuals and in diverse situations
- Standard 4: Displays effective interpersonal communication skills
- Standard 5: Demonstrates leadership skills

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**Video Segment 1 Graphic Organizer
Student Handout**

Directions: While viewing the video segment on your assigned contributor, fill out the following chart. You can share research responsibilities in your group by dividing up the chart sections among the different members.

| Individual | National Park(s) | Problem faced | Actions taken | Results |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Captain Charles Young | | | | |
| George Masa and Horace Kephart | | | | |
| George Melendez Wright | | | | |

Video Segment 1 Graphic Organizer
Student Handout (page 2)

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|--|--|--|--|--|
| Chiura Obata | | | | |
| Lancelot Jones and Juanita Greene | | | | |
| Federico Sisneros | | | | |

**Video Segment 2 Graphic Organizer
Student Handout**

Directions: While viewing the video segment on your assigned contributor fill out the following chart.

| Individual | Quote | Main Point Made |
|--|--|-----------------|
| Gerard Baker | "We need national parks to have people – especially our kids – understand what America is. America’s not sidewalks,. America’s not stores. American’s not video games. America’s not restaurants. We need national parks so people can go there and say, “Ah, this is America.”" | |
| Ernest Ortega | "Parks belong to everyone, parks belong to all of us. Our history is there... America’s history as diverse as it is, is captured by the national parks... America’s history is a diverse history... a woven history that comes from threads of different colors. " | |
| Robert Stanton | "The parks in essence are classrooms. All of that is history, that’s the part of us as a people, as a nation, and to extent that we can understand and learn from those, I think it pulls us together as a stronger people and a stronger nation. " | |
| John Hope Franklin | "I know that when I took my son to a national park for the first time, that I was planting in him the seed that would cause him to want to take his family. The understanding and appreciation of the parks is the responsibility of this country. And that’s the best idea." | |
| Shelton Johnson (2 segments) | "When I was a child in Detroit... there were no family trips to the national parks....But always there was this desire to see the Grand Canyon, to see Yosemite. There was a desire to fully invest my physical self and my spiritual self in America. " | |
| Kayci Cook Collins (From Episode 6) | "At the end of my father’s career in 1999 I had become what I always wanted to be – a [national park] superintendent... I have a four-year-old son, Sean, and he has already expressed an interest in being a ranger like his mommy. " | |

**Creating your Action Plan
Student Handout**

Directions:

1. As you fill out the chart in your group, consider the following questions:
 - What do you want to accomplish?
 - What tasks need to be completed? In what order?
 - What is your timeline for completing each task?
 - Who will be responsible for each task?
 - What actions will they take to complete the task(s)?
 - What kind of assistance will they need?
2. Check off the task when it is completed
3. Review the plan frequently to make any modifications.
4. Use a second sheet of paper if necessary.

Title of project or objective _____

| Tasks | Completion Date | Person Responsible | Actions | Assistance Needed | Task Completed ✓ |
|-------|-----------------|--------------------|---------|-------------------|---------------------|
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