

NATIONAL PARKS

National Geographic app brings Mother Nature's beauty to your mobile device

Monday will be the third Earth Day to pass since I started writing this column. The last two years, I wrote about websites that help you lessen the negative impact that a person living in a modern society has on the environment. This year, I'm writing about an app that shows why we should care about treating the Earth better:

National Parks is an app produced by the Earth-loving staff at National Geographic, and sponsored by the image-loving folks at Canon. It serves as a guide to many of the national parks in America. Viewing the app's spectacular photographs of the nation's greatest natural treasures should

be enough to convince anyone that our world is worth saving.

America's best idea

Yellowstone was the nation's first national park, established by a presidential act signed by Ulysses S. Grant in 1872. The national park designation was the result of the efforts of a small group of visionaries who felt that America's natural wonders rivaled the great castles and cathedrals of Europe. Famed naturalist John Muir argued that these wild places were necessary for the soul. Writer and historian Wallace Stegner felt that creating national parks was "the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst."

The number of places designated as national parks quickly grew. Pres-

ident Theodore Roosevelt added five during his tenure in the early 1900s. The National Park Service was established by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916 to oversee the parks. Today, there are 401 parks covering more than 84 million acres in every state except for Delaware, and in several U.S. territories.

Wish you were here

Launching the app displays a slide show of images from various parks. National Geographic has long been known for its beautiful photography, and these pictures are no exception. I loaded the app on my iPad. It also works on iPhones and iPods, but with their smaller screens you probably won't be able to appreciate the photos as much.

Tapping on the screen takes you to a gallery of images from all of the parks that are featured. Currently, only the 25 most-visited parks are featured, but new parks will be added over time.

Tap on one of the gallery images to bring up information on that particular park. Each profile starts with a series of scenic photos of different areas in the park. In the lower right corner of the screen are clickable icons featuring current weather information and stats on the park. In the center of the screen is a link to buy a more complete guide to the park for \$1.99.

Scrolling down the page reveals a brief description of the park and advice on what to do there. There's a set of buttons to the right of the text. One provides information on visitor services, park fees, contact information, links to the park's website and more. The next one has information on the best times to go and how to get there. The third has information

on campsites and lodging in the park. There are maps, rates and more information for each of the accommodations listed.

Back at the top of the screen there are two buttons labeled "guide" and "map." The guide section is what you've been viewing by default. Select map to view a topographical map of the park. You can use hand gestures to zoom and pan the map. There are markers on the map indicating points of interest, accommodations and photo sites. You can filter the information that is displayed by the season when you plan to visit and the activities you're interested in, such as camping, driving, etc.

Looks and works great

If you return to the home page there's a search tab on the right side. You can search for national parks by region, state, season or activity. In the upper left of the screen is an icon that reveals some of the app's other features. There's a photo gallery featuring images from National Geographic's archives as well as photos submitted by fans. You can save itineraries in another section. A news section takes you to articles on the various parks and related subjects. The Editors' Picks section describes favorite hikes in some of the parks. Finally, an Information section takes you to controls that help you manage the app, get support and more.

As you would expect from National Geographic, the app is well designed. It looks great and functions smoothly and intuitively. It also reminds us that Earth is a wonderful place and we need to take care of it.

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