At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States had five national parks that were celebrated for their unique and monumental features and their pristine natural beauty: Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, Mount Rainier, and Crater Lake. These parks are still considered by the American public to be some of the “gems” of the national park system, preserving the world’s largest trees, an amazingly deep lake, and geothermal oddities and wonders. With the founding of Yellowstone, the country’s first national park, in 1872, the federal government set a precedent for the preservation of the monumental, the extraordinary, and even the bizarre in nature. Parks were expected to possess a breathtaking or strikingly unusual natural wonder that would appeal to visitors. Early park tourists anticipated seeing grand natural phenomena that would rival famous Old World attractions.

The nation’s eighth national park was founded in 1903 in the southwest corner of South Dakota. In many critics’ estimations, however, Wind Cave National Park did not meet the high standards of grandeur and splendor set by its precursors. In his celebrated history of the United States National Park system, Our National Park Policy: A Critical History, John Ise deemed Wind Cave to be an “inferior” park and argued that it “did not measure up” to other early reserves. In the 1930s, Harlean James of the American Planning and Civic Association said the cave was an “interesting” phenomenon but should have been a state park rather than a national park. As late as 1980, Joseph Sax argued in Mountains without Handrails that the nation had “added obscurity to magnificence” by including Wind Cave among the ranks of the national parks. Even Robert Sterling Yard of the
National Parks Association dedicated only five sentences to Wind Cave in *The Book of the National Parks*, a seemingly uncritical celebration of America's national parks and monuments.\(^1\) How Wind Cave National Park achieved and maintained its status prior to the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916 and in the years since offers insight into the procedures and policies, or lack thereof, that have driven the country's preservation of natural history and wilderness. The history of Wind Cave also highlights the importance national parks had gained as symbols of America's greatness by the beginning of the twentieth century.

The early national parks were designed to protect nature's monuments and were also expected to provide for the recreational wants of visitors. Wildlife protection was a secondary concern. The late-nineteenth-century urban middle class, however, became increasingly interested in the "wilderness" experience that national parks supposedly offered. By the time the National Park Service came into existence, Americans viewed national parks as wilderness and wildlife reserves as well as tourist attractions. Thus, park superintendents began to include the protection of big game as part of their mission. Officials struggled to strike a balance between developing the parks and protecting wildlife. Ironically, the additional tourists the big game attracted to the parks compounded the difficulties of the animals' protection by making more roads, concessions, and other facilities that catered to tourists necessary.\(^2\)

As a national park, Wind Cave was expected to meet these vague, idiosyncratic, and conflicting standards. When it failed to measure up, other park boosters and writers criticized Wind Cave, and the Department of the Interior questioned its park status. In return, the National Park Service dealt with Wind Cave and other supposedly


inferior parks by “reshaping” them to fulfill park standards or by terminating them altogether. In the case of Wind Cave National Park, its major attraction, the cave itself, was viewed as somewhat less than monumental. The park service, however, promoted the site’s undeveloped prairie lands and its wildlife preserve, ultimately saving Wind Cave’s national park status.

The discovery of the cave that became the centerpiece of Wind Cave National Park is shrouded in the myth and folklore of the surrounding Black Hills. While American Indians in the area probably knew about the cave for generations, local legend has credited a number of cowboys, outlaws, and explorers with finding it. Two hunters, Tom and Jesse Bingham, have been linked to the cave’s “discovery” in 1881. Although they may not have been the first non-Indians to take notice of the cave, they sparked the local interest in it that would culminate in the creation of a national park.3

The Bingham’s located the cave because of a unique natural phenomenon—a strong breeze that blew in or out of its only natural opening with changes in barometric pressure. As they passed the eight-by-ten-inch opening, their hats blew off. After the Bingham’s showed the opening to a few friends, who helped them enlarge it, interest in the cave began to grow. A few parties of adventurers from the nearby town of Hot Springs did some initial exploration of the cave in the 1880s. Area residents began to call it “Cave of the Winds,” or “Wind Cave,” the name by which it was consistently known in the local press by the end of the decade.

As its existence became widely known, another party, the South Dakota Mining Company, became interested in the cave for reasons other than its recreational value. In 1890, company owners hired Jesse McDonald to manage their claim of the property. McDonald did not find valuable minerals in the cave, and the South Dakota Mining Company finally discharged him. McDonald and his family remained on the land as squatters, however, and began developing and promoting Wind Cave as a tourist attraction. They built a tiny cabin over the mouth, explored the system extensively, named rooms and formations, and collected specimens that McDonald took to town to drum up interest in his new tourist attraction.

The family was soon guiding a steady stream of curious visitors underground. The tours were physically rigorous because there were no established paths or electric lights. The McDonalds, however, were not turning enough profit to support themselves. Jesse, therefore, sold half of his interest in the cave to John Stabler, the manager of a hotel in Hot Springs. While the McDonalds and the Stablers staged a number of publicity stunts to promote Wind Cave, it achieved national recognition when Jesse McDonald and his son Alvin displayed a collection of cave specimens at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The public-relations triumph soon turned to tragedy, however, when Alvin died of typhus, which he contracted during the trip.

After Alvin’s death, the McDonalds, the Stablers, and the South Dakota Mining Company became locked in a legal battle for the cave. The McDonalds and the Stablers were dissatisfied with their partnership and tried to file separate mineral claims on the cave and agricultural claims on the land above it. Meanwhile, the South Dakota Mining Company recognized that the other parties had begun to profit from tourism and sought a judgment for rents and damages. Ironi-
cally, these legal maneuvers, combined with the national publicity that the McDonalds and the Stablers had generated for the cave, contributed to the eventual creation of Wind Cave National Park.

Following years of protracted litigation, the United States Geological Survey sent two representatives to assess the cave as a possible future national park. Apparently impressed with its aesthetic merits, the surveyors referred in their report to formations and rooms by the

*Alvin McDonald explored substantial portions of Wind Cave's rooms and passages before his death in 1893.*
names the McDonalds had given them. They also noted the cave’s unique geologic formations: boxwork, composed of intersecting blades of calcium carbonate that have the appearance of post-office mail slots, and frostwork, crystalline formations that cover the cave’s walls like snow. The secretary of the interior did not recommend the creation of a national park in 1898, however, for the private claims had yet to be settled. By 1900, the federal government had ascertained that none of the parties contesting for control of Wind Cave had legitimate claims. No one had attempted to farm or mine the area, nor was there any indication that the land would be valuable for agriculture or mining in the future. Without these claims blocking the way, the door was open for the federal government to create a national park.

The story might have been different, however, if Wind Cave had possessed valuable minerals or if the prairie above had been fertile farmland. The federal government had clearly established a precedent of creating national parks only in areas where the interests of lumbering, mining, or agriculture would not be jeopardized. Congress traditionally had placed the interests of extractive industries over the ideal of aesthetic or wilderness conservation. As early as 1873, Ferdinand V. Hayden of the Geological Survey had had to reassure a wary Congress that Yellowstone was completely devoid of any industrial use before the first national park was created. Likewise, Sequoia National Park, established in 1890, would preserve trees deemed to be useless and inaccessible to lumbering interests.

Wind Cave clearly had merit as a tourist attraction, which could economically benefit both its proprietor and the surrounding communities, but Congress did not value the tourism industry as it did the nation’s extractive industries.

While Wind Cave’s “worthlessness” paved the way for its future national park status, its reputation as a monumental feature of the American landscape was the main reason for reserving it. Congress had set the basic standard for future national parks when it created Yellowstone to preserve curious geothermal phenomena rather than

5. Ibid., p. 1; Runte, Our National Park Policy, p. 137.
Among the features that recommended Wind Cave for national park status was the extensive boxwork that decorated its walls and ceilings.
The cave's "Ribbon Room" featured an unusual mineral deposit called mule-ear drapery.

Much of Wind Cave's value as a natural landmark rested on speculation that its cavern system might be the largest in the United States. At the time, Mammoth Cave in Kentucky was the only standard for comparison. Wind Cave's reputation for expansiveness and unique natural beauty was also enhanced when Special Agent M. A. Meyendorff of the Interior Department reported that he could offer it "a second place to the Yellowstone . . . and declare the Wind Cave superior, in the point of attractiveness to the Mammoth Cave."

Meyendorff admired the cave’s boxwork and geodes, lamented the damage specimen collectors had done, and speculated on the beauty of areas yet to be explored. With confirmation that the cave possessed scientific and aesthetic merit and could be a truly monumental attraction, the Department of the Interior recommended Wind Cave for national park status. No one was particularly concerned with preserving a representative sample of the Great Plains landscape in this new park. Such lands would be set aside only because they were above a wonderful cave.

Representative William Lacey of Iowa spoke on behalf of the Wind Cave National Park proposal in Congress. A staunch supporter of national parks, he informed his colleagues that the area “is substantially what the Yellowstone country would be if the geysers should die. . . . The active forces are no longer in operation . . . but a series of very wonderful caves remain.” He may also have reassured otherwise leery Congressmen that Wind Cave was just as “worthless” as Yellowstone. In any case, the legislation creating Wind Cave National Park quietly passed both houses, and President Theodore Roosevelt signed the bill into law on 9 January 1903.

Soon after its creation, a few critics questioned the new park’s worthiness. Indeed, Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger said in 1910 that Wind Cave should not be a national park. Likewise, many critics and historians have regarded Wind Cave as an “inferior” park. Part of this criticism stemmed from the discovery that the cave was likely smaller than Mammoth Cave. In addition, by the 1920s, Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, which had been identified as the nation’s largest cavern system, began receiving national recognition. As the comparisons diminished Wind Cave’s reputation, some began to question its status as a national park.

Even though a number of park supporters criticized this national park, most believed it was valuable enough to be preserved. In addition to its extensive size, Wind Cave’s boxwork and frostwork

11. Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota, p. 75.
12. Ise, Our National Park Policy, p. 139.
formations were unique and impressive. The park was also located in the picturesque Black Hills, with Custer State Park, Jewel Cave, and the historic towns of Deadwood and Lead nearby. Nonetheless, some critics believed that scientific merit and pleasant surroundings were insufficient criteria for establishing a national park. From this perspective, national monument or state park status might have been more fitting. In 1903, however, national monument status for Wind Cave was not an option. Created in 1906, this designation recognizes some particular archaeological or natural feature, requirements Wind Cave likely would have met.14

Although Robert Sterling Yard charged that Wind Cave National Park was a glorified "picnic site,"15 it could, and did, cater to a significant number of summer tourists. From 1903 to 1916, the park consistently attracted between three and four thousand visitors annually, with a total of nine thousand in 1916. While Yellowstone and the Platt National Park in Oklahoma attracted far more tourists, Wind


Guided tours like the one pictured here attracted increasing numbers of visitors in search of a unique recreational experience.
Cave's numbers compared favorably with those at Sequoia, General Grant, and Crater Lake National Parks during the same period.16

Prior to the creation of the National Park Service, Wind Cave usually received an appropriation of twenty-five hundred dollars per year. Even though the allocation was minimal, it reflected the general pattern for congressional financing of national parks rather than any hostility toward Wind Cave in particular. Many congressmen clung to the idea that national parks could and should be self-supporting through admissions revenues and licensing fees for concessions, a concept first articulated when Yellowstone was created. Still others believed the national parks did not need money for protection and development; simply setting aside the land was enough. As a result, the parks consistently received little funding from Congress.17

While Wind Cave's annual appropriations were adequate to pay the superintendent's salary, maintain roads and the park's headquarters, impound stray cattle, and open new passageways, developments such as electric lamps for the cave and a more reliable water supply were delayed. Nonetheless, the new park met the recreational wants of its visitors, including guided lamplight tours of the cave by the McDonald and Stabler children and others. Tourists could make a day trip to the park or camp overnight.18

The superintendent had the power to license concessionaires. Wagon and automobile tours from Hot Springs to the national park were the most common services. In 1913, Wind Cave's superintendent issued nine permits for these operations. The fifty-dollar license fee augmented the park's meager congressional appropriations. Although there was not a great deal of demand for food service in the park, the first park superintendent granted his own wife a permit to serve meals to tourists.19


The Cave has been thrown open to the public by the Government.

Arrangements for Guides, Lights, etc., may be made at the office of the

JENSEN LIVERY & STAGE CO.

Daily Coaches are run to the Cave, leaving at 8:30 a.m.

PHONE No. 6.  HOT SPRINGS, S. D.  C. L. JENSEN, MANAGER.

Local business owners such as C. L. Jensen, whose coach and guiding services were advertised in an early park leaflet, performed a variety of duties for visitors.

In 1911, the American Bison Society asked Congress to approve the establishment of a bison preserve in Wind Cave National Park. The following year, lawmakers established the new preserve, whose facilities and animals would be managed by the United States Bio-
logical Survey. The American Bison Society provided twenty-six thousand dollars for buildings, fences, and an improved water system. The society also donated fourteen head of bison. By 1915, the preserve boasted sixteen bison, sixteen elk, and eleven antelope. Historian John Bohi argued that the establishment of the game preserve was the most important event in the park's first twenty-five years. With the introduction of the big game, Wind Cave National Park received a new tourist attraction. The superintendent soon realized the bison's potential as an amusement for visitors and suggested that a few animals should be penned "within a small inclosure [sic] alongside the road" for "the general public to obtain a glimpse." While the cave itself might not have been an attraction to compare with other national parks in the critics' estimation, Wind Cave National Park could now boast a wildlife preserve that added interest for park visitors.

This diversification of Wind Cave's functions may have helped to preserve its national park status. After the National Park Service was established in 1916, director Steven T. Mather and Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane quickly established general missions for the national parks to which the park service, and most Americans, subscribe today. Lane wrote to Mather, affirming the director's views, that "every activity of the Service is subordinate to the duties imposed upon it to faithfully preserve the parks for posterity in essentially their natural state." Mather also envisioned that the new park service should encourage recreational use by increasing automobile access, developing interpretive and educational programs, and working with concessionaires on improvements. After 1916, the national parks also had a general mission to function as wildlife preserves. With bison and elk already established within its boundaries, Wind Cave had anticipated and seemed to fulfill adequately this preservation role.

In the end, the evaluation of Wind Cave as relatively unworthy as a national park was not based on an objective set of ecological standards; the cave simply did not measure up to the subjective standards of beauty or monumentalism that prevailed at the time the

federal government instituted the park system. Wind Cave was deemed "inferior" partially because it paled in comparison to the size and grandeur of Mammoth Cave or Carlsbad Caverns. While Wind Cave was an interesting, if not singularly monumental, centerpiece for the park, the site ultimately kept its national park status because its features meshed with the mission of the newly formed park service to provide tourists with recreational and wildlife-viewing opportunities. As it had done with bison, the National Park Service allowed prairie dogs to establish themselves in the park in the 1930s, thus creating one of the largest prairie-dog towns in the country. The importance of wildlife as an attraction for Wind Cave National Park is reflected in many tourist guides and commentaries on the parks. Since the 1930s, guides and tour books have given equal weight to the "world of darkness" (the cave) and the "world of light" (the prairie and the animals).24 Ironically, Wind Cave National Park was modified early in its history, 1903-1915, to fulfill general park standards that were not codified until years after the National Park Service's founding in 1916.

Today, the country's national parks, which are modeled worldwide, carry a scientific mission as well. Ideally, the modern national park should be large enough to preserve representative samples of a nation's ecosystems and indigenous plants and animals.25 This new mission, added to the early park standards for scenic preservation, recreation, and wildlife protection, has not lessened the problems and contradictions inherent in National Park Service standards. Overcrowding and pollution in the most popular parks, such as Yosemite, undermine the park service's mission to preserve them in a pristine state. These urban problems impugn the parks as wilderness or an escape from the pressures of modern-day life.


Although overuse may do irreparable damage to the parks, the willingness of Congress and even some park service employees to label certain parks “inferior” may have done even more harm to the system. It is easy to justify the existence of “crown-jewel” parks that are older, more famous, and boast superlative national attractions; it is far more difficult to prove that the less-famous Wind Cave is a “worthy” member of the world’s first park system. Even today, the cult of the crown-jewel parks makes other valuable, but lesser-known areas vulnerable to decommissioning because of political whim. It also endangers funding for newer, smaller parks, and exacerbates overcrowding in popular parks. Nonetheless, Wind Cave and other less-celebrated parks often attract substantial numbers of visitors and are important regional education and recreation areas.26

The major standards by which national parks are judged have changed little since Wind Cave was created. Nonetheless, the history of Wind Cave National Park demonstrates that the federal government initially lacked coherent standards and procedures for estab-

lishing parks. Under the Mather administration, the National Park Service outlined general criteria for national parks that embraced traditional, but often unarticulated, ideals for nature preservation, recreation, and monumentalism in national parks. Questions about those ideals will continue to shape the destinies of the national parks. In any case, Wind Cave National Park has grown and adapted to the changing demands of the National Park Service and the visiting public. As one of the earliest parks in a national park system that now includes fifty-four parks in the continental United States, Hawaii, Alaska, and Samoa, Wind Cave’s unique natural features, both above and below the ground, bring thousands of visitors to South Dakota both to enjoy and, perhaps, endanger the site’s fragile existence.