

George Catlin and the Dream of the National Parks

In the early 1800s, the population of the United States was growing quickly. Settlers were moving westward at a rapid rate. As the population spread across the continent, explorers and settlers were exposed for the first time to the wide variety of natural environments that exist in what is now the United States.

There was much curiosity in about the new frontier, and the government sponsored expeditions to document and map the areas that had not yet been settled by European Americans. (Many of these lands were already inhabited, however; Native American populations had been living in the western area of the continent for many centuries.)

During this time, many artists expressed a growing interest in wilderness and wildlife. Some of them wanted to escape the forces of urbanization and industrialization in the East. Others were interested in learning about the ways of life of the Native Americans that lived in and beyond the frontier.

As a result, some artists accompanied explorers and settlers, and documented their impressions about the land, the ways of life, and the inhabitants of the west.

One of these artists was [George Catlin](#), a painter and writer who documented life on the frontier—especially the ways of life of Native Americans. Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1796, Catlin had a lifelong fascination with the Native American people. His mother had been briefly captured by Native Americans in Wyoming Valley, PA., when she was a girl, and Catlin was intrigued by her stories about the frontier. As a result, he traveled west in 1830 and spent many years painting portraits of Native Americans. He even spent a month living among the [Mandan Indians](#), learning a great deal about their customs. He also painted landscapes of the West, and documented his experiences in writing.

Take a look at some of Catlin's famous paintings. How would you feel if you were a European American seeing these images for the first time? How would you feel if you were a Native American who was the subject of one of these paintings? What do you think about the way nature is portrayed in these images?

[Comanche Indians Chasing Buffalo](#)

[Ball Play of the Choctaw—Ball Up \(With Tipis in Background\)](#)

["Brick Kilns," Clay Bluffs 1900 Miles above St. Louis](#)

[View in the Grand Detour, 1900 Miles above St. Louis](#)

[A Crowe Village on the Salmon River](#)

Eventually, Catlin grew concerned that America's westward expansion would threaten not only [Native American civilization](#), but also the beautiful wilderness and wildlife of the west. He expressed these concerns in his artwork and writings. In 1832, during a trip to the Dakotas, he wrote that these elements should be preserved "by some great protecting policy of government . . . in a magnificent park . . . A nation's park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!"

At the time, not many people agreed with Catlin. Most people felt that they needed to "tame" the wilderness so that it could be used for settlements, farming, mining, or other activities that helped the human population and the growing nation's economy.

It would be many years before the leaders of the nation, as well as the general population, changed their way of thinking about the wilderness, but George Catlin helped to open people's eyes to the beauty and wonder of the West. Together with [other artists](#), writers, and scientists, he celebrated the natural beauty of America and helped ensure that future generations would be able to experience the nation's unique and breathtaking natural areas.

Food for thought!

You will be learning more about the preservation of the national parks in class. Keep these questions in mind during your lesson.

Do you think that George Catlin would be pleased with today's National Park Service?

Do the national parks seem to accomplish his goals?

Which of Catlin's concerns are not addressed by the National Park Service?