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## Introduction: Yellowstone National Park's 150th Anniversary

Cam Sholly  
*Yellowstone National Park*

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## Introduction: Yellowstone National Park's 150th Anniversary

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# WYOMING LAW REVIEW

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## INTRODUCTION: YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK'S 150TH ANNIVERSARY

*Cam Sholly\**

March 1, 2022, marked the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Yellowstone National Park. Signed into law by President Ulysses S. Grant, the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act created the world's first national park:

“The tract of land . . . lying near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River . . . is reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

America's first national park was thereby set aside to preserve and protect the scenery, cultural heritage, wildlife, and geologic and ecological systems and processes in their natural condition for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Yellowstone serves as the core of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem—one of the largest nearly intact natural ecosystems remaining on the planet. Yellowstone contains over 10,000 hydrothermal features and half the world's active geysers. There are 67 species of mammals, 285 species of birds, 6 species of reptiles, 5 species of amphibians, and over 1,000 flowering native species within its boundaries. The

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\* Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park since October of 2018. Cam is responsible for overseeing management of Yellowstone's 2.2 million acres and over four million yearly visitors. Cam is also the current chair of the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee. Before assuming his duties at Yellowstone, Cam served in various leadership roles including regional director of the Midwest Region for the National Park Service Headquarters, superintendent of Natchez Trace Parkway, chief of range operations in Yosemite National Park, and several other positions. Cam holds a bachelor's degree in management from Saint Mary's College of California and a master's degree in environmental management from Duke University. He is a graduate of the Harvard University Senior Executive Fellows Program and the FBI National Academy. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army and deployed to Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

<sup>1</sup> Act of Mar. 1, 1872, ch. 24, § 1, 17 Stat. 32, 32 (codified as amended at 16 U.S.C. §§ 21–22).

park is also rich in cultural and historical resources, with a combined 25 sites, landmarks, and districts on the National Register of Historic Places.

Park managers have learned many lessons during Yellowstone's 150 years. In the early 1900s, the government killed nearly all predators in the park, and the bison population was hunted to less than two dozen. Later that century, the 1988 fires burned more than one-third of the park, and the introduction of non-native lake trout decimated native Yellowstone cutthroat populations. Through modern resource management efforts involving bison, grizzly bears, native fish, gray wolves, wildland fire, and others, Yellowstone's ecosystem is the healthiest it has been in over a century.

Based on the park's location at the convergence of the Great Plains, Great Basin, and Columbia Plateau, 27 Native American Tribes have historical and modern connections to the land and its resources. For over 10,000 years before Yellowstone became a national park, it was a place where Native Americans lived, hunted, fished, gathered plants, quarried obsidian, and used thermal waters for religious and medicinal purposes.

Today, Yellowstone is facing new challenges. Employee housing, workforce development, historic preservation, climate change effects, transboundary wildlife management, increasing visitation, and deteriorating infrastructure are issues impacting Yellowstone's workforce, resources, visitors, and gateway communities. To tackle these challenges, Yellowstone National Park management has set five major strategic priorities, each supporting the overarching National Park Service mission and each critical to Yellowstone's success. The priorities are: (1) Focus on the Core (the workforce); (2) Strengthen the Yellowstone Ecosystem and Heritage Resources; (3) Deliver a World-Class Visitor Experience; (4) Invest in Infrastructure; and (5) Build Coalitions and Partnerships. Within each of these strategic priority areas is a wide range of actions designed to achieve success.

The rise in visitation is a challenge Yellowstone faces today and will continue to face in the future. Approximately 1,750 acres of the 2.2 million acres are roads and parking lots. Most of Yellowstone's visitors remain within that area, which is less than 1% of the park. As such, increasing visitation impacts park infrastructure, staffing, and operations to a much greater extent than it impacts natural resources. In response, Yellowstone has developed a visitor use strategy that focuses on preventing and mitigating resource impacts, understanding and responding to impacts on staffing and infrastructure, improving visitor experience, and working with gateway communities to coordinate our response and continue facilitating recreational access. The park has already implemented many micro-geographic actions to address increasing visitation in specific areas. These actions will become more aggressive as visitation increases in future years.

Yellowstone is bigger than its boundary. Each of our partners plays a vital role in making decisions that protect Yellowstone for future generations and improving

the positive conservation, environmental, economic, and social impacts the park provides the region and country.

As stewards of the world's first national park, we have a unique opportunity at this 150th year to reflect on the lessons of the past and present, elevate voices and perspectives that have been historically underrepresented, and strengthen Yellowstone for the future by making decisions together that protect the park and our shared heritage for centuries to come. As we look to the next 150 years and beyond, we envision a park with healthy ecosystem processes, visitors who are inspired by transformative experiences, where people of all backgrounds feel welcome and represented, and where Yellowstone continues to be a model for conservation worldwide.

