Alpine Experiments: The National Parks and the Development of Skiing in the American West

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Abstract
In 1886, the U.S. Army mounted cavalry soldiers on skis to patrol the winter landscape of Yellowstone National Park. Prior to Yellowstone's skiing soldiers, the U.S. government had no formal relationship with skiing. In Yellowstone, the Army initiated the U.S. government's intimate and enduring relationship with skiing in the American West. When the National Park Service (NPS) took over the management of Yellowstone, the government's involvement with western skiing transferred over to the NPS. Upon its creation in 1916, the NPS inherited a national park system primarily carved from the high western mountains and embraced the promotion of recreational skiing in the deep and lingering snow of the parks. Working with regional boosters and park concessionaires, the NPS endeavored to transform snowbound parks into four season destinations. By the 1930s, national parks hosted high stakes ski competitions and became some of the earliest centers of lift-served skiing in the West. Ultimately, ski lifts operated in ten western parks during the 20th century. However, critics questioned the appropriateness of the national parks as venues for Alpine skiing. Struggling with its dual mandate of preservation and recreation, the NPS began to recalibrate its permissive approach to Alpine skiing by limiting the type of development and competitions allowed in the parks. The NPS exited World War II with a more conservative approach towards Alpine skiing. However, in the 1950s, the agency embraced a park by park approach to winter use that stifled the development of lift-served skiing in some parks while enabling its growth in others. This approach led to decades of contestation between the NPS, local populations, environmentalists, and concessionaires, which ultimately led to the removal of ski lifts in all of the parks except Yosemite and Olympic. In 2015, the United States Forest Service is the government agency most often equated with western skiing. In my thesis, I will suggest that it was the national parks that first created the inextricable link between the U.S. government and skiing in the West, and once this connection took hold, it proved to be an extremely difficult bond to break.

Recommended Citation
Acadia National Park is a United States National Park situated in the state of Maine, near Bar Harbor. It was initially created as the Sieur de Monts National Monument in 1916. However, later it was renamed Lafayette National Park in 1919, and was given its current name of Acadia in 1929. Acadia is one of the oldest designated national park areas east of the Mississippi River. It reserves most of Mount Desert Island, and is further associated with smaller islands off the Atlantic coast. Indeed, the parks preserve a landscape that still resembles the southern Sierra Nevada before Euro-American settlement. It is one of the most amazing national parks in the USA.

Arches National Park is a US National Park located in eastern Utah. We usually measure ski area by acreage in Canada and the USA, but over in Europe, resorts more often measure the combined length of all the groomed ski runs added together. There are many other ways you can also measure ski areas, for example: most uplift capacity of their ski lifts or the biggest by popularity (skier days). Powder Mountain actually has the biggest ski area in North America if you count everything within its boundaries, exclude the Yellowstone Club + Big Sky combination. However, as the area only has six chairlifts compared to Whistler Blackcomb’s 19 chairs and three gondolas, it is not generally included in the North American top 10. But that is a judgement call and some, including powder mountain itself, would put it at number one. Yet Voyageurs national park in Minnesota offers some of the same activities with a fraction of the crowds. Almost half the park is water, with more than 500 islands and 655 miles of undeveloped shoreline. Situated a short drive west from Washington DC, on I-66, the battlefield is located in Manassas, Virginia. Manassas was home to two significant battles in the civil war, including the first battle of Bull Run, and is part of America’s military history. Glacier national park, located in the Rocky Mountains of Montana, is home to 26 glaciers, a world-famous scenic drive, a healthy wolf and grizzly population, and a rare triple continental divide. North Cascades, about two hours north-east of Seattle, houses over 300 glaciers, more than any other US park outside Alaska.