



Thanks for our Lands

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

A great observer of the American West, Wallace Stegner, once said that creation of a national park system was the best idea the federal government ever had.

“We need wilderness preserved because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed,” he wrote. “The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health.”

Texas has only 14 sites maintained by the National Park Service – far fewer than most other western states. National Parks often have been carved out of federally-owned land after a state joined the union.

But when the Republic of Texas joined the U.S. in 1845, Sam Houston negotiated a different arrangement. Texas had an enormous public debt of approximately \$10 million, and it was assumed by the federal government. In return, Texas ceded to the Union a large portion of territory, including what is now most of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Wyoming.

In the unique deal, Texas got to keep all of its public, or unclaimed, lands. That meant that when oil was discovered here some decades later, Texas colleges and universities reaped billions of dollars in royalties that would otherwise have gone to the federal government.

It also meant that any national parks in Texas had to be established with land that was bought, donated or ceded to the federal government. At first, Texas concentrated on setting up state parks, some 133 of them. All our federal parks were established well into the 20th Century.

Our 14 national parks are exceptional in quality, and memorialize the history, diversity and grandeur of our unique state.

Some of the most beautiful architecture in Texas is found in the San Antonio Missions National Historic Park, which includes four restored churches built in the 1700s: San Jose, San Juan, Espada and Concepcion, which can easily be visited in a few hours, perhaps on the way to the Alamo -- which is preserved by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

But the missions are an exception. Most Park Service sites protect unique Texas frontier land, starting with the crown jewel – Big Bend National Park, Texas’s first national park. With 801,000 acres, an area roughly the size of Rhode Island, Big Bend is considered one of the outstanding geological laboratories and classrooms of the world. Dinosaur fossils, more than 1,000 species of plants and more than half of the species of birds in North America make their homes in Big Bend.

Texas began accumulating land for a state park in Big Bend in 1932, spurred by a former Texas Ranger named Everett Townsend. But the area is a national

treasure, and the state ultimately turned the deed over to the U.S. government.

Beginning in the 1960s, conservationists were able to secure federal funding to preserve three additional major park sites in Texas.

- One of the most primitive forests in America, the 97,000-acre Big Thicket National Preserve in Southeast Texas, finally achieved protected federal status in 1974. It’s among the most biologically diverse places in North America, a rainforest replete with flowers, birds and animals rarely seen anywhere else – and trees and vines so thick they block the sun.
- The Padre Island National Seashore, at 70 miles long, is the longest remaining undeveloped stretch of barrier island in the world. It was established in 1962 at the suggestion of Sen. Ralph Yarborough. The park was completed after a long battle with developers and property owners who were successful in keeping mineral rights for much of the land. The seashore features miles of pristine beaches, tidal flats and dune areas that are famous worldwide.
- The Guadalupe Mountains National Park was created from the spectacular Guadalupe Mountain Ranch, previously the home of thousands of mohair-producing Angora goats. After some private donations and a major lobbying campaign, President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation in 1966 which created this 80,000-acre park. The federal government was authorized to spend \$1.8 million for land to complete the park. The government also acquired from Texas the lands’ mineral rights. The park offers 80 miles of trails for hikers and unmatched West Texas beauty.

Due to the quirks of our history, Texas became part of the federal government’s best idea – the national park system – relatively late. But the character of our state is based on the rugged and unique landscape that forged the character of its settlers. We should all be grateful to the far-sighted individuals who helped preserve this matchless part of our heritage.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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