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Q&A: Filmmaker Ken Burns sees national parks as 'democratic '

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The latest project of documentary filmmaker Ken Burns and his longtime colleague Dayton Duncan is "The National Parks: America's Best Idea." The six-part series took six years to create and will air on PBS in the fall. Anchorage Daily News (ADN) reporter Lisa Demer talked on the phone with Burns.

ADN: What surprised you most overall doing this project?

Burns: I think it was the unexpected emotion. The parks have this ability to wake you up. To remind you of your better self. To instill in you whatever you want to call it: Rapture. Transcendental experience. Religious experience. Spiritual experience. Scientific experience. Reason. They just have this ability to remind you of something more significant than the momentum of your ordinary life.

ADN: What's your favorite story about the creation of what we now know as Denali National Park and Preserve?

Burns: There's this paradox at the heart of the national park bargain. You stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon or at this massive mountain [Denali] and you feel your atomic insignificance. And yet that makes you larger, that makes you connected to everyone and everything else. It's that sense of feeling, both how fragile and short our lives are, but also what a glorious web of interconnectedness the parks suggest we can participate in.

ADN: How do you decide what to pursue? Your most famous projects are so varied: Civil War, baseball, jazz.

Burns: The secret is that I've been making the same film over and over again. And that's just asking one deceptively simple question, "Who are we?"

ADN: So is the documentary about the parks, is it really about the people behind the parks?

Burns: That's exactly right. This is not a travelogue. It's a history of the ideas, and most importantly the individuals, behind this uniquely American creation. For the first time in human history, land was set aside not for kings or the very rich but for everybody, an utterly democratic idea. In fact, we see the parks as the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape.

And so the people we meet are not just those top down heroes — the Theodore Roosevelts and the John D. Rockefeller Jrs. — but also a host of so-called ordinary people who fell in love with some precious portion of their country, and worked their whole lives to see it set aside for perfect strangers, meaning you and me. My grandfather took my father who took me and I've taken my daughters now to national parks. These are where the experiences of not just a lifetime, but the

whole life of a family, are etched.

ADN: What are the threats to national parks today?

Burns: For a while, it was very popular to say that the greatest threats come from the people who love them. That is to say, the visitors who create traffic jams in Yellowstone and Yosemite. But those numbers have leveled off and in some parks have begun to decline.

So to me, the greatest danger is apathy, which then permits those natural enemies of the parks, those extractive and acquisitive and, many people would say, rapacious interests that can't look at a beautiful stream and not think dam, that can't look at a beautiful stand of timber and not think board feet, that can't look at a beautiful canyon and (not) imagine how much better it would be if the miners were set at work at it. Those are the natural predators of the national parks and they're always there.

What we've been able to build over the last century and a half is a bulwark of park constituents who love their parks and have been able to keep these threats at bay. As we increasingly become a kind of digital, virtual human being, we forget how critical the experience of the natural world is to our physical and mental health.

Jefferson himself thought you really couldn't be an American without a relationship to the land. And I think the national parks give you that relationship. So for me the biggest threat is the beginning of what I see as a sort of apathetic relationship to them on the part of some people. It only just requires the rest of us who know their glories to visit them that much more often and to do our best to convert those nonbelievers into believers. The more constituents the parks have, the better off we all are as a country.

ADN: Did you pick up on any threats or risks to parks in Alaska in particular?

Burns: No. We were interested in telling the story of the Alaska parks, which often involved initial outrage and opposition to their creation, which is not uncommon. That was true of the Grand Canyon and true of Yellowstone and true of Yosemite and true of nearly every park that's been set aside. There's been local people who resisted. And then how much that local opposition has transformed itself into, at first begrudging acknowledgement that tourism is a more consistent sort of income for a town than a pipeline or fishing, and then a kind of real sense of admiration for the way in which communities have been positively transformed by tourism. Which is as your old Gov. Hammond used to say, the permanent pipeline.

ADN: Everybody knows Yosemite, Yellowstone, maybe Denali, the big ones. Do you have a favorite park that most people generally don't know?

Burns: I've been to a lot and I've had spectacular experiences in all of them. So it's sort of a Sophie's Choice. It's hard to say which child you like the best, but mine was a gift from Yosemite to me. (He describes how during an early shoot in Yosemite, he told the crew that he thought Yosemite was probably the first national park he had visited. But one night, he couldn't sleep and flashed on a childhood memory.)

Suddenly, I realized that in 1959 when I was 6 years old — now 50 years ago — my mother was dying of cancer. Our household was a sad and demoralized place and my father was incredibly distracted. But one day after school he picked me and drove me from our home in Delaware to Baltimore, where he had grown up. He put me to sleep in his old bed, under his old chenille comforter. It seemed like only a second later when he awoke me at 4 o'clock in the morning and we left the house before light. He drove me to Front Royal, Va., at the northern end of the Skyline

Drive, which winds its way through Shenandoah National Park.

We drove up and through clouds and mist and through tunnels, all of which was the first time I had ever done that. We saw deer. We turned off into a little place where there was a cabin just big enough for the two of us. I remember this impossibly long hike of maybe a half a mile. We turned over logs and caught bright red salamanders. My father knew every single bird and animal and plant that we saw and identified them. He sang me songs that have been permanently part of my hard drive that I've sung to my daughters that I didn't remember where I had learned them. It had been on this trip. I can still to this day remember what his grip feels like, his hand holding mine. And I think that is the essence of the national park. For all those reasons, Shenandoah will always be my favorite national park, with a nod to Yosemite for awakening that memory in me.

ADN: What's your take-home message for national parks?

Burns: I want people to get out and see them. There's no substitute for real experience. But we'd like to at least show people the glories that are there, the amazing stories behind the creation of these parks and then hopefully deputize every one of the viewers to become a kind of steward, a more active steward if they already love the parks, if they already visit them.