

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2026 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2026 asked students to explain what governmental service or program is essential and needs to be protected? Keep in mind the governmental role of providing order and security, offering public or civic amenities, and protecting individual rights. Essays have been edited for length.

FIRST-PLACE ESSAY

The Importance of National Parks

by Oran Saar

“God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, and avalanches; but he cannot save them from fools, — only Uncle Sam can do that.” This statement by John Muir (1897) has stood strong for over a century as a principle for the government’s duty to protect the country’s most beautiful land. Early conservationists like Muir were able to see the future consequences greed and uncontrolled industrialization could pose to the land if the government did not intervene.

Now we are witnessing their fears come to life. In the last 35 years in the United States, an area of wild land larger than the state of Florida has been lost to urban sprawl and deforestation (Kolkiewicz 2022). In the past few months, the Trump administration has implemented major budget and staffing cuts to the National Park Service (NPS). Some of the biggest parks, like Yosemite, have lost nearly a quarter of their permanent staff, preventing them from carrying out even the most basic operations such as trash cleanup (Karlman and Morton 2026). The Trump administration wished to make further budget cuts with hopes of lowering federal spending

but was stopped by a bipartisan bill (NPCA 2026). Unfortunately, the bill also removed the certainty that national parks must remain federal land and open up the possibility for their private sale in the future. In particular, Sen. Mike Lee has proposed the removal of section 130 of the Interior Appropriations Bill, which requires the Department of the Interior to maintain ownership of all existing national park units (CWP 2025). Sen. Lee, like many within the Republican Party, has been a proponent of reducing environmental regulations so companies can more easily extract resources from the land.

With the parks’ future coming under fire, there has never been a better time to reiterate their impact. The National Park Service is an essential government agency due to the environmental, health, and economic benefits it provides to every member of the nation. One of the greatest benefits of the National Park Service is its role in preserving the natural ecosystems across the country. With increased urban sprawl, untouched natural habitats are becoming increasingly rare, putting pressure on the species that call those locations home. National

parks, however, provide large swaths of land that cannot be developed or polluted as heavily by humans and industry. National parks are home to more than 600 endangered and threatened species (NPCA 2019). Along with providing a haven for these species, government-subsidized maintenance of the parks repairs harm caused by humans.

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum recently stated that he is against the removal of the 64 “crown jewel” national parks but proposed the idea that around 400 other NPS sites could be transferred to state or local control (Fischler 2025). While the idea of just transferring the smaller parcels of federal land may seem reasonable, it would cause them to lose much of their legal protection, putting their ecosystems at risk. Burgham’s goal could be most devastating in ecosystems like the Great Basin in the western United States. Great Basin National Park is considered one of the 64 “crown jewel” national parks, but much of the larger Great Basin ecosystem, which was identified as the third-most endangered ecosystem in the country, is preserved by smaller pieces of federal land like the Basin and Range National Monument (Stein et al. 2000). If ecosystems like the Great Basin are broken up, this would lead to habitat fragmentation, which can have negative effects on both biodiversity and the overall production and functionality of ecosystems (Liu et al. 2018).

In addition to the impact preserving the parks has on animal and plant well-being, the parks also have a large benefit to human health. The national parks are 85 percent vegetated area, allowing them to act as carbon sinks, storing CO₂. Some estimates predict that the national parks sequester 17.5 metric tons of carbon per

year on average (Banasiak et al. 2015), which can reduce global warming along with its associated health risks.

In addition to preserving our long-term health, national parks provide a gateway for millions of people to enjoy nature, get exercise, and learn about our nation's history. Places that can provide healthy ways to reduce stress are becoming increasingly vital as exercising in nature has been shown to improve one's mental health and stress levels (Okudan et al. 2025). Spending time in nature has also been shown to boost immune health (Andersen et al. 2021).

Finally, although the official reason for the park's funding cuts is "government efficiency" and their financial "long-term sustainability," this idea is spurious (Kelleher 2025). The Department of the Interior's official budget request for 2024 was \$3.2 billion.¹ The estimated national park revenue in 2024 was \$365 million through admission fees (Frommer 2025). However, this revenue is only a small part of the parks' true value, which is the economic boost they bring to the areas around them.

Acadia National Park attracts over 4 million visitors annually to Maine, all of whom spend money and boost Maine's economy.² Acadia National Park produces an estimated \$785 million of economic output for the Maine economy and supports over 5,000 jobs (Lanning 2025). This is just a fraction of the total \$56.3 billion dollars and 415,000 jobs that the national parks generate across the nation (Frommer 2025), which means that the park system's economic benefit is 17 times its federal expenditure.

The National Park Service provides priceless humanitarian value on top of being one of the most economically viable government programs in our nation's history. To defund the national parks would be to close a vital artery to

the beating heart that is the United States. Providing unmatched resources to the American people while also generating economic gain for the country is a gift that should be looked at with gratitude. As members of this great nation, we must continue to think about our duty to preserve this country for future Americans as our predecessors did, funding the National Parks Service not only for our own benefit, but for generations to come.

NOTES

- 1 "NPS Budget," US Department of the Interior, <https://www.doi.gov/ocl/nps-budget-2>
- 2 "Park Fact Sheet," Acadia National Park, <https://www.nps.gov/acad/learn/facts.htm>

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