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Front Page  
Development  
Politics  
Travel & Outdoors  
Books  
New West Blog  
Community Blogs  
Magazine  
Images & Multimedia  
Conferences

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#### Filmmaker Ken Burns Raises Curtain on National Parks Series

#### You Might Oppose The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act If ...

#### What's the Deal With the Grateful Dead?

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## COMMON GROUND

## Filmmaker Ken Burns Raises Curtain on National Parks Series

**In his next project, Burns turns his lens to national parks, at a time when visitors and funding have dwindled.**

By David Frey, 5-30-09

Documentary filmmaker *Ken Burns* has produced beloved PBS series on deeply American themes, from the Civil War to baseball to jazz. His next project, due out this fall is *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*.

Burns credits the subtitle to the great Western writer *Wallace Stegner*, who would have turned 100 this year. The six-part series tracks over a century of the park system, from the creation of Yellowstone in 1872 up to 1980, when the once-foreign national system was being loved to death.

Now, parks face just the opposite problem. Burns worries about declining interest in national parks, from children and their parents more plugged into iPods and Xboxes than nature.

Meanwhile, the parks have been declining under years of neglect and are in need of millions in upgrades. One of the biggest problems facing national parks today, Burns says: "Money, money, money."

We caught up with Burns at *Mountainfilm* in Telluride, Colo., where his new series had its world premiere.

**New West: Your films have always tried to capture a quintessential Americana. How do you see the national park system fitting into that?**

Ken Burns: It's one of those great inventions of ours, like jazz and baseball. I think "Americana" is a dangerous word because it is susceptible to nostalgia and sentimentality, and nostalgia and sentimentality are the enemies of anything good. Now real emotion, higher emotion, is what you're looking for. I just look for subjects that allow us to perceive our history at that deep emotional level, and not just at that other rational level. That's where we safely go to with almost all of our stuff, but the things that matter most to us, the families and relationships and work that we do, appeal to the higher spirits. That's what Theodore Roosevelt said in visiting to Yosemite.

**NW: How do you find this series resonating with people?**

KB: I've been surprised by how much emotion was in it. We didn't expect the depth of it. I've done films on the Civil War, on baseball, and they're hugely emotional films, but I've had more emotion in screenings that I've done for various episodes with this than in anything. I think it's because when we say we are Americans it's because we're bound together by this common land. And the only common land that we can now share that is as it was are the national parks.

**NW: Even some of your subjects were tearing up as they talked about their first memories at national parks.**

KB: It's hugely important. This is part of what we do. We connect to each other. Life is so ephemeral and these connections so tenuous and so easily broken by disease and accident and this relatively short life span we have that when we can be connected to something greater than themselves, it produces generally powerful emotions. I'm not interested in excavating the dry dates and facts and events of the past, but some emotional archeology that touches something higher that might be the glue of what our purpose is.

**NW: When I think about a movie about national parks I expect beautiful scenic vistas, but a lot of what these films are about is the people behind them.**

KB: That's important. I think human beings, when they tell stories, they tell stories about other human beings. Someone once said that every landscape is



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#### National Parks

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still a portrait, because you're trying to say, "Hey, look at this, other person." This is a film set against the backdrop of the most spectacular scenery on earth, but it is at its heart the history of ideas and individuals. There are 50 or more individuals that we introduce you to over the course of this, big and small, black and white and brown and red and yellow, and female as well as male, that fell in love with these places and tried to save them.

**NW: It seems like you see your role as trying to find some common ground for Americans.**

KB: My biggest role is, I just want to be a good filmmaker. I just want to tell good stories. But I understand that history is a way in which people can come together. There is so much fractionalization in our world today that its important to find places that we can converse together. History is one of those places.

**NW: Americans have a particular connection with land, private property on the one hand, but also this sense of wildness that has always driven the country.**

KB: Exactly. We inherited a Garden of Eden, which Thomas Jefferson thought would take generation, hundreds of generations to fill up, and in less than five we were in danger of losing it all. The parks emerge out of this bittersweet sense of, what we don't save we'll lose forever. That's certainly the case.

**NW: So what would part seven be?**

KB: I Think it would be waiting 25 years to see how we responded to this critical moment, this crisis of a diminution of interest, a generation of kids who are nature-deprived, and how we can pry them, and not just them but their parents, away from their virtual devices that offer no real being or doing, and to substitute real experience that comes in capital-N "Nature."

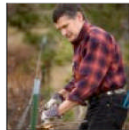
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By [David Frey](#), 5-30-09 | [add comment](#) | [email story](#) | [print story](#)

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