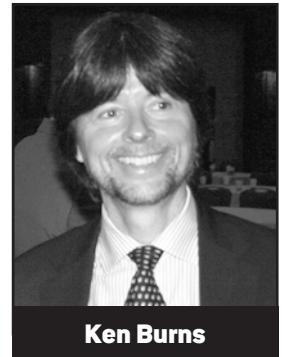


# Celebrating Our National Parks: An interview with filmmaker Ken Burns

by Scholastic Kid Reporter Kayla Gough, 11

*The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, by award-winning filmmaker Ken Burns, will air on PBS-TV beginning September 27. Burns recently spoke with Scholastic Kid Reporter Kayla Gough about the new documentary. Here are excerpts from the interview.



**Ken Burns**

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**JS: Could you tell me the reason you chose the title?**

**Ken Burns:** We really struggled for a long time over what the title should be. We sort of assumed the main title should be *The National Parks*, because we wanted to give it to you straight. But we started off thinking [of it as] *America's Best Idea*. . . . In the opening of the film, though, somebody challenges it right away. "That's not our best idea," he says. "Thomas Jefferson had the best idea: that regardless of the accident of your birth, you're entitled to live out what you want."

But maybe the first thing we did *after* we became that country, that was our best idea: to set aside land. It's a completely democratic idea—the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape. As we went through [making this] series, in almost every one of the episodes somebody would say something that was close to this: "There's not a better idea than this." So I thought [that the subtitle we chose] would make people think, "What *is* our best idea?"

**JS: What is the importance of national parks?**

**Burns:** Well, they operate on many levels. First of all, there's a historical one. For the first time in history, land was set aside, not for

kings or royalty or the very rich, but for everybody and for all time. We [Americans] invented it and now it's been copied around the world, so I guess it has some historical importance. It also has this sort of national importance, this sort of pride. It's where we go to remember why we're Americans. It's where we get to go to see a glimpse of how things used to be. Not just 50 years ago, when it was set aside, but 15,000 years ago. We get a glimpse of the primeval. It's also a place where families go to cement their relationships. They take vacations and you get to see your mom or your dad or your brothers and your sisters in a different light, and you create memories. Then you take your [own] family. My grandfather took my dad, and my dad took me, and I now take my three daughters to national parks. You think that you're perpetuating something that's important on a very intimate and personal level.

**JS: Could you describe the importance of African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians in national parks?**

**Burns:** We "discover" these places but they've been the homes of Native Americans for literally thousands of years. What we found [in making this film] is that the

story of national parks is not the way history is [usually] taught: top-down; that there's some benevolent white guys who give you the gifts. Theodore Roosevelt is important, [and] John D. Rockefeller Jr., the philanthropist, is important. . . . [But we also learned] that each individual park had one person who fell in love with it and worked, often for their whole lives, to save the park. These people were black and red and brown and yellow and female, as well as white and male and famous. . . .

[For instance], the first biologist of the National Park Service [was] a man named George Melendez Wright, a Hispanic. The Native American Superintendent of Mount Rushmore [National Park is featured in] our film. An African-American ranger named Sheldon Johnson interprets the African-American Buffalo Soldiers, the celebrated cavalymen who were the parks' first protectors at Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks. So [the national parks story is] a very diverse story. It isn't "politically correct"; it's the truth.

**JS: What do you hope that kids will take away from this documentary?**

**Burns:** I hope that they will bug their parents to take them to national parks. Kids today spend so

much time with their video games and [watching] TV and [being] online that they think that virtual existence is an existence. It's not. It's a contradiction in terms. . . . Doctors [are] worried about your generation; they say that you have a nature-deficit disorder, that kids don't get out enough. I hope that people [watching our documentary will] say, "Wow, that's a cool place. I'd like to see that for real. I'd like to go there to see a bear. To see a moose. To see a wolf." . . . I hope that the kids who see it . . . will say, "OK, let's go. Can we take a vacation there some time?"

**JS: Which park is your personal favorite?**

**Burns:** It's complicated. I have three daughters, and it's almost like asking me which one of *them* is my favorite. I think what happens is that it's not so much the park, it's who you saw the park with. It's sentimental. In 1959, when I was 6 years old, my dad took me to Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. It's a very small place. And it was a very tough time in my life. My mother was dying of cancer, which she would do a few years later. My dad was [usually] pretty distracted, and we didn't do things together much. But this one time he took me to this park, and we camped out and had this little cabin, took hikes—impossibly long hikes of a half a mile or three quarters of a mile. I can remember almost everything [about] that time. I particularly remember his grip, holding my hand. So to me, what could be a better park? It doesn't have the spectacular waterfalls of Yosemite, it doesn't have the geysers going off as Yellowstone [does], it's not the Grand Canyon. But for me it has a kind of intimate thing.

**JS: Did anything crazy ever happen during filming the documentary?**

**Burns:** We saw lots of bears! That's the best thing ever. We've seen wolves. We had to film at 125°F in Death Valley. There was an at least 50-degrees-below-zero wind chill in Yellowstone during the winter filming. But most of the time we were pinching ourselves because we couldn't believe how lucky we were to be doing this as a job. We worked on this for 10 years, we [were] shooting for 6. It's in many ways the most satisfying project I've ever worked on. . . . Just [having] the ability to go out to these special places and spend more time than you'd usually do as a tourist [was wonderful]. To force yourself to get up before dawn and travel 50 miles to [look through] binoculars to see a pack of wolves howling. . . . You can't hear it [at first, but] . . . then you'd hear the sound of the wolf. It took the sound that long to [reach your ears]. It was incredibly special.

**JS: How did you become interested in being a historical documentary filmmaker?**

**Burns:** By accident. I really wanted to be a feature filmmaker and have my films shown in theaters. [I wanted to] be like Alfred Hitchcock or Steven Spielberg or somebody like that. But all of my teachers in college were social-documentary still-photographers, and they reminded me that there's much more drama in what is and what was—history—than in anything of the human imagination. So I found myself committed to documentary, and found myself committed to telling stories in history. I thought, "Oh my goodness, [by choosing this] I've taken a vow of anonymity and poverty." . . . Fortunately those

things haven't happened. I've continued to handmake the films with a group of people I love and work with, which has been really great. I think I have the best job in the country.

**JS: *The Civil War* is definitely one of your most popular films. When you made it, did you ever envision an African-American President?**

**Burns:** No. In fact, I gave a commencement address at Boston College in Massachusetts [last spring] and I told people that the graduates were just witnessing history, that this was the beginning of our third act as a people. Our first act began with Thomas Jefferson, who said, "All men are created equal," but he owned other human beings. [By "men"] he meant all white men of property. Abraham Lincoln started our second act [with] the Gettysburg Address when he said [in effect], "Look, we really do mean that all men are created equal." Then nothing happened for 100 years. Even after the civil rights movement, it [took] a couple of generations before an African-American could become President. I think we're entering our third act. I think it's a very amazing time to be [alive].

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Born July 29, 1953, in Brooklyn, New York, **Ken Burns** has directed and/or produced more than 20 documentary films and miniseries about America and Americans, including *The Brooklyn Bridge* (1981), *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1994), *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (1997), *Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton & Susan B. Anthony* (1999), *Jazz* (2001), and *The War* (2007).