There is no evidence that the world took much note when the U.S. Congress created the planet’s first national park in 1872. In fact, little enough note was taken in the United States. But despite the lengthy growing pains, the national park movement flourished beyond the imaginations of its founders. By 2004, 59 national parks, plus an additional 320 national monuments, seashores, battlefields and other special sites, celebrated every aspect of the American landscape and experience.

If anything, the global national parks movement is even more popular; 180 countries have almost 1,900 parks or equivalent reserves. American scholar and conservationist Wallace Stegner wrote, “the national parks were the best idea the United States ever had and maybe will ever have.” The worldwide popularity of national parks immeasurably buttresses Stegner’s assertion.

The 1872 Yellowstone Act not only called for land and resource preservation, but also demanded—and this was a radically new idea—that they should be preserved unimpaired for future generations. This notion posed extraordinary hurdles for managers of parks, because in the 19th century there were no templates for managing parks unimpaired and in perpetuity. Managers had to learn by doing. Today, park management is still a hopeful blend of art, science and politics. The sheer complexity of issues often compels managers to make decisions whether or not there is adequate scientific information or proven precedents.