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**Michelle's Next Mission**

**By: Timothy Egan**

MOUNT RAINIER, NATIONAL PARK

You would not know, just as egg-yolk-colored glacier lilies are pushing through ground newly unburdened of its snow, that there is so much trouble around these lands that form America's Best Idea.

You could not fathom, among the babble of languages bouncing off granite walls in Yosemite, that these places may one day be unloved.

Our shared outdoor spaces, our attics of history and graveyards of sacrifice — from Devils Tower to Death Valley, from Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth home to the Pennsylvania ground where Flight 93 crashed on 9/11 — are being overlooked. The physical embodiments of the American story are being ignored by too many.

Last year, there were 274 million visits to all areas run by the National Park Service. These places still draw more people than Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association and Nascar combined. This is a crisis?

Well, yes. The problem is that 10 years ago, the parks attracted about 12 million more visitors than they do today. Attendance has been in gradual decline for more than a decade.

Could the first lady do for national parks what she did for growing lettuce?

And, worse, visitors all look sort of the same: generally white, fairly prosperous, sensible-shoe-wearing adults.

This is where Ken Burns is supposed to come to the rescue. The film that he and the writer Dayton Duncan have produced — "The National Parks, America's Best Idea" — which is scheduled to be shown over six nights on PBS in the fall, is stunning and restorative, like the parks themselves. There will most likely be a Ken Burns Effect — just as there was after his films on the Civil War and baseball. But it will not be enough.

For that, we need something else. A superstar. A style-shaper. A person who could get whiny city kids not only to eat their vegetables, but to grow them.

We need Michelle Obama to save the national parks.



She was blunt, while looking ever so stylish, in leading a renaissance for kitchen gardens. “It’s plain and simple,” said the first lady, in explaining how one-third of American children came to be overweight or obese. “They’re not eating right, and they’re not moving their bodies at all.”

A Nature Conservancy report a few years ago linked the decline in children’s interest in the outdoors to their being under “virtual house arrest” to electronic media, spending 6.5 hours a day face-planted in Facebook, Xbox, television, a text-tablet or some other device.

It’s not that this generation of young people is different from previous ones. Human beings need nature to live full lives — always have, always will. Thus, when rangers at Rainier started an experiment this summer to bring families from Seattle’s poorest neighborhoods on their first-time camping excursions in the park, “we had far more people who wanted to try it than we were able to accommodate,” said Kevin Bacher, a park ranger.

The idea that every citizen holds title to these lands, the Burns film notes, is “as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence, and just as radical.”

Black soldiers in Yosemite and Yellowstone were among the first park rangers. During the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt put the urban unemployed, people who had never slept under the stars, to work in places like Glacier Park and Death Valley. They left lasting improvements in the parks, while the land had a similar effect on the workers.

Ten years ago, President Bill Clinton’s African-American park superintendent, Robert Stanton, introduced a plan to make the uniformed work force look more like America and to reach out to urban areas.

But it was not enough. The parks need Obama-era branding. So, the first family should go ahead and spend that week at Martha’s Vineyard in August, playing scrabble with Hillary and Bill, clamming with Spike Lee. But it would not take much for Michelle and her brood to visit the people’s land.

Maybe an overnight in Acadia, the first national park east of the Mississippi. Or a trip to the California home of Eugene O’Neill, America’s only Nobel Prize-winning playwright. Alas, the O’Neill national historic site had a mere 2,440 visitors last year — a lonely home for the creation of “A Moon for the Misbegotten.”

Or how about a stopover at Gettysburg’s new visitor center, where one of the first things that now greets a visitor is an image of slaves. “People used to tour the battlefield and come away still wondering what we were fighting about,” said Alan Spears of the National Parks Conservation Association.

From that graveyard to the glaciers of Rainier, this land, this history, is a shared birthright. But we are absentee owners, at best, if we don’t create a new generation of stewardship.