

NATIONAL PARK

An area under legal protection, distinguished by special natural qualities, preserved in its natural state or close to its natural state, valued for its landscape, cultural, educational, scientific and social qualities.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, a national park is a natural area which was established in order to protect ecosystems and preserve them for present and future generations. In the Polish legislation it is defined by the Nature Conservation Act of 2004, which at the same time defines the management and operation of the national park. A park is created in order to preserve biodiversity, inanimate nature formations and landscape features, to restore the proper condition of natural resources and components, and to recreate distorted natural, plant, animal or fungi habitats.

Passive or active nature protection is carried out in the national parks. The latter involves, for example, protection of animals: reintroduction of species (e.g. European bison in the Białowieża Primeval Forest) or providing them with the best developmental conditions, e.g. through breeding centres and rehabilitation centres for animals. In the case of forest ecosystem, national parks are used to protect and rebuild the forest stand (sanitary pruning, removal of fallen trees and forest nurseries). Parks also protect specific plant species and aquatic ecosystems existing there.

An important function of national parks is to make the protected area available to tourists and nature lovers for recreation and teaching purposes. Some parks have the necessary tourist infrastructure, e.g. trekking routes, hostels, campsites, cable cars.

Yellowstone Park in the United States (established in 1872) was the first national park in the world. The oldest such park in Europe is Sarek in Sweden (1909). In Poland, the first legal acts establishing national parks were adopted in 1932 and concerned the Pieniny National Park and the Białowieża National Park (considered the oldest in the Polish legal system due to the restitution carried out in 1947, currently on the UNESCO World Heritage List). There are 23 national parks in Poland.

Other forms of nature protection functioning in Poland, related to national parks, but of lesser institutional and legal importance, are a nature reserve and a landscape park.

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