

Reading Strategy: As you read about the national parks, connect the information to your own life.

GEOGRAPHY

America the Beautiful

by Dana Jensen and Dolores Johnson
Photographs by Q.T. Luong

Photographer Q.T. Luong paddles kayaks, scrambles up mountains, and treks wilderness trails. What's his mission? To bring all 58 national parks into focus.



Cliff Climbing. Luong went to extremes to get this picture of a climber on El Capitan.

Sweat dripped from Q.T. Luong's face. He peered over the edge of the cliff. Below him was a 3,000-foot drop. He was standing on top of a massive granite cliff called El Capitan. It is twice as tall as the Empire State Building!

Luong is a photographer. He had gone to Yosemite National Park to take pictures of climbers scaling the cliff. He grabbed a coil of rope from his pack and anchored the rope into the ground. Then he attached himself securely to the rope.

Clutching his camera tightly, Luong lowered himself down the granite face of the cliff. Soon he was dangling off the rock. The rope creaked and groaned. Luong swallowed hard. He held the camera to his eye and looked through the viewfinder. Once he found the climbers, he started clicking.

From Paris to the Parks

Luong is Vietnamese and grew up in Paris, France. He wasn't always such a brave climber. In fact, when he was young he didn't even like sports. In college, some friends convinced him to try mountaineering. He loved it! The thrill of climbing drew him in. He photographed each new adventure.

Then some climbers told him about Yosemite National Park in California. They spoke about sheer cliffs. They described views that could take your breath away.

About a million years ago, massive rivers of ice called glaciers flowed across this land. The glaciers eroded, or carved away, the earth and rocks below. They left behind deep canyons and jagged mountains. They polished granite cliffs, including El Capitan.

Luong wanted to see this amazing place for himself. In 1993, he moved to California. His first camping trip to Yosemite changed his life.

The first morning, he woke and went outside his tent. Rising above the valley, he saw towering cliffs capped with a dusting of snow. The cliffs seemed to soar up into the sky above. Later in the trip, an afternoon rain shower cleared. Light poured through the clouds. A rainbow arched over the valley. Luong was in awe. He had never seen anything so perfect.

Birth of the Parks

Luong wasn't the first to fall in love with amazing places like Yosemite. In the 1800s, explorers traveling out West came across landscapes that were unlike anything they'd seen before. They saw erupting geysers and gurgling hot springs. They climbed mountains. They stood under rushing waterfalls.

The explorers wanted to protect these places. They set about convincing government leaders that no one person should own these areas. The lands, they said, should be public for everyone to enjoy.

Members of Congress saw paintings and photos of the special places. They read reports from people who traveled there. By 1872, Congress was convinced. That year, it passed a bill creating Yellowstone National Park. The vast park covers parts of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. Yellowstone became the first of America's 58 national parks.

Eighteen years later, a man named John Muir inspired people to protect an area in California's Sierra Nevada mountain range. It was called Yosemite. Muir believed the area was far more beautiful than anything people could build. The government agreed. In 1890, it created Yosemite National Park.

Gearing Up. Luong carries this heavy backpack with camera gear on his trips to the parks.



Top Bunk. It takes most climbers several days to reach the top of El Capitan. That means they must spend nights on the face of the cliff. They sleep on a fabric platform called a portaledge.

A Vertical World

Yosemite Valley, where Luong first camped, is the heart of the park. It is only 11 kilometers (7 miles) long but holds unlimited beauty.

To one side is Half Dome, rising steeply from the valley floor. At 1,450 meters (4,800 feet), the cliff dwarfs the land below. Across the valley is El Capitan.

The meadow at the base of El Cap is one of Luong's favorite places to take pictures. The valley is also home to the tallest waterfall in North America. It is called Yosemite Falls and is actually three waterfalls in one. The sound is deafening. Rushing water plunges 739 meters (2,425 feet), crashing on the rocks below. Sprays of rainbows appear in the mist at its base.

In other parts of the park, many other waterfalls spill and splash. Two small glaciers continue to shape the land. Coyotes race through the foothills. Black bears plod through thick mountain forests. And in higher areas, small creatures called marmots scurry around.

Through the Lens

After Yosemite, Luong headed to Alaska to climb Denali's Mount McKinley. Still, the beauty of Yosemite kept pulling him back. Then he visited Death Valley National Park. Its parched deserts gave him a very different view of California.

A wrist injury limited his climbing, but not his imagination. From behind a camera, Luong captured the wonders of the wild. He used a special large-format camera. His camera and gear weighed 23 kilograms (50 pounds)! It was worth the effort, though. His camera records 25 times more detail than a regular camera.

On his journeys, Luong realized how unique each place is. Each park protected special parts of America's natural diversity: deserts, glaciers, deep canyons, sky-high mountains, and more. How could he share this country's beauty with all the people who live here? He decided to do something no one had done before.

He used a large-format camera to take pictures of all the national parks in the U.S. It took ten years. He covered 100,000 miles. He faced bears and raging rivers. But nothing could stop him. In 2002, Luong met his goal.

Protecting Parks

Luong took on a big challenge with his national parks project. Yet the parks themselves face an even bigger challenge: their survival. People and pollution are hurting many parks.

What happens outside the parks' borders can pose problems, too. Nearby businesses sometimes pollute surrounding land. The pollution can then drift into a park and harm habitats and wildlife. In some parks, mining and logging affect the animals and plant life.

Overcrowding is one of the biggest problems the parks face. Each year, more and more people fill the parks. More people means more trash, more noise, and more cars. It also means more roads and buildings. Some people think we should limit how many cars can drive into Yosemite. Reducing the number of cars may reduce pollution and noise.

This doesn't mean people shouldn't visit the national parks. They should. After all, these places belong to everyone. But Luong says people should be careful to leave nature as they find it. Often tucked in between cities and highways, these parks are a glimpse of what the land looked like long ago. Preserving them means preserving history.

This Land Is Your Land

Today, the national parks showcase the beauty of America, from coast to coast. They remind us that our country is much more than shopping malls and skyscrapers. It is much more than houses and highways.

Our country is the glaciers of Alaska and the volcanoes of Hawaii. It is the sea lions of California and the panthers of Florida. And it is everything in between. The national parks will keep our country's beautiful places safe for years to come.

Luong's photographs reveal the beauty of Yosemite and the other national parks. Still, there is nothing like being there. Stand in a meadow of buttercups and look up at the sky. Feel dwarfed by the huge size of Half Dome and El Capitan. Enjoy the spray of a waterfall. Watch deer leap over logs. And remind yourself: There is no place quite like this on Earth.



Rock Sculptures. This massive formation, called Cathedral Rocks, was carved by glaciers millions of years ago. Luong captured this beautiful scene after a fresh snowfall.



Falling Water. Luong loves taking photos of Yosemite Falls. It is the tallest waterfall in North America.

Wordwise

- cliff:** steep wall of rock, soil, or ice
- Congress:** part of U.S. government that makes laws
- geyser:** jet of hot water and steam
- glacier:** large body of ice moving across land
- national park:** land set aside by the government for public use



Wild Life. Coyotes are a common sight in Yosemite National Park.