



After the Fact | [Serve the Country, Save the Parks](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

[Sound of birds chirping, footsteps on forest floor]

Robin Eckstein: You can have a million thoughts in your head about a million different things, but when you're sitting in a forest and you just hear the birds chirping and the wind blowing through the trees, you just realize everything's going to be okay.

[Intro music]

Dan LeDuc, host: That realization that everything's going to be okay. Who hasn't felt it after hiking in a forest or soaking in a glorious sunset? Maybe no one needs that feeling more than America's veterans when they return from being in harm's way. That was Robin Eckstein speaking a moment ago. She served in the Army's 1st Armored Division, driving supply missions in Iraq, and when she came home after a total of 7½ years in combat zones, she found solace during visits to places like Crater Lake National Park in Oregon.

In this episode of ["After the Fact"](#) from The Pew Charitable Trusts, we're talking about our national parks, their backlogged maintenance needs, and what this means to America's veterans. I'm your host, Dan LeDuc, and Robin was among the many veterans who have traveled to Washington to push for action on needed repairs to the parks.

Robin Eckstein: A lot of our national parks have military heritage associated with them. And so they especially mean something to veterans, to be able to go there and see our history and know that we're still being thought of afterwards. And if you can think to yourself, "This is what I was fighting for, these national treasures." You know, Crater Lake National Park—making sure it's there for everyone else. I want that to be the reason why I fight.

Dan LeDuc: There are more than 400 national parks, preserving some of the country's most iconic landscapes. But, as Robin noted, 156 of them honor veterans. And that's our data point for this episode. These 156 sites are battlefields, forts, and cemeteries; reminders of past triumphs and tragedies. Places like Gettysburg National Military Park and Fort McHenry. Sadly, these hallowed places are beset with crumbling roads, closed trails, and leaky sewer pipes. The needed repairs add up to \$6 billion—nearly half of the total \$11.6 billion maintenance backlog for all the national parks.



Robin says it's more important than ever that we care for these special places—for veterans and for everyone else, too.

Robin Eckstein: We have these beautiful parks here. These stretches of land that are just unbelievably gorgeous that no one else has. If we're going to have things for our future and for our children, they have to be taken care of. There is no reason why we can't step up and make sure that they are a priority for us.

Dan LeDuc: Joshua Tuohy also wants to make the parks a priority, and for the rest of this episode, we'll talk with him about why they are so important to him and other veterans. Josh lost his leg serving in the U.S. Army in Afghanistan. And he worked toward his recovery by hiking in the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. He now works with young people and other veterans to maintain park trails there.

Joshua Tuohy: I was with the Stryker Brigade out of Fort Lewis, Washington. I was in southeastern Afghanistan, an area called the Zabul province. I had a great experience there, but it ended a little shorter than I would have liked. It was a Thursday, I believe, in September—Sept. 24, 2009—that I ended up getting hurt. Our vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. I was sitting in the back, up top, on one of the machine guns. And yeah, the rest is kind of history.

Dan LeDuc: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. And so you were wounded and brought back to the United States.

Joshua Tuohy: Correct. Yeah, and that's where the real journey began, I suppose. Yeah, I ended up rehabbing out of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, which was then in DC, and now it's up in Bethesda. Vigorous rehab, physical rehab—I lost my right leg above the knee, which posed a series of challenges that still to this day I encounter. You know, uneven terrain and just pacing myself on certain days. But I was really committed and adamant about regaining a level of physical confidence and capability. That was something that I took pride in as a service member, being physically fit. I was an infantryman.

Dan LeDuc: You pretty quickly upon your return started seeking out the national parks.

Joshua Tuohy: I did.

Dan LeDuc: And so what did you feel some of these first times out there, when you were trying things out again?



Joshua Tuohy: Physical exhaustion I think would be the first thing that comes to mind. I walk with hiking poles, and it's a real physical task for able-bodied folks. And so for me to go out there and do it—you know, the uneven terrain and the steep inclines in some places—it's a physical test that I enjoy. It's a sense of accomplishment when you do it. It had a healing property, in a way, because when you get through it, and you do it enough times, you start to believe that this is something that you can do. And I had to prove that to myself. I was living in denial for a period of time and not wanting to get out and be as active. But just to get you out there—I mean, as soon as I come back, I want to go right back out there again.

Dan LeDuc: I can understand the physical side of it and the confidence-building side of it. Are there other things that maybe speak to the inner part of you when you're there?

Joshua Tuohy: Yeah, sure. The serenity, certainly, the calmness. The silence is so nice. I live under 395. I hear cars. I hear planes flying over at Reagan. I know it's 6 o'clock in the morning when they start taking off. And to get out there and break away for a weekend and do that is absolutely paramount to the mental health for me personally, and I'm sure that's shared with a number of other Americans.

Dan LeDuc: And that's the thing, you know. These parks are, of course, special for all Americans. But for you and other veterans, I imagine they also have an added significance.

Joshua Tuohy: Absolutely. Many of the folks who joined the service are proud of their service, and they're proud to represent their country. Part of that representation, I think, is the physical lands that we have here. And those are encapsulated through the National Park System. They are sort of the crown jewels of what we have to offer here in America.

Dan LeDuc: Have you discussed this then with other veterans that you know?

Joshua Tuohy: Yeah, I have. I worked with other veterans on this issue, and it's something that we talk about. It's a source of—getting back to the source of pride. And it's unfortunate that they've gotten to the state of disrepair. Again, they're monuments to our nation. And if we can't take care of those things that are in our backyard, what does that say about us as a society?

Dan LeDuc: So what are you doing?

Joshua Tuohy: I work for an organization called the Corps Network out here in DC. And we represent the nation's service and conservation corps. We try to get opportunities for young people and veterans—which was really what drew me to the organization as well—to engage in



service projects. Building trails, restoring habitat, and wildfire remediation is a big issue as well. The park system itself represents such a unique challenge, but also an opportunity to engage lots and lots more people in these kinds of projects. To forge a common bond and have a sense of purpose. And to come together for something greater than any one individual.

Dan LeDuc: And what would you urge other Americans to do about all this?

Joshua Tuohy: Engage civically with your state and local representation, and get out to DC if you can. Or get engaged with groups that liaison out here. Everyone, every voice counts. I mean, if we had 300-plus million last year visiting these park systems, I mean that's a sizable chunk of our population. If you can get a fraction of that talking and on the same page in expressing your interests, and explaining what these mean to you. Talk about some of the economics, and what that contributes to your community that you live in. The gateway communities, and the areas right outside are critical to the livelihood of some of these towns. They generate so much revenue through the outfitters, to the tour guides, and the boating guides, and the maintenance folks who work out there, and the hospitality industry, and the lodging, and so on and so forth. You sell some trinkets or something to folks who are going into the park system. And some provisions of sorts. It's a great opportunity to showcase that as well. So I'd encourage everyone to be engaged on the issues.

Dan LeDuc: And Josh, will we see you in a park again soon?

Joshua Tuohy: Absolutely. I plan on going this weekend. So will we see you out there, is the question.

Dan LeDuc: You will. Yeah. Thanks for joining us today.

Joshua Tuohy: Thank you for having me.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: If you want to learn more about the national parks, check out our previous episode about the deferred maintenance backlog. You can find it as well as more background on the parks—and other past episodes—at pewtrusts.org/after-the-fact. As always, we appreciate you listening and appreciate your reviews on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. For [The Pew Charitable Trusts](https://www.pewtrusts.org/), I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."

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