

NATIONAL PARKS

GHANIAN STYLE

BY JOHN COPELAND NAGLE
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR FACULTY RESEARCH

When I was child, the only national parks that my family visited on vacation were the historic military parks commemorating Revolutionary War and Civil War battlefields. My own children have had a different kind of national park experience. This year, the Nagle family visited Kakum National Park, a popular tourist attraction in Ghana.

We were visiting Ghana thanks to our friends Cameron and Anne Gongwer, whose daughter Caylor is a good friend of my own daughters, Laura and Julia. The Gongwers serve as medical missionaries in a village that we reached after a five-hour drive from the Atlantic coast. We enjoyed five memorable days simply experiencing life among the people in their village. That left us with a few days to see other parts of the country, and my environmental interests pointed me toward an opportunity to experience some of Africa's legendary scenery and wildlife.

We had thought about visiting other national parks in Ghana to satisfy my lifelong desire to see a hippopotamus in the wild. But the other national parks were either much too far away given the increasingly sketchy condition of the roads as one drove further from the coast, or lacking in any basic visitor amenities, or both. For example, Mole National Park is Ghana's largest national park, but we were told that the very size of the park resulted in a distant separation between the elephants, lions, and other animals and their human visitors. Bui National Park stretches along the Black Volta River which forms Ghana's western border with Côte d'Ivoire, and it features lots of hippos, but the roads to the park are bad and the visitor accommodations nonexistent. The Weichau Community Hippo Sanctuary in Ghana's far north promised the opportunity to sleep in the "Hippo Hide Tree House," but our friends reported that the sanctuary was rather disappointing, especially given the twelve-hour drive necessary to get there.

The diversity of conditions found in Ghana's national parks reflect the varying ways in which national parks are conceived throughout the world. President Grant signed the bill designating Yellowstone the world's first national park in 1872, and ever since then different interests have struggled to articulate competing visions of the role of national parks. By law, national parks in the United States are to be "preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all the people in the United States." The reality is that the National Park System is pushed to choose between the sometimes conflicting demands of recreation and preservation, as an ongoing administrative and congressional battle attests. Today, America's national parks struggle with conflicts involving air quality, snowmobiles, invasive species, and

inadequate funds to maintain trails and other facilities, with little in the law to guide the park's managers.

Ghana's national parks face similar issues, plus some much more basic ones. We experienced some of the challenges during our visit to Kakum National Park one afternoon in early July. Kakum is located near Ghana's Atlantic coast, and it is the country's most visited national park. The area's unique rainforests were threatened by massive logging operations, expanding agriculture, and hunting until the land was preserved in 1932. Kakum became a national park in 1992. The visitor amenities were modest by American standards, but quite impressive for Ghana. We enjoyed our lunch of fufu (a traditional Ghanaian dish combining mashed cassava and plantains plopped into ground nut soup), served at the park's original "Rainforest Café." The park contains an excellent visitor's center—built thanks to funds provided by USAID—which describes the Ghanaian rainforest and the importance of protecting endangered ecosystems. Like American parks, Kakum is charged with achieving a comprehensive, and sometimes conflicting, mandate: "to conserve rainforest biodiversity and to serve as an educational and research facility as well as a tourist attraction."

The highlight of the park, and the highlight of our visit, was a walk along the canopy walk. Built in 1995, the canopy walk





stretches 1,000 feet in seven separate sections along the top of the rainforest, rising over 300 feet above the ground. It wasn't as unnerving as I had feared—at least for me—but my typically adventurous wife Lisa's knuckles were white from grabbing the ropes so tightly. A few of the local Ghanians who approached the canopy walk turned back before they stepped out onto the ropes. But my family, our friends, and I all crossed the wobbly planks without incident. And, alas, without seeing any of the park's 250 species of birds or any monkeys or other animals. Our guide told us a story, though, about an incident a few years ago when a park ranger was leading a group of schoolchildren through the forest, just as a leopard jumped out of a tree onto the path behind them. The children did not see the cat, and only later did the ranger tell them what they had missed.

We enjoyed our visit to Kakum. To be sure, the park is not perfect, with one critique citing declining attendance, apparent corruption, and a lack of other tourist activities besides the canopy walk. The fact that we chose Kakum because it was said to be the best national park to visit tells me a lot about the facilities at the other national parks in Ghana. But while the park could be improved, I was also struck by what the area would be like if it had not been designated as a national park. The trees would have been used for lumber instead of sustaining a disappearing ecosystem, and the land would probably look like much of the rest of the developed landscape that we saw throughout the country. The American idea of national parks has helped to preserve part of Ghana, and thus provided the Nagle family with a very special summer vacation.