The National Park Service

An Unmoderated Remote User Testing Report

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Executive Summary

NPS.gov is a website run by the National Park Service, an agency of the United States federal government that manages the National Parks System. Through this website, users are able to browse through information, pictures, and videos about the parks, monuments, recreational areas, and other sites within the system.

For this report, we conducted unmoderated remote user tests through a service called Userlytics, in order to test the usability and user experience of the website, specifically for first-time users with the intention of visiting a specific state and its parks. Six participants were asked to remotely complete three tasks and respond to post-task and post-test questions, and as they did this, they were recorded and asked to speak their thoughts aloud.

After watching and analyzing the unmoderated remote user tests, we have come up with three recommendations to improve the usability and overall user experience of the website:

1. **Add more interactive elements and information to the map components**
2. **Add a search bar and filters to the state-level "Find a Park" page**
3. **Reorder the homepage information to bring important elements of the website above the fold**

For each recommendation, the issue was and a solution was made, with a mock-up attached to show what it would look like on the site. Overall, we believe these recommendations would allow users to more easily navigate the comprehensive information that NPS.gov shares and to have a better understanding of the National Parks System.

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Introduction

NPS.gov is a website run by the National Park Service, an agency of the United States federal government that manages national parks, monuments, and other natural, historical, and recreational areas. The website allows users to browse through comprehensive information on these areas, such as news and alerts, activities to do, and historical and cultural facts.

For this study, we evaluate how users would navigate the website to plan their own trip to the National Park System. Unmoderated remote usability tests were conducted using Userlytics (userlytics.com). Six participants were asked to complete a set of tasks and share their thoughts and feedback about the website and their overall experience. Based on the feedback received from the tests, usability experts will provide three recommendations to improve the overall usability and user experience of NPS.gov.
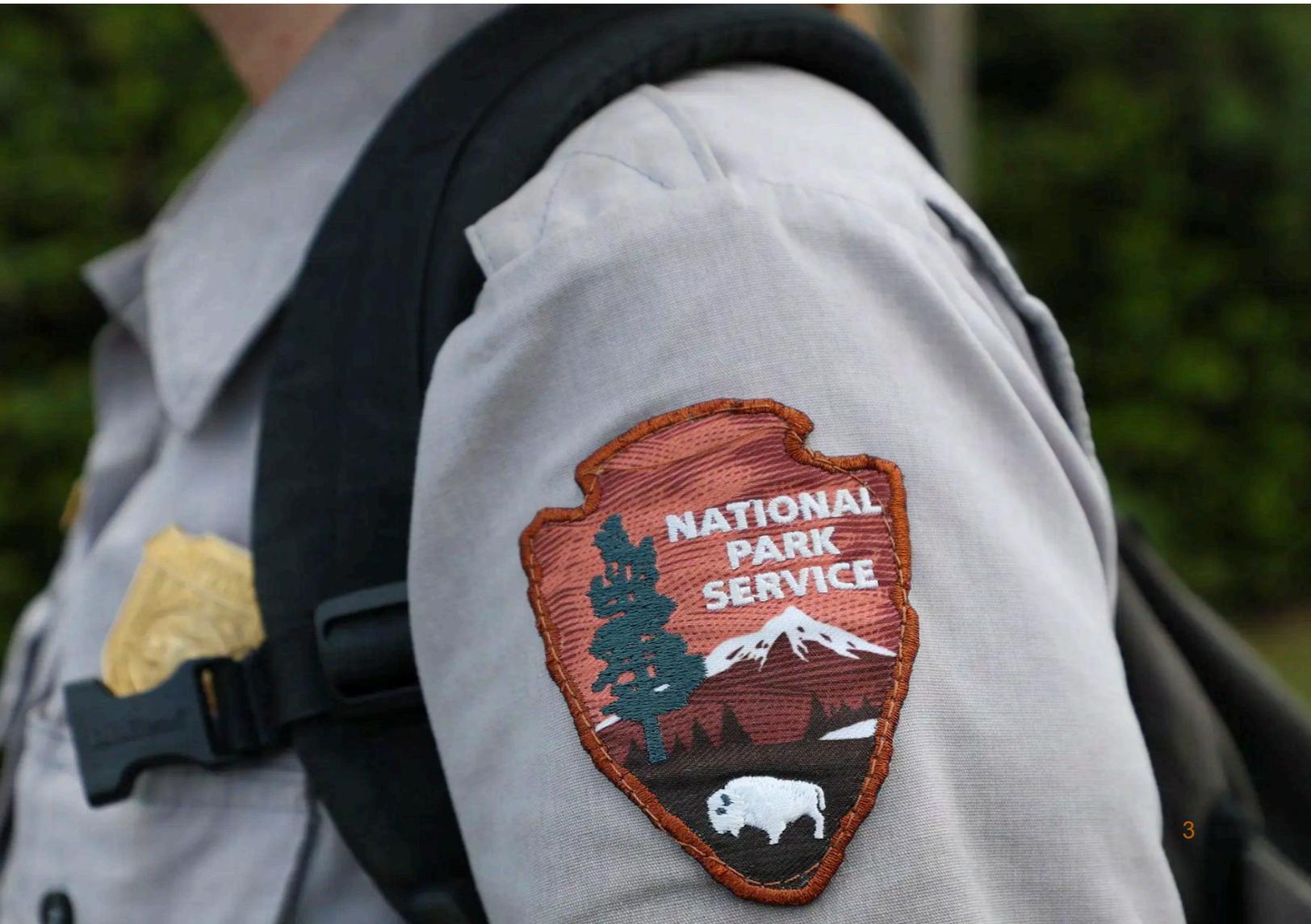
Methodology

Evaluation Method

To properly assess the National Park Service's website for usability issues and to develop thoughtful recommendations, we decided to conduct an unmoderated remote user test. This type of usability test allows participants to complete tasks while being observed remotely- allowing us to gain valuable insights from potential real-life users in their natural environment (Whitenton, 2024). The tasks we created were aimed at challenging participants to use different flows on the National Park Service website, specifically for first-time users who wanted to visit a particular state. Participants used the site userlytics.com to record and read aloud their navigation through an assigned task. Unmoderated remote user testing was a good choice to reduce costs and time compared to other usability methods. However, a potential drawback was that we were unable to inform users whether they had completed the task, so many users falsely claimed to have completed it.

For our unmoderated remote user test, we used the site userlytics.com to assess the National Park Service's website on a desktop browser. With this platform, we recruited 6 participants who answered "Yes" to both screening questions —"Do you enjoy traveling?" and "Do you enjoy nature and animals?"—and were willing to participate. These screener questions helped us identify participants who were most likely to enjoy using the National Park Service website and the scenarios we created for the tasks. These six participants were guided through a test consisting of three tasks, during which they had to read aloud each task and every thought as they completed it. After each task, the participant would read aloud follow-up questions and rate how they felt about the task and its difficulty on a scale from 1 - 5 (1 being very easy, five being very difficult). Participants' narration during these tasks provides researchers with valuable insights into how users think when using the National Park Website and the flow they intuitively follow to complete a goal. Participants were also tasked with answering three follow-up questions after completing all three tasks, which allowed them to summarize their experience and recommend what the website could improve or include.

Target Users

This evaluation aimed to assess the National Park Website for potential usability issues and determine improvements for first-time users interested in traveling to and visiting the United States' National Parks and Monuments.

We selected participants with the following characteristics:
- Country: United States
- Age: 18-60
- Education Level: High School
- Device: Desktop
- Gender: Any
- Web Expertise: Intermediate to Advanced

These qualifications were to ensure that the participant would have sufficient knowledge to navigate a site and provide us with feedback based on their experience with websites. Along with these qualifications, we developed Screening Questions to ensure that our participants would be at least interested in navigating our site. These screening questions were:

1. Do you enjoy traveling?
2. Do you enjoy animals and nature?

Test Details and Tasks

User Filters
- <u>Language</u>: English
- <u>Age</u>: 18-60
- <u>Web Experience</u>: Desktop and Mobile Webs
- <u>Max Session Time</u>: 30 minutes
- <u>Recording Methodology</u>: Camera + Screen + Audio
- <u>Source of Participants</u>: Userlytics Worldwide Panel
- <u>Number of Participants</u>: 6
- <u>Country</u>: United States

- <u>State</u>: Any
- <u>Gender</u>: Any

Screener Questions

1. *Do you like to travel?* [**Select one:** 1: Yes, I like to travel, 2: No, I don't like to travel]
2. *Do you enjoy animals and nature?* [**Select one:** 1: Yes, I enjoy animals and nature, 2: No, I don't enjoy animals and nature]

User Objectives

You're flying into Los Angeles, California in a week and you want to plan three different activities in the national parks while you are there. Talk us through your general impressions.

Tasks

1. *You plan to rent a car, drive about an hour out from Los Angeles to a national park, and hike a mountain. You are an experienced hiker, so find a hiking path that has a higher elevation to visit.*

[On a scale of 1 - 5, how difficult was this task?: **Rate 1 - 5** (1 - Very Easy, 2 - Somewhat easy, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Somewhat difficult, 5 - Very difficult)]

[If this task was difficult, can you describe which area(s) were challenging?: **Verbal Response**]

2. *You want to drive out to Cabrillo National Monument, but you're not sure how much an entrance fee would cost for you and the car. Find how much the entrance passes/fees will be if you enter with your car.*

[On a scale of 1 - 5, how difficult was this task?: **Rate 1 - 5** (1 - Very Easy, 2 - Somewhat easy, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Somewhat difficult, 5 - Very difficult)]

[If this task was difficult, can you describe which area(s) were challenging? : **Verbal Response**]

3. *You are going to sail out to the Channel Islands National Park, and you want to go camping in the Santa Rosa Island Campground. Find out if you have to make a reservation to camp there.*

[On a scale of 1-5, how difficult was this task?: **Rate 1 - 5** (1 - Very Easy, 2 - Somewhat easy, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Somewhat difficult, 5 - Very difficult)]

[If this task was difficult, can you describe which area(s) were challenging?: **Verbal Response**]

Follow Up Questions

1. *Thank you for participating in our National Parks Service website study! Would you use this website to plan your trip to the national parks?*

[**Select one**: 1: Yes, I would definitely use it to plan my trip, 2: No, I would definitely not use it to plan my trip, 3: Maybe I would use it to plan my trip.]

2. *What are some area(s) in the website you believe need improvement?*

[**Verbal Response**]

3. *What were some aspects of the site that you liked? What was helpful?*

[**Verbal Response**]

Findings & Recommendations

Overall Findings

After receiving our participants' test results, we analyzed their responses in a table (Appendix A). We were able to determine which tasks were most difficult, which elements of each task were challenging, the flows users take when tackling these tasks, how they felt about the website layout, and what recommendations they have for improving the site. Using this table, we were able to determine three recommendations for the National Park Service website that address the recurring usability issues our participants have expressed during testing.

Recommendation 1: Add more interactive elements and information to the map

The Issue: When landing on a state-specific page, the user is greeted immediately with an interactive map that shows the different national parks, sites, and trails. However, when clicked on, there isn't much information shown. Most of the popovers simply show a link to the state, or links to other pages, without exposing any basic information. Thus, rather than being able to use the interactive map, the users are forced to scroll down through the page and read through each park. If they want an idea of where the park is, they have to scroll back up to consult the map.
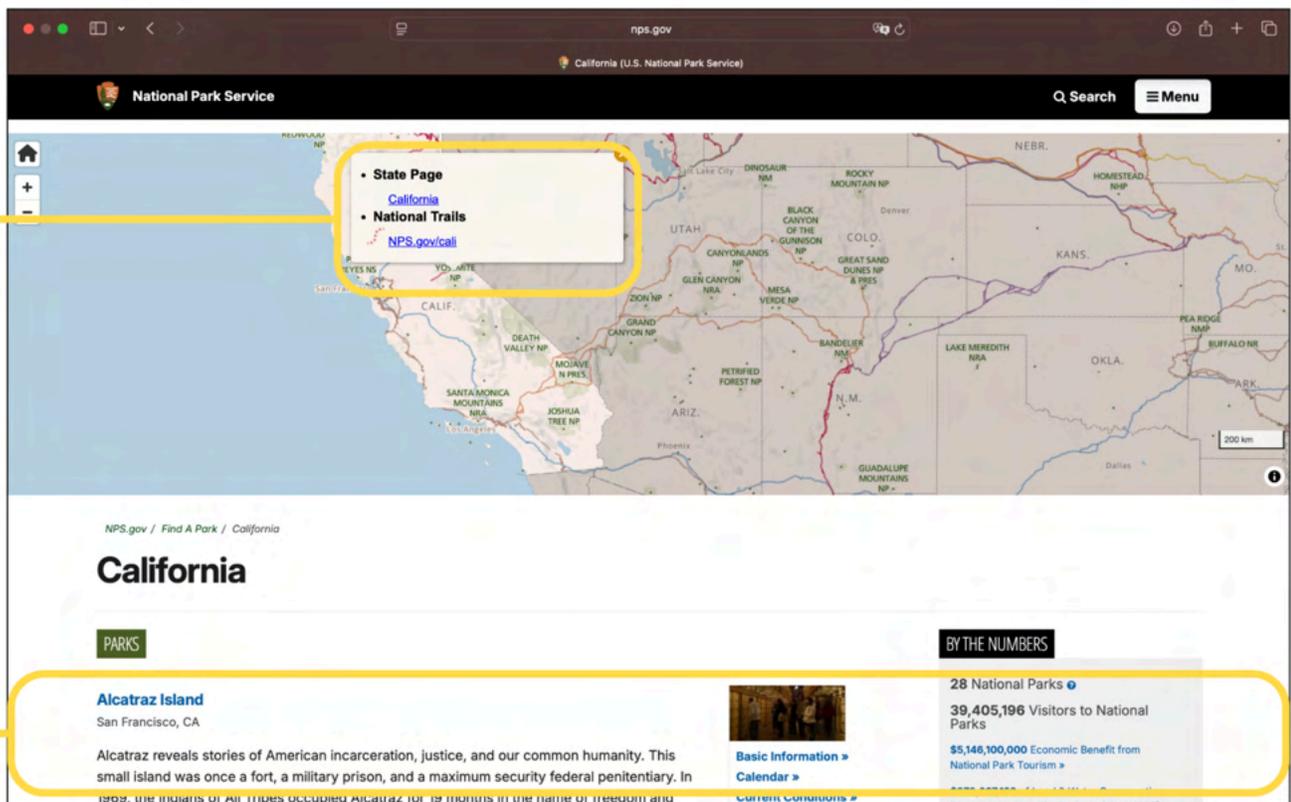

The Solution: To fix this usability issue, we designed an interactive map that allows users to freely explore the State's parks and monuments, allowing users to be able to click on a specific location and view information about it. If they would like to learn more, there will be a

button to take them to that specific park's page, without having to scroll down through the State's page.

Now users can click on parks within a state and view information about a location without having to scroll down. They can also choose to learn more about the park by clicking "Visit Park Page."

Added indicators for each park on the State map so users can understand where they can interact. The star icon will "fill in," once a user interacts with it, giving feedback on what park they are viewing.

Included a compass so users understand the map orientation.
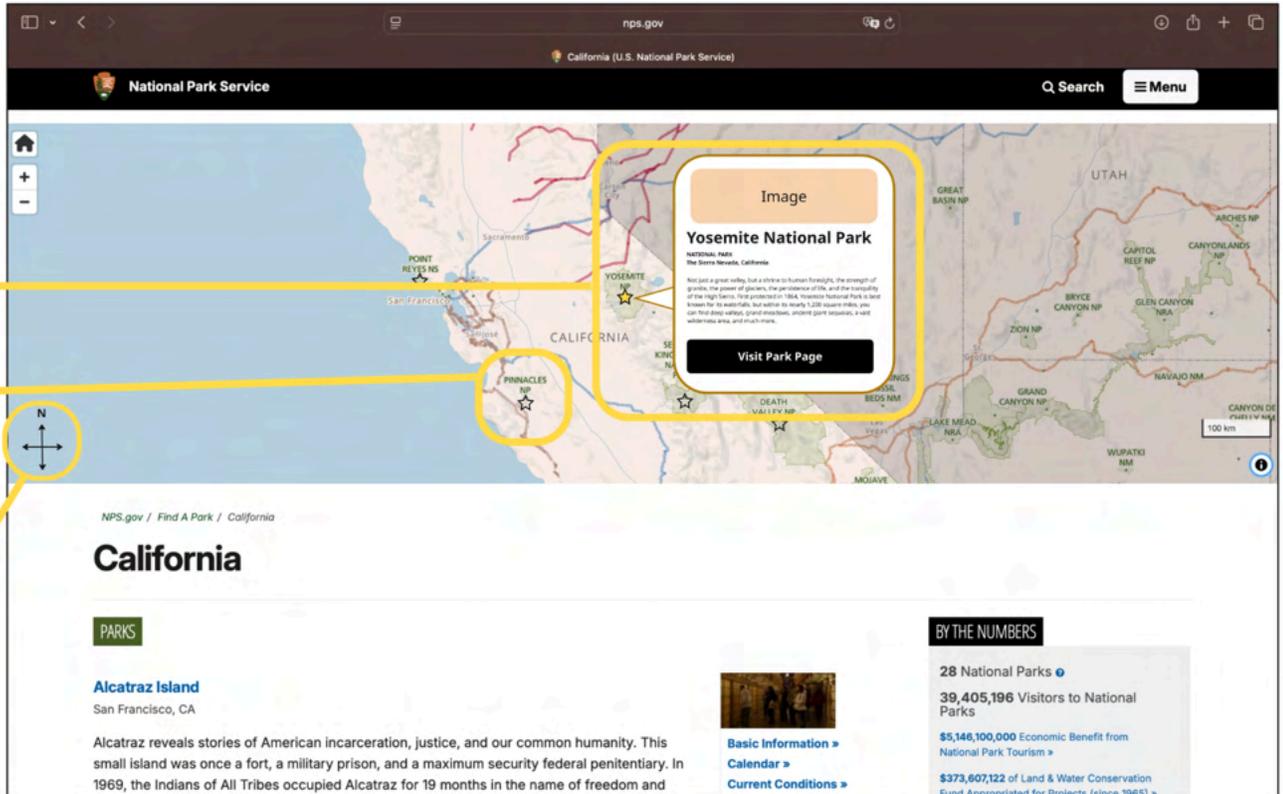
Recommendation 2: Add a search bar and filters to the state-level "Find a Park" page

The Issue: When on a state-specific page, users are given a list of parks within the state, but no way to easily search or filter through them. Users are forced to scroll and click into each park to search for general information, such as what type of activities are available. Although many of the participants expressed appreciation at all the information that was provided, participants expressed frustration with the difficulty of combing through it, and thus they found it hard to complete their tasks. Some had to use the browser find functionality to search for parks or keywords, and others attempted to use the sitewide search — however, because of the search logic, they accidentally ended up finding information on other states.
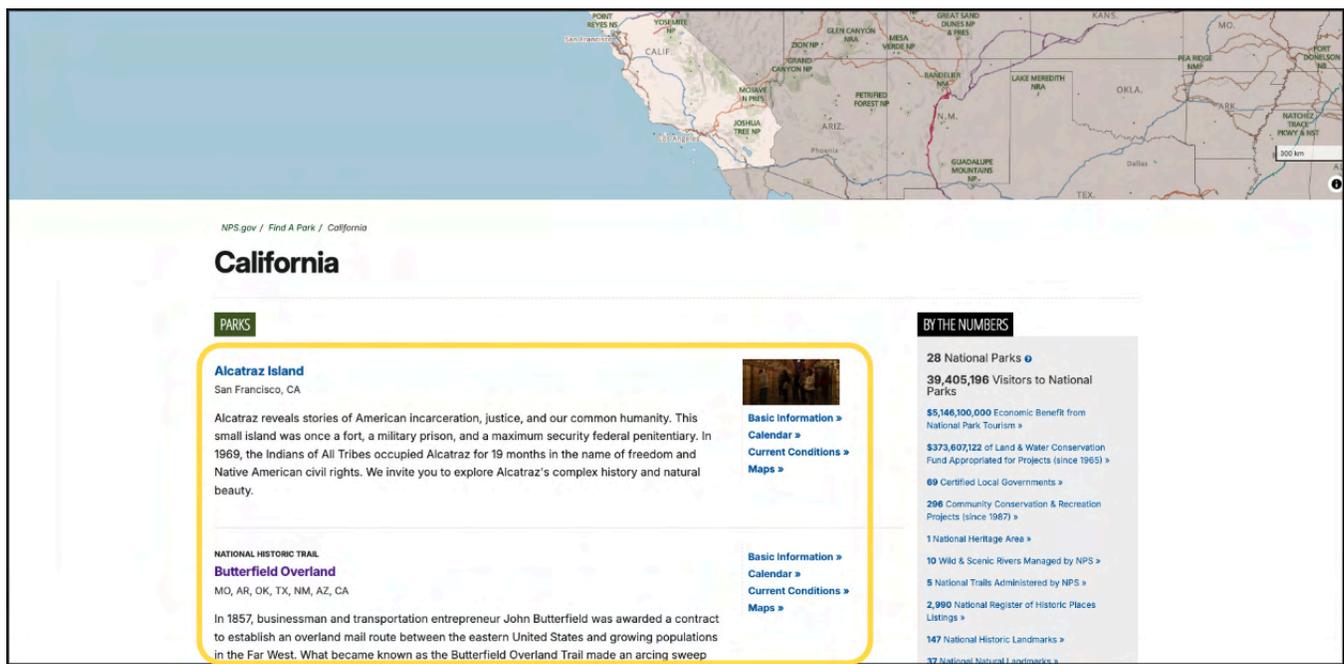
Parks are listed with short descriptions and links to relevant pages, however users must scroll through and read through information first to find what they're looking for.

The Solution: The nationwide 'Find a Park' page already has search functionality and filter options. However, due to the lack of visibility into this page, the many participants did not find it and instead continued to be frustrated with the state-specific page. Thus, we propose that

the same search functionality and filter options be moved into the state-specific page, so that users can discover the parks more efficiently by state.

Search bar and filters allow users to easily find a park based off their needs, without scrolling through and reading information

Recommendation 3: Reorder the homepage information to bring important elements of the website above the fold

The Issue: When reviewing our results, we noticed a recurring usability issue. The participants always began their tasks on the Homepage, but it did not offer enough options for the different goals they had in mind. Many participants reported that the information they expected to see on the Homepage was not there. The information currently on the Homepage includes options to see Parks in the Fall Season, view Parks and States, and see recent events at the parks. There is an obvious issue with the "Find a Park >" option: users did not recognize it as something they could click. We believe this option is essential and should be highlighted on the Homepage.
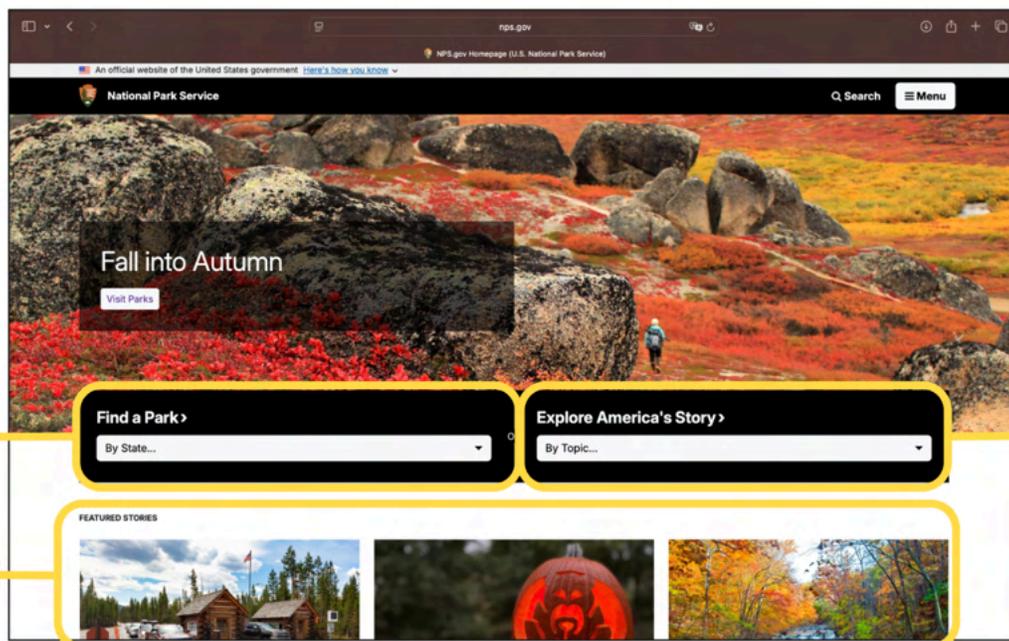
When looking for a park, users were drawn to this first, and it limited the users to only search by State. There is also an issue with "Find a Park >," no users recognized that you could click on this and it would take you to a list of Parks.

We believe that this isn't important information to have above the fold. This is not prioritized in the main menu so we will remove this and replace it with more useful elements that users are looking for.

Recent events/stories help keep users updated on what is happening within the parks. We deem this useful information that is peeking below the fold.

The Solution: In order to fix this issue of usability, we have to take a look at the Information Hierarchy and re-evaluate what is the most important information that should be highlighted on the Homepage. The current homepage was difficult for users to navigate because it presented users with little options to choose from and the options available were unclear and not super important to their goals. Therefore, we decided to design a Homepage that allows

users to have lots of options to choose from when first entering the Homepage, and also making it elements that are first in the Main Menu Navigation.

Included the Main Navigation on the Homepage so users can instantly figure out what information they can find. Also provided an option to open up the Main Menu if they do not see what they are looking for.

Edited the text to make it more clear what this button will take the user to.

Broke down the most important elements from the Main Navigation to fit "above the fold," on the Homepage so users now have multiple options to choose from when starting from the Homepage.
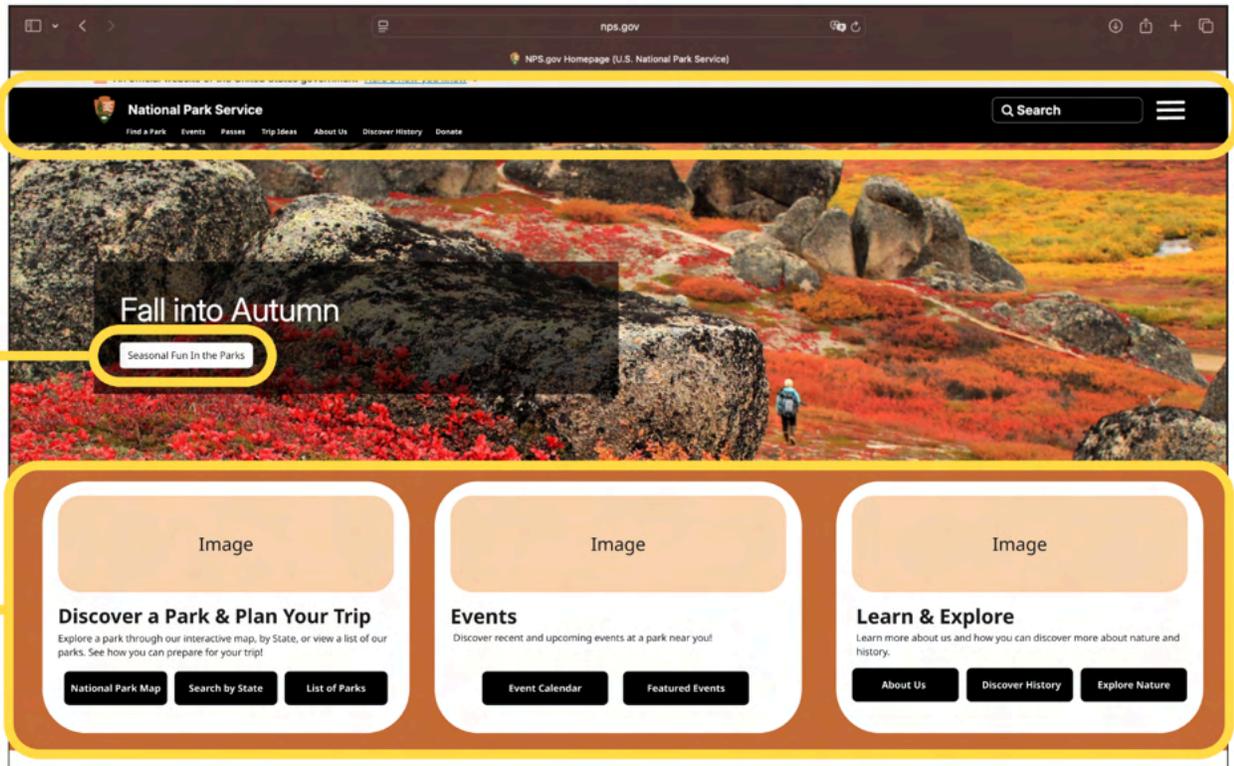
Conclusion

The National Park Service website does a good job of informing users about the national parks, their events, and history. The website is visually appealing and provides plenty of information to help users plan and prepare a trip to a national park. However, the website lacks functional information layouts on some pages, limiting what users can access and understand, thereby causing usability issues. We identified these usability issues through an unmoderated remote user test with six participants who matched our user profile. For example, we found three major usability issues within the site's Homepage, state map system, and filtering options. Using the test results and pinpointing the exact usability problems, we successfully recommended adjustments to these pages that address what our participants struggled with.

Our first recommendation is to add more interactivity to the state map by including icons and a way for users to view and visit specific location pages, allowing them to freely explore each state's map without constantly scrolling for information. Our second recommendation, to include more options within the search functionality, will enable users to filter by different parks when exploring. Our third and final recommendation for reimagining the Homepage gives users access to all essential site elements without having to search for them. We designed a main navigation at the top of the Homepage so users could view more options instantly. We redesigned the search bar to look like a bar where a user can type. The Menu "hamburger" is beside the Search Bar to indicate that the user could extend the menu options if needed. We switched the title of the first page element to reflect where it actually takes the user, "Seasonal Fun in the Parks." We finally removed the elements we recognized as not crucial. We included the main elements of the Main Menu on the Homepage, all "above the fold," to give users multiple, useful, and informative options.

Overall, the unmoderated remote user test we conducted has helped us identify crucial usability issues within the National Park Service website and develop detailed solutions. With these recommendations, the National Park Service website can continue its mission of informing users about the National Parks, but now with an excellent user experience.

Appendix

Appendix A

Task 1			
User	Task 1 Observations	Task 1 Time	Post-Task 1 Responses
1	Didn't complete task, tried to use interactive map to complete task initially but struggled with that, tried to see if there was a way to filter out trails but couldn't	6:35	5, wished there were more filtering/searching options, especially within the state page (e.g. filter by activity, opening time, etc.)
2	Semi-completed task, found a park with a trail but didn't find a specific trail. Instead of going through the 'California' page, I decided to use the menu to go to 'Trip Ideas'. But then decided to go to the 'Find A Park 'page, which made finding places near LA easier. Used filter for 'Hiking' to find Santa Monica Mountains.	2:26	3, thinks filters should be right by the search area, as they felt like they could've missed it. Also should be able to change results per page
3	Didn't complete the task. Initially found trails by searching 'hiking', but then realized she landed on a page for a South Carolina park. Searched up 'hiking in california' using a search bar, but found that didn't work. So I used the 'California' page to look, but didn't read through the pages to search through information.	3:50	4, couldn't find hiking places based on the specific state of interest. Wishes that closures were listed on the state page.
4	Tried to locate Los Angeles from the States tab- could not find it. Choose California from the States tab on the homepage. Confused- particular hike or mountain they wanted. Not sure how to find a hike that's about an hour away. Can't confirm if it's an hour away, but successfully located a mountain. I tried to see how close Los Angeles was on the map. Found the map/located multiple maps for a mountain (Castle Mountain). Did not find a specific one- confused wanted to clarify. Did not successfully complete the cat completely.	5:34	4- Confused on what the task was asking, I was not able to find anything that confirmed anything about elevation- very broad task. I think they missed something.
5	Was unable to hear their audio and see their screen for most of it. Thought to go to Plan Your Trip, Trip Ideas, thought it would take her to the trip she would want to go to. Had lots of issues with loading. Unable to see their screen. Thought to search up hiking paths- got no results. Visit your park > national park getaways > one where we	5:58	4 - wasn;t the easiest because you have to read through everything. Say there are missing key words. Each national park should be organized with key words/identifying words. Expected to see different

Task 1

	can hike. Did not find a trail in California, did not find one near Los Angeles (found one in New York). Just looked at hikes and reviewed them. Did not complete the task.		categories.
6	Nice image in front. Alert for government shutdown. Can Find a Park, explore a story. Went through the homepage. I would go by State, and choose California. Zoomed in on the map, Santa Monica Mountains area found on map, tried to click on Map and it just brought her back- thought it would bring her to the park but it did not. List of parks is below, scrolled down to the mountains, started to look for hiking paths- found the backbone trail, found the map, wondering if there are more difficult/easier trails, thinks the map would tell her. Completed the task, but wasn't able to confirm if the height was challenging/high elevation. Wondering why there was no interactive map. Hard to find because nothing is labeled by difficulty.	5:04	4 - Able to find trail names but not specifically which ones were more difficult. Links didn't take where they expected, though the maps were interactive. No labels on each trail segment, what the elevation/difficulty would be. Videos but not information? Difficult to understand. The image of the trail map is poor quality.

Task 2

User	Task 2 Observations	Task 2 Time	Post-Task 2 Responses
1	Completed task, found it easy to navigate to correct information via the 'California' page.	1:15	1
2	Completed task, used 'Find a Park' page and searched for park name. I found it easy to navigate to correct information.	1:18	1
3	Completed task, but had to scroll a lot to find the information. Used a dropdown menu to go to the 'Parking' page, but information wasn't listed there. Eventually found it under 'Basic Information'. I also tried using the search bar, but that didn't work so I went to the 'California' page.	4:53	4, spent a lot more time than expected to find information.
4	Did not start at homepage- left off at last task. He went to Plan My visit- season passes. Thought this was a prototype- did	2:48	2 - Challenging the wording in the task, no worded right, not sure if he would be able to

Task 2

	not successfully find the right location and fees. Stayed on the Castle Mountain overall page and did not look for the correct location. Did not complete the task.		find fees/payments- assumes this is a prototype and blames this on why he couldn't find the correct information where it should be
5	Issue: did not start at homepage. Went to "C" in recent Getaways. Searched up the monument in the search bar, found it. Found Fees and Passes, completed task.	2:38	2 - pretty easy, just search it up, go through the categories.
6	Searched it up, pressed the plan you visited, scrolled down, chose entrance fees and passes, completed the task.	1:23	1 - very easy, just search it up and find the fees and find the table. Very easy, no difficulty

Task 3

User	Task 3 Observations	Task 3 Time	Post-Task 3 Responses
1	Completed task, found information via the 'California' page, but scrolled a bit past information at times	2:03	2
2	Completed task, used 'Find a Park' page. I initially tried searching for Santa Rosa Island, but realized I had to search by Channel Islands. Scrolled past information at times and had to visit separate pages via the dropdown menus. (didn't realize that things to do was on island page)	2:44	2, thinks information could be consolidated together
3	Completed task, but had to go to multiple pages to find information. I expected it to be under 'Basic Information.'	4:20	4, didn't know where to click to find the information.
4	Did not read out the task. Stayed in the Castle Mountains section again. Found directions to Castle Mountain. Assumed that it would be there. Went back to the homepage, used the States homepage first. Chose California, found the Channel Islands- chose Camping, scrolled down to view reservations. Completed task.	3:24	2 - Sometimes websites gave wrong impression, it was complicated because there are other tabs related to directions/planning (but he was still in the castle mountain section)
5	Searching up Channel Islands, the task was slow because of poor wifi connection. Big delay because of wifi issues. Unable to view her screen as she went through the	3:19	2 - Looked it up, did the same as the last time, found the category and read through it

Task 3			
	task. Found camping reservations on the channel islands.		
6	Searched it up, searching is the easiest way to get there, clicked on first result, Plan Your Visit Menu > Places to Go > Santa Rosa Island. The screen froze. Completed task.	2:31	2 - harder than previous because she had to go deeper than before from the search. Little confused by sub-navigation and where campground information could be. Had to dig down deep to find.

Post-Test			
User	Q1 Response	Q2 Response	Q3 Response
1	Yes, but not easy to use	Would like more search/filtering options, such as by zipcode, activity, driveability. Would like more information and interactions provided on the map	There was very detailed information, but it's not easily available.
2	Yes	Filter should be next to search, number of results shown per page, ability to see pins on the maps, consolidate content	The visuals, content, and information are useful.
3	Maybe, I found a site challenging to use.	Organization, would like different content for tab names. I would like to filter out a specific activity by state or city.	Information is useful.
4	Yes, definitely would. A lot of helpful information.	Planning, directions and transportation, minimizing the amount of tabs available, make the sub menu navigation more simple.	Homepage, modern it looked. Overall impression made by professionals, very well designed. Tabs were helpful at the top- allowing him to find things quickly.
5	Yes, definitely, everything was sorted where everyone could find what they're looking for, lots of labels	Not a lot of ways it could improve. Have a chat bot where people can answer questions to people right away.	Alerts and effects right on top, everything is laid out in a way that is easy to understand, how everything is organized, everything is easy to view. Everything a person needs to know is there.

References

Whitenton, Kathryn. "Unmoderated User Tests: How and Why to Do Them." *Nielsen Norman Group*, 1 Feb. 2024,
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