



Photograph by Marian Gonzalez.



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Parks Are Social

Photographs from Flickr

Two years ago, I began a research project with colleagues at Stamen Design to explore social media generated every day in California parks, open spaces and natural areas, from city centers to wilderness areas. We began by setting up algorithms to capture all of the social media content emanating from within the boundaries of these areas on Instagram, Flickr, Twitter, and Foursquare. So far, we've gathered social media from more than half a million unique social media users who have shared content in one or more of the 11,628 parks in California.

We discovered two important things in our research. First, parks are social. People do things in parks that they do in the rest of their lives. They take selfies, they share photos, and they meet up. What this means for parks supporters in California is that we don't have to gin up social media around parks. People are already sharing their love of parks on social media. When I told this story to the deputy director of the National Park Service recently, she said, "Yeah, it's like people are having a party over there. And they're talking about us. And we're not going to the party." We don't have to create the party. We just have to figure out how to join the party and bring something to it.

The second thing we found is that diverse Californians will see people like themselves in parks, despite the fact that some groups are, in fact, underrepresented in park attendance. For some, a barrier to going to parks is that they don't think they will see people like themselves in parks. But if you look at social media, you will see diverse Californians in parks—and people want to see people like themselves in public spaces in order to feel welcome there. So if we can represent that diversity by sharing those images, it is an invitation to California's parks.

Naturally, we created an app for that: CaliParks.org. As part of the Parks Forward initiative in California, we built a browser-based app for Californians to discover their parks, find out what they can do in a park nearby today, and share their love for parks. Here are some of the images people have shared. **B**

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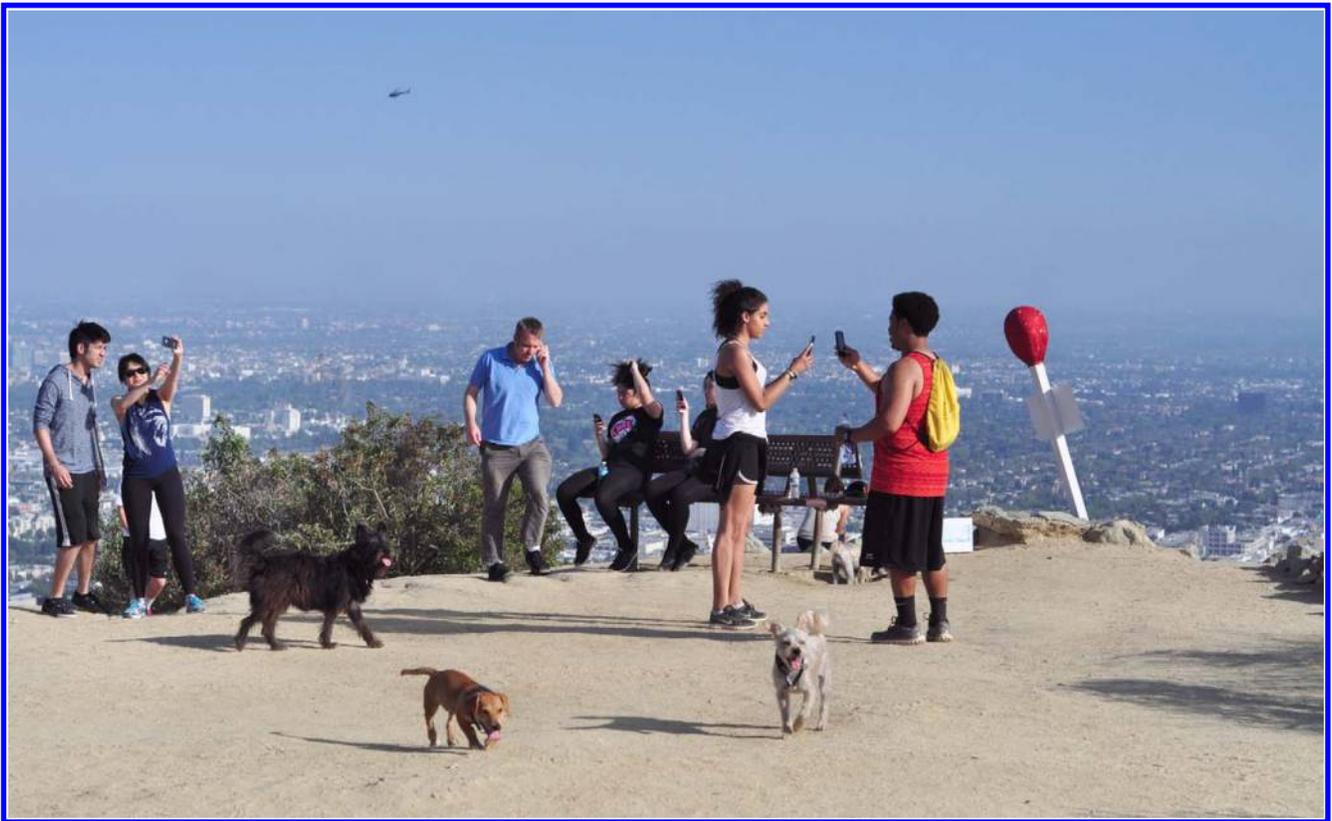
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