

United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service Biscayne National Park 9700 SW 328 Street Homestead, FL 33033



L-7615

August 26, 2010

Dear Friend of Biscayne National Park:

The National Park Service has proposed a Mooring Buoy and Marker Plan for Biscayne National Park. The purpose of this Plan is to enhance visitor enjoyment, increase safety, and reduce damage to park resources. There are popular aspects of the Plan including additional mooring buoys along the reef and near historic shipwrecks, as well as the addition of markers near shallow areas and along some navigational channels. However, there are also grave misunderstandings circulating about the Plan, resulting in a recent flood of concerned emails, letters, and calls to the park. I wish to clarify these misconceptions and explain what the park is trying to accomplish.

Some misinformation being distributed implies the park will close down visitor access to Sands Cut. This small, but beautiful shallow area is located between Sands Key and Elliott Key, within Biscayne National Park. Over 100 boats gather here most weekend days during the summer and fall; many with families who enjoy swimming, snorkeling, wading, and viewing nature. The growing popularity of this area has resulted in visitor use conflicts as families try to enjoy the area while others have come to listen to loud music and party. Although this is a tiny portion of the park not more than 1,000 feet long, 20% of all law enforcement incidents occur here. We frequently see boating under the influence, underage drinking, disorderly conduct, assaults, noise violations, and vessel accidents. Boats rafted or pulled up close together prevent park ranger vessels from reaching those who need medical attention or protection from assault. During a recent weekend incident, it took rangers over twenty minutes to reach a victim of cardiac arrest.

With our limited ranger staff, the disproportionate amount of time spent at Sands Cut reduces our availability to respond to other incidents, including fishing and lobstering violations, unsafe boat operations, search and rescues, and medical emergencies in other areas of the park. There has also been a steady loss of critical seagrass cover in the Sands Cut area, degrading and diminishing the essential habitat required for healthy fish and other marine life.

At the shoals near Sands Cut and the shoals near Stiltsville, we propose to install shallow-water mooring systems. We envision these as sand pins or mooring pins, where single boats would moor without running their boats up on the flats. Using aerial maps, we estimate installing approximately 70 pins at Sands Cut, but of course, nature doesn't give us straight lines and constant depths to work with, so we don't know the exact number. Our intent is to provide safe mooring for as many boats as possible while allowing for compatible visitor use and emergency access.

The National Park Service is mandated by Congress to conserve park resources while providing for appropriate visitor use. We want families to be able to enjoy the beauty of this area, while

maintaining access for park ranger vessels to ensure safe recreation. As we phase in the implementation of this Plan and make adjustments to the configuration of the mooring systems as necessary, the park intends to increase visitor safety and enjoyment while reducing crime and damage to natural resources

We are also proposing a small mooring buoy area along the eastern shore of Elliott Key where anchoring would not be allowed. The majority of the Park would remain open to anchoring, including most of the area adjacent to Elliott Key and all of the area historically marked for anchoring during the Columbus Day Weekend. This Plan would have no impact on the Columbus Day Weekend event.

I hope this explanation clarifies the park's proposed plan and alleviates the concern of those who love and utilize Biscayne National Park.

Sincerely,

Mark Lewis

Superintendent