

THE  
**FUTURE**  
OF  
**AMERICA'S**  
**NATIONAL**  
**PARKS**

First Annual  
Centennial Strategy for

# Niobrara National Scenic River

August 2007

CENTENNIAL INITIATIVE



Site: NIOB

Year: 2007

### **Vision Statement**

The Niobrara National Scenic River protects a 76-mile stretch of the river in north-central Nebraska. This National Park Service site is also a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Niobrara is the longest river in the state (535 miles) and is home to more species of fish than any other Nebraska river. The Niobrara is known for its scenic beauty, biological significance, paleontological resources and as a popular Midwestern recreation destination by river floaters.

The scenic attributes of the Niobrara include tall sandstone cliffs, a rocky streambed with numerous riffles and rapids, over 230 waterfalls, and six diverse ecosystems that host an equally varied array of wildlife.

The Niobrara is a popular recreational destination for visitors from much of Nebraska and several neighboring states. About 40,000 people float the river each summer and several tens of thousands more visit the area to hunt, fish, camp, hike, picnic or take a scenic drive.

The park's Centennial vision is to establish an initial Interpretive Division, create wayside exhibits and provide a regional, multi-agency visitor information and education center to serve park visitors and travelers who pass through the area. Few travelers know anything about the river and the incredible resources and recreational opportunities that abound in the Nebraska Sandhills. Nearby are various state recreation areas such as Merritt Reservoir and Smith Falls State Park, two National Forests and two U.S. Fish and Wildlife refuges. An interagency visitor center would showcase the region's diverse resources and recreational opportunities with the Niobrara River acting as the common thread linking the various lands together. Partnerships with these agencies and other local organizations to build and operate the center would be a logical option and a wise use of public funds.

In addition to providing interpretive and educational materials through exhibits, waysides, handouts and various media the NPS would seek to protect the river environs by creating and funding a comprehensive land protection program. Most of the land bordering the river remains in private ownership. There are strong incentives for landowners to sell their property to developers when agricultural prices fall, property taxes increase or when family descendants decide to not remain on a ranch and the owner can no longer maintain the property. Offering conservation easements or buying limited properties from willing sellers would help ensure that the river's outstandingly remarkable values are preserved. Partnerships would be a critical part of this program and would include the Nebraska Land Trust and the Niobrara Council.

The administration and other park partners are looking forward to the opportunities that the Centennial Challenge will present in order to better serve the visitor and protect valuable resources.

### **Park/ Superintendent/ Program Manager**

Paul Hedren

Site: NIOB

STEWARDSHIP

Provide inspiring, safe, and accessible places for people to enjoy - the standard to which all other park systems aspire.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

Establishing an interagency visitor and education center would orient travelers and park visitors to the national scenic river and surrounding resources and educational opportunities offered by other agencies. The NPS would have the opportunity to present safety messages and provide information and educate visitors about the park's resources. There is no current visitor center for the NPS. Local residents have longed for a regional visitor center to serve the needs of the Sandhills.

The work described currently is supported by OFS and/ or PMIS

Site: NIOB

STEWARDSHIP

Improve the condition of park resources and assets.

Improve the natural resources in parks, as measured by the vital signs developed under the Natural Resource Challenge.

Creating a land protection program and providing funds for conservation easements will help protect critical resources and hence improve or conserve resources measured through the vital sign monitoring program (water quality, vegetation, specialized plant communities, etc.).

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Site: NIOB

STEWARDSHIP

Assure that no compelling chapter in the American heritage experience remains untold and that strategically important landscapes are acquired, as authorized by Congress.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

A land protection program will help protect the riverine lands that are crucial in ensuring good water quality, species diversity and protect watersheds. Preventing undesirable development of private lands along the river and keeping lands in current agricultural uses is a high priority of the NPS.

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Site: NIOB

**STEWARDSHIP**

**Encourage children to be future conservationists.**

**Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)**

Interactive exhibits in the multi-agency visitor and education center and wayside exhibits, as well as interpretive program content would enhance the ability of the NPS to encourage youth to be conservation minded.

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Site: NIOB

**ENVIRONMENT**

**Inspire an environmental conscience in Americans.**

**Establish programs to showcase exemplary environmental practices and increase visitor awareness of how the practices apply to their daily lives, as measured by surveys.**

Wayside exhibits, visitor center exhibits and interpretive programs would target the importance of water use and conservation, forestry and grassland management, fire management, and the legacy of cattle ranching and good land stewardship.

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**Demonstrate environmental excellence through increased use of alternative energy and fuels at every park.**

Construction of a multi-agency visitor and education center would utilize the latest technologies in environmental conservation (wind energy, passive solar construction, water recycling, etc.).

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Site: NIOB

**ENVIRONMENT**

Engage partners, communities, and visitors in shared environmental stewardship.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

Partners in the multi-agency visitor and education center would showcase their agencies efforts towards conservation and environmental stewardship. The building could set an example for future construction in the community of Valentine, offer meeting room space for various organizations, host programs and special events that promote environmental awareness and stewardship. Sustainable practices and practical suggestions would be presented to the visiting public in creative ways.

Establishing a land protection program would help to inform and educate the local public about the importance of keeping lands in current agricultural uses (i.e ranching) and developing sustainable practices that use Best Management Practices for grasslands and forests. Funding for conservation easements would be a critical component.

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Site: NIOB

**RECREATION**

Encourage collaboration among and assist park and recreation systems at every level—federal, regional, state, local—to help build an outdoor recreation network accessible to all Americans.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

Constructing an Interagency Visitor and Education Center will allow each agency/entity to educate the public about the recreational opportunities that each area offers, as well as tie together the various recreational experiences into a common theme of the Sandhills/Niobrara River environs. This is especially true of state lands (state park, wildlife management areas) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands (Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge) with the possibilities of connector trails and water trails.

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Site: NIOB

RECREATION

Establish "volun-tourism" excursions to national parks for volunteers to help achieve natural and cultural resource protection goals.

Increase annual volunteer hours by 100 percent, from 5.2 million hours to 10.4 million hours.

Staffing of the interagency visitor and education center would be greatly enhanced by utilizing volunteers from the local community of Valentine to help operate the facility.

The work described currently is supported by OFS and/ or PMIS

Site: NIOB

RECREATION

Focus national, regional, and local tourism efforts to reach diverse audiences and young people and to attract visitors to lesser-known parks.

Increase visitation by 25 percent at lesser-known parks through a national tourism effort aimed at helping people to discover the breadth of parks and experiences.

By constructing an interagency visitor and education center along the river near Valentine great numbers of travelers would have the opportunity to stop and learn about the National Scenic River and the Sandhills. There is currently no centralized and easily accessible/recognizable place for visitors to get information about the river. There are no NPS facilities at the river or wayside exhibits to provide information or interpret the resources of the park.

The work described currently is supported by OFS and/ or PMIS

Increase the number of visitors that attend ranger-facilitated programs such as campfire talks, hikes, and school programs.

The establishment of a visitor and education center and an Interpretive Division would permit the NPS to reach many visitors by providing a point of contact, and offering walks, talks, float trips and an educational outreach program to local communities and schools.

The work described currently is supported by OFS and/ or PMIS

Site: NIOB

**EDUCATION**

**Introduce young people and their families to national parks by using exciting media and technology.**

**Increase the number of web hits through the introduction of advanced, interactive features that attract young people to national parks.**

Establishing an interpretive division would help ensure that the park website would be updated on a consistent basis.

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**Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)**

Visitor Center exhibits would use modern media and technology to interact with park visitors but also to encourage them to meet the resource directly.

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Site: NIOB

**EDUCATION**

**Promote life-long learning to connect generations through park experiences.**

**Enroll an additional two million children in the Junior Ranger program.**

The Niobrara NSR is currently developing a Jr. Ranger Program. A visitor and education center would provide a centralized point of contact for the NPS to reach visitors on a landscape that largely remains in private ownership with no current NPS facilities.

The work described currently is supported by OFS and/ or PMIS

**Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)**

Exhibits about the history of the river and Sandhills could include the legacy of cattle ranching and American Indian influences that would build a strong tie to the land and river for residents instilling a sense of pride and conservation-minded stewardship.

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Site: NIOB

**PROFESSIONALISM**

Be one of the top 10 places to work in America.

Meet 100 percent of diversity recruitment goals by employing people who reflect the face of America.

Every effort would be made to recruit locally among the Sioux nation for employment opportunities in the establishment of an Interpretive Division.

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Site: NIOB

**PROFESSIONALISM**

Promote a safety and health culture for all employees and visitors.

Reduce the number of employee lost-time incidents and serious visitor injuries by 20 percent.

Building an interagency visitor and education center would provide the NPS the opportunity to directly reach park visitors and educate them about having a safe river trip. Interpreters could reach the public in the field and assist patrol rangers in getting safety messages out to park visitors.

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Site: NIOB

**PROFESSIONALISM**

Model what it means to work in partnership.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

The Niobrara NSR is all about partnerships. The NPS currently manages the river primarily through partnerships with the Niobrara Council, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resource Districts and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The interagency visitor and education center could be operated by various agency personnel and organizations and house other offices for the Niobrara Council, and possibly the Valentine Chamber of Commerce.

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