Newsletter No. 1 • Spring 2011

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Grand Canyon National Park

Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park

Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Friends,

The National Park Service (NPS) is pleased to announce the availability of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park for public review and comment.

Along with the required No Action/Current Condition Alternative, three additional Action Alternatives, includng the NPS Preferred Alternative, propose various strategies to substantially restore natural quiet in Grand Canyon National Park.

It has been a long, challenging, but rewarding endeavor to complete the Draft EIS. Many agency and stakeholder representatives have been involved for several years and provided input to develop Alternatives, identify and clarify issues, and consider methods for evaluating impacts. We believe the NPS Preferred Alternative provides an approach that simultaneously balances resource protection with diverse opportunities for all park visitors, including great opportunities to experience solitude and natural quiet along with high-quality aerial viewing at Grand Canyon National Park. The NPS Preferred Alternative makes many areas quieter while providing for an economically viable air-tour industry. It allows the current number of air-tour operations to continue along with the opportunity for measured growth. The NPS Preferred Alternative meets the Congressional mandate for substantially restoring natural quiet at Grand Canyon.

We are now asking for your input on this important Draft EIS. Results of this planning process will guide the future of Grand Canyon National Park. Public comments are integral during this planning process to achieve the best plan. After reviewing comments, our next step will be to release a Final EIS leading to a Record of Decision. The NPS will respond to substantive commments in the Final EIS.

Sincerely,

Jane Lyder
Acting Superintendent

Get Involved!

You are encouraged to attend any of the Open House public meetings to learn more about the Draft EIS, ask questions and submit comments. Comments will be accepted for 120 days through June 20, 2011.

Submit your comments on the National Park Service Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) Web site at ***http://www.parkplanning.nps.gov/grca.*** The National Park Service values your participation in this effort and will carefully consider your concerns, values, and preferences in shaping decisions and future actions. Public meetings will be held in:

Phoenix, AZ - April 6, 2011
Flagstaff, AZ - April 7, 2011
Las Vegas, NV - April 14, 2011

Meeting times and locations are listed on the National Park Service PEPC Web site at ***www. parkplanning.nps.gov/grca*** and the Grand Canyon National Park Web site at ***www.nps.gov/grca/parkmgmt/planning.htm.***

EIS for Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park

The NPS has released a Draft EIS for "Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park" for public review and comment. The Draft EIS assesses environmental and related impacts that may result from actions being proposed to achieve the statutory mandate of the National Parks Overflights Act, to provide for the substantial restoration of the natural quiet and experience of Grand Canyon National Park.

Four Alternatives are identified in the Draft EIS, including a No Action Alternative, which would continue current management practices. Three action Alternatives are presented in the Draft EIS, including a NPS Preferred Alternative. Implementation of each Alternative was evaluated based on route configurations and operations of air-tour aircraft over a ten-year forecast period.

What is an EIS?

An Environmental Impact Statement is a formal document produced in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA establishes standards that guide an EIS, which is used to evaluate a range of Alternatives for a proposed action that may have a significant effect on the human environment. An EIS guides decision makers as they seek to create policy or take action that balances human need with environmental stewardship.

Every EIS follows a standard format, which includes a clear definition of the purpose of and need for action, the environment of the area(s) to be affected, and a full and fair disclosure of environmental impacts of the proposed action (Preferred Alternative) and the Alternatives to that proposed action.

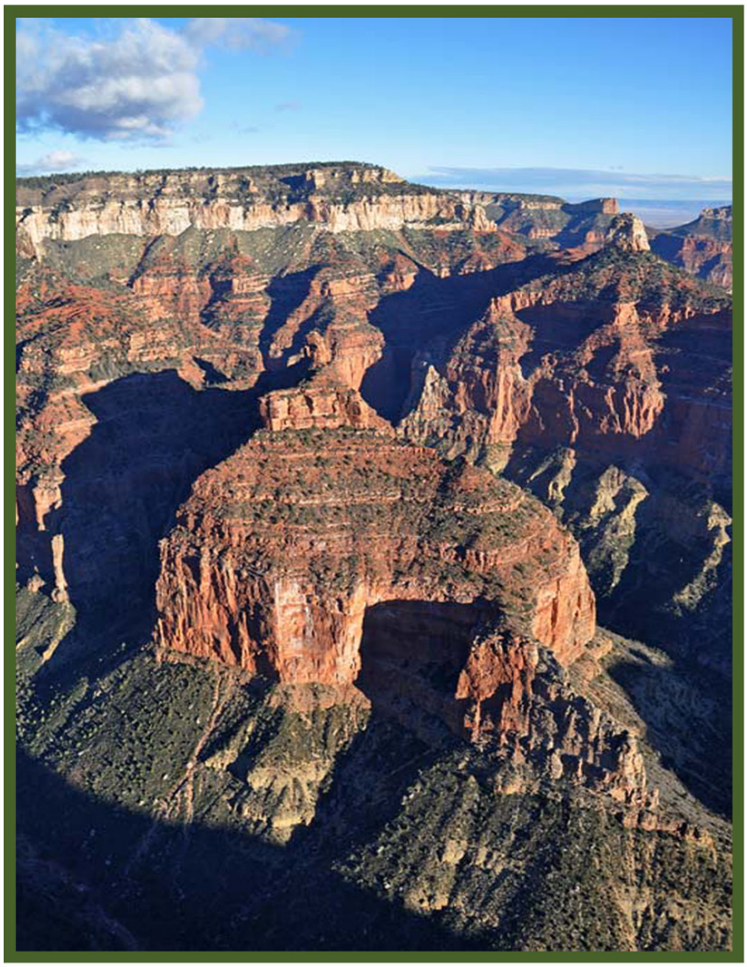
A Draft EIS is made available for review and comment to the public and other Federal and State agencies to ensure decision makers consider and understand all sides of the issues and all important information before decisions are made or actions taken. Keeping the public involved in decision-making that may have environmental consequences is a critical part of the NEPA process. Public comments, stakeholder and economic interests, and other criteria are considered when the NPS responds to comments, including deciding whether to make any changes to the Preferred Alternative or the impact analysis in the Final EIS. Following the Final EIS, the NPS will publish a Record of Decision.

To review the DEIS,
visit the Web site:
http://www.parkplanning.nps.gov/grca

Environmental Impact Statement Objectives

The NPS developed the Preferred Alternative for protection of park resources and the substantial restoration of natural quiet to the park as mandated by the 1987 National Parks Overflights Act. Several objectives were considered when developing the Draft EIS:

- Improve and maintain substantial restoration of natural quiet and enhance Grand Canyon National Park visitor experience.
- Provide a reasonable opportunity for visitors to safely experience Grand Canyon by air tour, without adversely affecting the national airspace system.
- Protect public health from adverse effects associated with aircraft overflights.
- Protect wilderness character in Wilderness in the Special Flight Rules Area.
- Provide primitive recreation opportunities without aircraft intrusions in most backcountry areas, most Colorado River locations, and destination points accessed by both backcountry and river visitors.
- Provide recreation opportunities with limited aircraft intrusions for visitors at developed areas along the rim and major front-country destination points accessible by road.
- Protect sensitive wildlife habitat and cultural resources.
- Provide a quality aerial viewing experience while protecting park resources and minimizing conflicts with other park visitors.
- Maintain an economically viable and safe air-tour industry.



The Sound of Silence: Natural Quiet at Grand Canyon

Prior to legal mandates to protect it, and long before mechanized noise threatened it, Grand Canyon's remarkable natural quiet was a key focus of many visitors' experience. The stillness and solitude was not simply remarkable. It was viewed as an essential quality — a key defining characteristic — of Grand Canyon.

National parks are some of the most unique places in the world. One responsibility of the NPS is to keep them special. Natural sounds — an important resource and component of the visitor experience — are slowly and incrementally disappearing or being covered up by noises that didn't exist until recently.

Natural and cultural sounds awaken the sense of awe that connects us to the splendor of national parks and have a powerful effect on our emotions, attitudes, and memories. In many cases, hearing is the only option for experiencing certain aspects of our environment. The ability to hear natural sounds often presents the best opportunities to find wildlife because animals can be heard at much greater distances than they can be seen. Cultural sounds are invaluable for recreating a historic scene or setting a mood. Experiencing natural sounds also contribute to a sense of tranquility and solitude.

Not surprisingly then, the American public comes to parks with quiet in mind. In fact, Americans say one of the most important reasons for preserving national parks is to provide opportunities to experience the sounds of nature.

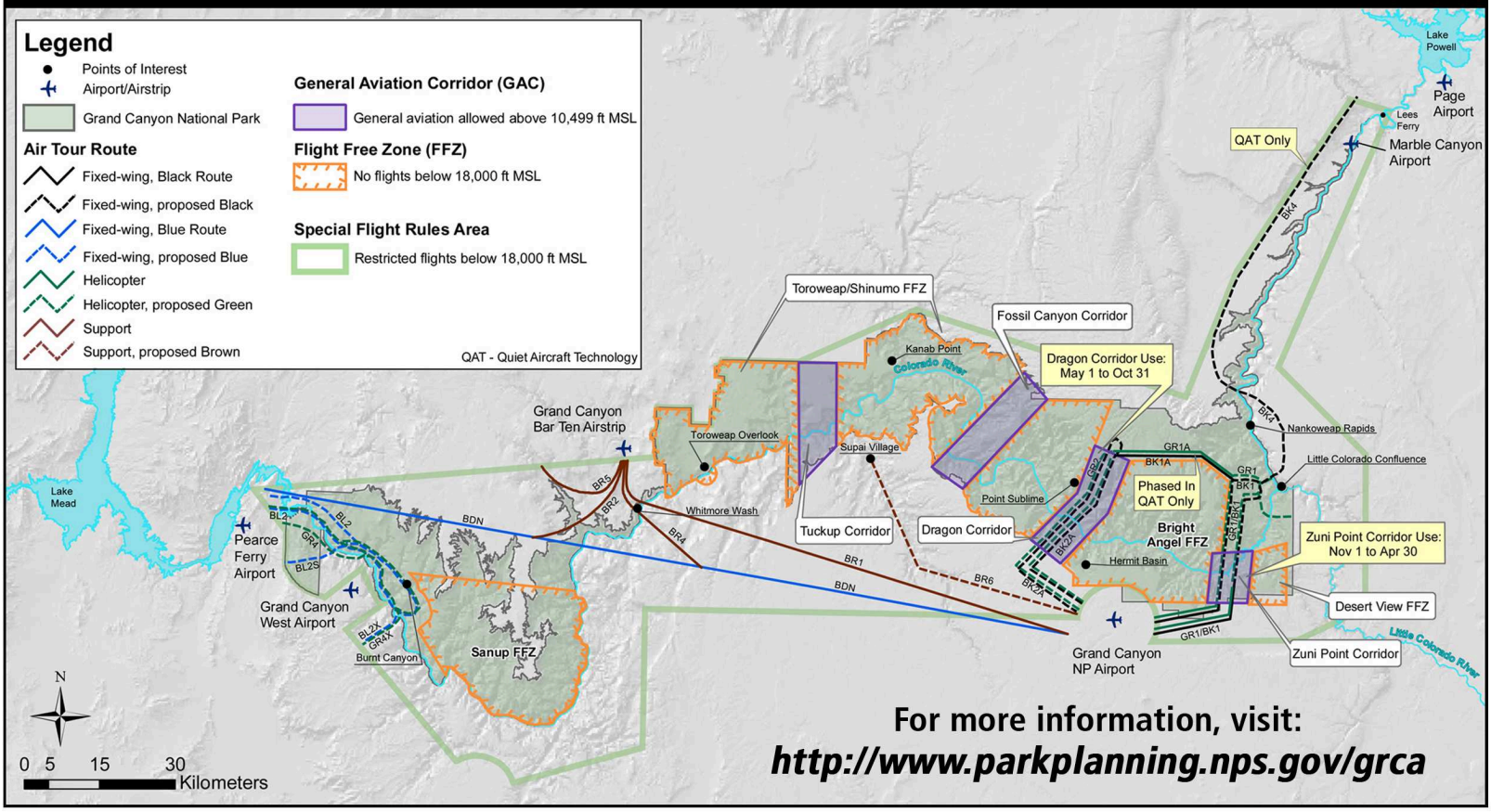
Preserving the soundscape is included in the NPS mission to preserve our nation's resources and cultural heritage unimpaired in trust for use by all the people, both now and in the future.

In fact, Congress thought this was so important they passed the 1987 National Parks Overflights Act, which required substantial restoration of the natural quiet and experience of Grand Canyon National Park. In April 2000, this requirement was reaffirmed in the National Parks Air Tour Management Act.

The NPS Preferred Alternative features several key components

- Substantial restoration of natural quiet would be improved and maintained over 67% of the park ten years after implementation of the plan. If current management of overflights continues, after ten years substantial restoration of natural quiet would be 53% of the park.
- Provides for long and short loop air-tours, with seasonal shifts in short routes at six month intervals and long routes open year-round. Seasonal shifts would reduce noise impacts to visitors and resources under air-tour routes while providing a variety of high-quality air-tour visitor opportunities.
- To reduce impacts from aircraft noise, only quiet-technology aircraft would be allowed on all routes after a ten-year period.
- To maintain noise reductions from other provisions described in this list, but allow some growth to maintain a viable air-tour industry, total annual allocations would be 65,000 and apply to all flights except those currently exempt. Currently, up to 93,971 air-tour flights can occur each year, but fewer than 57,000 have been reported for any year.
- To limit impacts on the busiest days, but allow some flexibility for air-tour operators, there would be a daily cap of 364 air tours with a requirement to report all flights daily rather than as a three-month total as now required. Currently, there are no limits on the number of daily flights; there were 314 flights reported as air tours on the busiest day in 2005. An additional 50 air tours could be flown under the proposed daily cap.
- Routes would be adjusted to reduce noise in sensitive areas while still allowing for exceptional air-tour opportunities.
- Route altitudes close to canyon rims would be raised above rim level to reduce impacts to ground-based visitors and park resources, and comply with existing law (1987 National Parks Overflights Act).
- Provides at least one hour quiet time after sunrise and before sunset. Curfews would be increased and apply to the park's entire East End, with 9 hours flight time in summer and 7 hours in winter. Currently, curfews limit flight times to 10 hours in summer and 8 hours in winter.
- The effectiveness of flight-free zones in reducing noise would be improved by raising the ceiling of all four zones to 17,999 feet mean sea level (MSL), with limited exceptions for safety and national airspace.

NPS Preferred Alternative Map



For more information, visit:
http://www.parkplanning.nps.gov/grca

Historical Perspective

1985

National Parks Overflights Act

This Act mandates that the NPS recommend actions to substantially restore natural quiet and experience at Grand Canyon National Park.

Aug 1987

May 1988

Special Federal Aviation Regulation 50-2

1990

Extended Special Flight Rules Area to 14,499 feet altitude and expanded boundaries, established flight-free zones, and provided air tour routes and general aviation corridors.

Presidential Memorandum

President Clinton issued a Presidential Memorandum directing the Secretary of Transportation to issue proposed regulations for Grand Canyon National Park to appropriately limit sightseeing aircraft to reduce aircraft noise immediately, and further restore natural quiet, while maintaining aviation safety in accordance with the Overflights Act.

1995

April 1996

National Parks Air Tour Management Act

For Grand Canyon, the Act provides for designating quiet technology aircraft, and establishing routes and relief from allocation caps for quiet technology aircraft, provided they do not increase noise or negatively impact substantial restoration of natural quiet.

April 2000

Notice of Intent

Notice of Intent (71 Federal Register 4192) to prepare EIS is released.

2005

Jan 2006

Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park Draft EIS

NPS releases Draft EIS for public review and comment.

Open House public meetings

2010

Phoenix, AZ - April 6, 2011
Flagstaff, AZ - April 7, 2011
Las Vegas, NV - April 14, 2011

Feb
April
2011

The 1987 National Parks Overflights Act requires the NPS to recommend actions to substantially restore the natural quiet and experience of Grand Canyon National Park. To meet this mandate, the NPS has prepared a Draft EIS to assess alternatives to manage commercial air-tours and related flights within the Grand Canyon National Park Special Flight Rules Area. The EIS will help reduce or mitigate potentially adverse impacts associated with park overflights.

The EIS process was initiated with publication of a "Notice of Intent to Prepare an EIS for Actions to Substantially Restore Natural Quiet to the Grand Canyon National Park and Public Scoping" in the Federal Register on January 25, 2006. That scoping process generated approximately 1,300 comments through public meetings in three locations and through a written comment period.

Public Involvement Process

The release of the Draft EIS marks a new step in the process. The NPS encourages public involvement, participation and comments on the Draft EIS during the 120-day public comment period that will run through June 20, 2011. All substantive comments received during this period will be considered and may result in changes in the Final EIS. Substantive comments are those that raise, debate, or question a point of fact or policy in the Draft EIS, providing rationale for "why" the commenter agrees/disagrees with a point or wants to see a change in the analysis or alternatives.

After analyzing the comments received on the Draft EIS, the NPS will prepare a Final EIS and distribute it to the public. After a 30-day no-action period, the NPS will prepare a Record of Decision, which will be the decision document providing the NPS recommendations to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The FAA will then conduct a rulemaking process to implement the NPS recommendations in accordance with the 1987 National Parks Overflights Act.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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How can I participate?

The public is invited to participate in this 120-day comment period in the following ways:

1. Attend one or more of the three public meetings to learn more about the project and provide comments.
2. Submit a comment through the National Park Service's Planning, Environment and Public Comment database at ***www.parkplanning.nps.gov/grca.*** Click on the "Open for Comments" tab on the left-hand side toolbar and then select the Draft EIS document link.
3. Comments may also be mailed to:

Superintendent, Grand Canyon National Park
Attn: Office of Planning and Compliance
P.O. Box 129
Grand Canyon, Arizona 86023

Open House public meetings:

The public meetings are a key component of the public comment period. The NPS encourages your participation at these meetings, as your input will help decision makers achieve the best plan for aircraft overflights at Grand Canyon National Park.

Meetings will be scheduled in the following locations:

- **Phoenix, AZ - April 6, 2011**
- **Flagstaff, AZ - April 7, 2011**
- **Las Vegas, NV - April 14, 2011**

For more information regarding the times and locations of the meetings, visit the NPS Web site at ***www.parkplanning.nps.gov/grca*** and the Grand Canyon National Park Web site at ***www.nps.gov/grca/parkmgmt/planning.htm.***