



Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument

Critical Issues and Opportunities for the 21st Century

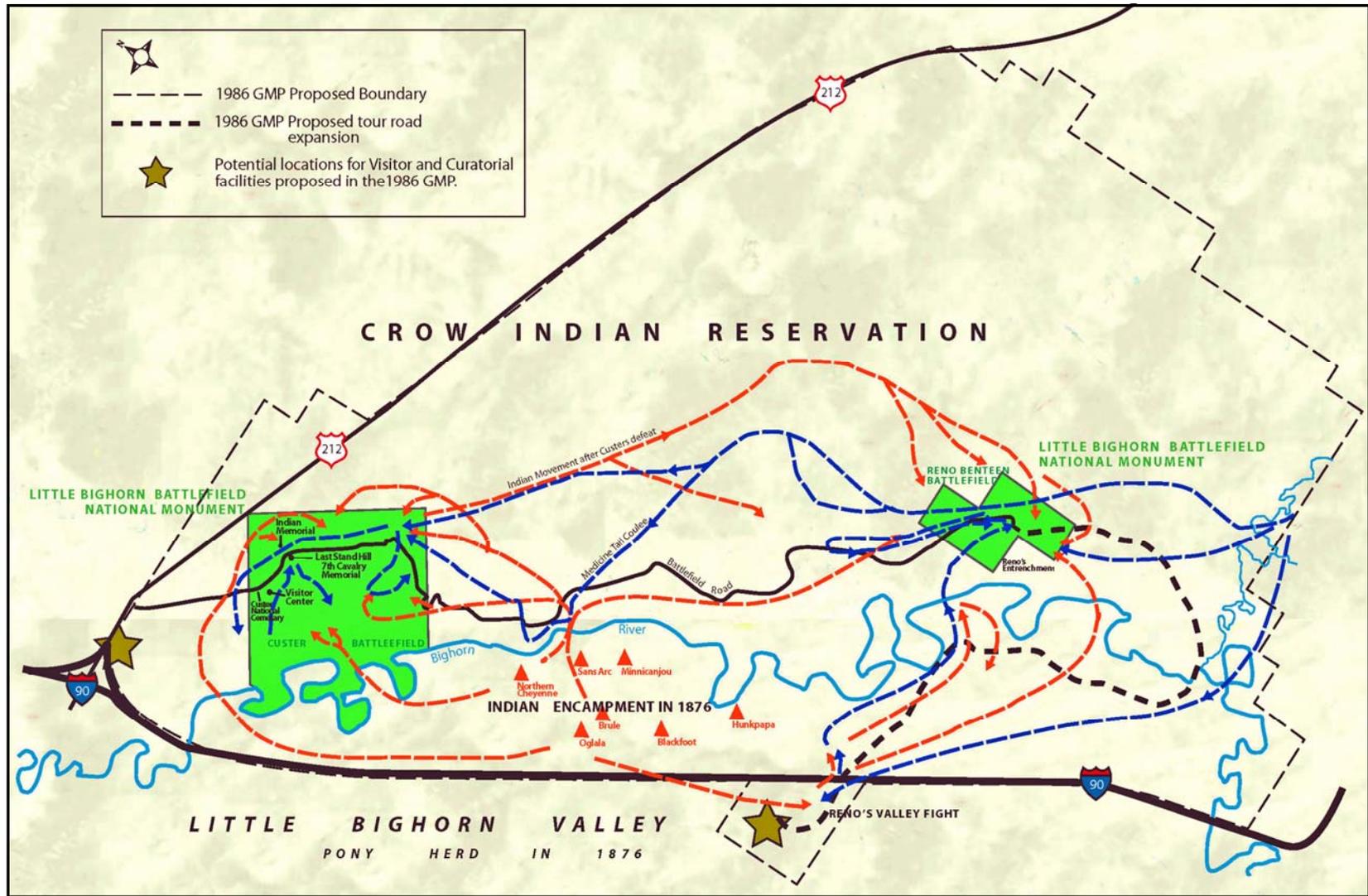


Little Bighorn today and in a 1911 view of Crow tepees on the banks of the Little Bighorn River. Richard Throssel photo courtesy Western History/Genealogy Dept., Denver Public Library.

Little Bighorn's 1986 General Management Plan Recommendations

Little Bighorn's 1986 General Management Plan spelled out how the park should be managed for the next 15 to 20 years. It was never implemented, but some of the primary recommendations of the plan include:

- Adding approximately 11,800 acres to the monument. The existing park boundaries are shown in bright green on the map below. The boundary proposed in the 1986 plan is roughly represented by the yellow line.
- Extending the existing tour road by several miles to create a loop. The tour road was proposed to be one-way, starting where the battle began in the valley, then passing through the Reno-Benteen area, and ending at Last Stand Hill. Barring oversize vehicles was also contemplated, and a shuttle bus system was recommended.
- Moving the existing visitor center, restrooms and parking lot to one of two possible locations marked by yellow stars below. A 1996 amendment to the 1986 GMP proposed an alternate visitor center location near Garryowen.



- Replacing the inadequate curatorial space in the existing visitor center with modern curatorial space that meets national museum standards in the new visitor center.



A Park Facing Challenges, And A Dire Need For Collective Vision

Aging infrastructure...limited land...crowding...a long-term plan never implemented...



**Protecting A National Treasure
Superintendent Kate Hammond**

Only a handful of historic sites capture our imaginations like Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. Here, in 1876, the U.S. Army under Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer met defeat at the hands of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors who were fighting to preserve their way of life. To Americans, and the entire world, the monument has achieved iconic—even mythic—status.

But Little Bighorn's got big problems.

The 58-year-old visitor center is too outdated and cramped to comprehensively convey one of the most important stories in American history and Plains Indian history. The monument's roads and parking lot are in bad shape and woefully inadequate for today's traffic. Thousands of artifacts and documents stored at the site are poorly protected. Important battlefield sites are excluded from the park and inadequately safeguarded.

Park officials have been grappling with these issues for decades. In 1986, a major National Park Service (NPS) study called a General Management Plan recommended relocating the visitor center and parking lot, extending the tour road, and expanding the park by 11,800 acres to incorporate and protect additional historic areas.

In the 24 years since the plan was approved, the NPS has made little headway in implementing its recommendations

due to a combination of political issues, controversy over some of the plan's proposals, and lack of funding. Yet those same problems that the 1986 management plan attempted to address have worsened. And that raises two important questions: Is the 1986 plan still the vision that the NPS should be pursuing? If so, what do we need to do to make progress implementing that plan? If not, then what?

We want to know your answers to these questions. This fall, we will invite interested parties—Indian tribes, historians, community leaders, park partners, landowners and the public—to join us in discussing the management challenges that the park is facing, and help us determine what the next steps should be in solving them.

We all know there are no easy answers to these questions. But it's hoped this process and this document will help us forge a collective understanding of these issues and help us figure out the way ahead to addressing them.

Critical Issues and Opportunities for the 21st Century



The Visitor Center Is Cramped And Outdated

Built in 1952, it lacks the room needed to tell Little Bighorn's full story from multiple viewpoints

- The visitor center is outdated and too small.
- Park visitation has tripled since 1952.
- The center is too close to Last Stand Hill.
- It has safety and building code issues.
- The space for exhibits and lectures is inadequate.

How badly outdated is the visitor center?

When the visitor center was built in 1952, about 100,000 people visited the park every year. But visitation has tripled since then, currently averaging about 300,000 people a year. The park has no auditorium or large meeting room, and until 2008 it used a dingy basement storage room to show the park film. But that was stopped because the space wasn't handicapped accessible and it had safety and code issues.

Visitors pack into the visitor center's observation room, which is temporarily used as a 30-seat makeshift theater. There, they watch the park film on a television set. Many people are forced to stand outside and peer inside. To hear a ranger program, visitors gather on a patio that's not big enough to hold typical seasonal crowds of 100 to 150 people. The patio affords little protection from inclement weather or the noise of traffic from the nearby tour road. The cramped exhibit space houses outdated exhibits that have been piece-

mealed together and do not tell a full story.

The 1986 plan called for building a new visitor center away from Last Stand Hill. Although some parking and services would have remained onsite, it was seen as a way to partially restore the landscape.

When that plan wasn't adopted, the NPS considered leasing private property for a new visitor center. But the idea was scrapped, partly because there wasn't enough money in the budget to maintain the lease.

Another issue is where to put the visitor center. The NPS once believed it was best to keep buildings close to main attractions such as Last Stand Hill. But in recent years, the NPS has focused on restoring historic landscapes. Would moving the center enhance or undermine the visitor experience?

The NPS also proposed temporarily expanding the visitor center. Approved by the NPS in 2008, the expansion would've included a large multipurpose room and provided improved exhibit space, among other benefits.

But some park advocates opposed the plan because of the impact of the construction on the landscape, and because it seemed to be a retreat from the goal of moving the facilities off-site. These concerns led the NPS to withdraw approval of the plan, and the out-of-date center has remained largely untouched ever since.



About 100,000 people a year visited Little Bighorn in 1952. Now the average is 300,000-plus. Ranger talks take place on an unattractive, undersized patio, and people are forced to crowd around the doorway to see inside the center's makeshift theater.

Critical Issues and Opportunities for the 21st Century



Thousands Of Precious Artifacts Are Inadequately Protected

Poor climate control, lack of space and other vulnerabilities earn the museum bad marks

The park's irreplaceable collection of 119,000 historic photographs, weapons, sketches and Indian artifacts are stored in cramped basement rooms that don't meet basic museum standards.

- Some artifacts need appropriate storage.
- Better climate control is needed.
- Water leaks pose a threat to artifacts.
- People with disabilities can't access the basement storage rooms.
- Space is too cramped to properly store artifacts.
- There is no fire protection.

curatorial facility that was proposed in concert with the new visitor center under the 1986 plan. Another failed solution proposed expanding the existing visitor center to include new space to display museum objects. The latest idea, proposed by an outside consultant, is to relocate the collection to a building offsite—possibly in Billings, at another park, or at a private museum—that meets museum standards and would be readily accessible to researchers and historians.

There are more than 119,000 artifacts in the world-class collection stored at the Little Bighorn monument.

But many of the irreplaceable historic weapons, sketches, photographs and other artifacts are kept in drawers and cardboard boxes down a flight of stairs in three small rooms in the basement. The space lacks proper climate control and is vulnerable to water leaks from overhead pipes. It's also cramped and inaccessible to people with disabilities.

“Although the museum collection facility is secure and away from public areas, the storage areas do not meet the fundamental standards per National Park Service policies nor best practices as determined by American Association of Museums,” one expert study of the space noted.

The problems with the curatorial space are long-standing and would've been remedied by the construction of a new



The park's museum houses old photos, weapons, sketches and Indian artifacts. Above, Crow scouts on the battlefield.

Critical Issues and Opportunities for the 21st Century



Roads And Parking Are Major Issues For Visitors

Crumbling asphalt, inadequate parking and narrow roads frustrate motorists



Above: Deterioration, severe drop-offs and crowding are major problems. Below: Parking is so tight near the visitor center that many drivers must park along the park's entrance road. That's not only frustrating to visitors, it also damages the road and the landscape.

- The parking lot is undersized and unsafe.
- Some visitors can't find parking and leave.
- Large vehicles can't navigate the lot safely.
- The road is too narrow for buses and RVs.
- The road is failing in places.

On a typical summer morning at Little Bighorn, cars, buses and RV's file past its entrance, quickly filling the parking lot next to the old tan brick visitor center.

And that's when the trouble begins.

Frustrated drivers start prowling the lot searching for a parking spot, sometimes making two or three circuits before giving up, parking along the entrance road and walking. Large vehicles can't maneuver safely in the parking lot, and

the tour road is too narrow for them. The asphalt itself is crumbling. Severe drop-offs make driving unsafe.

Meanwhile, tour buses stop in the middle of the parking lot to drop off dozens of visitors at a time, blocking traffic. Many visitors dodge cars to hurriedly stop at the restrooms built on a traffic island in the middle of the parking lot.

The 1986 plan proposed extending the road miles across pristine battlefield landscape. That would allow visitors to start their tour in the valley where the battle began and re-trace it in a more chronological order, but would harm the landscape.

The 1986 plan also proposed an alternative transportation system such as shuttles or tour buses, to reduce or eliminate the number of vehicles on the road and landscape.

Unfortunately, solving the transportation issues at Little Bighorn isn't as simple as expanding roads or buying shuttles. Roadways raise challenging questions, including how much of the park should be sacrificed to pavement, or whether bigger roads simply encourage speeding and traffic.

At other national parks, the NPS has experienced challenges finding ways to pay for shuttle systems without passing significant costs on to the visitors who use them.

Obviously, Little Bighorn has several transportation issues that need solutions.



Critical Issues and Opportunities for the 21st Century



Key Battlefield Sites Lack Protection And Can't Be Visited

Only key U.S. military sites are fully protected by the NPS

- Little Bighorn includes 762 acres, but the battlefield covered nearly 12,000 acres.
- Only U.S. military sites are protected by the NPS.
- The Indian encampment is not accessible to the public.
- A non-profit group has purchased more of the battlefield to donate to the NPS, but the NPS lacks authority to accept it.

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is impressive, but it doesn't tell the whole story of the battle between Lakota and Cheyenne Indians and the U.S. Army because important sites are left out.

Only the area near Last Stand Hill and the Reno-Benteen Battlefield are protected by the NPS. The site of the Indian village along the river and many areas linked to troop and warrior movements are outside the 762-acre park, even though the battle ranged across some 12,000 acres. As a result, visitors are unable to fully experience the battlefield, or visit the area where the battle first began. This hampers visitors' ability to appreciate the battle from the perspective of the Lakota and the Cheyenne participants.

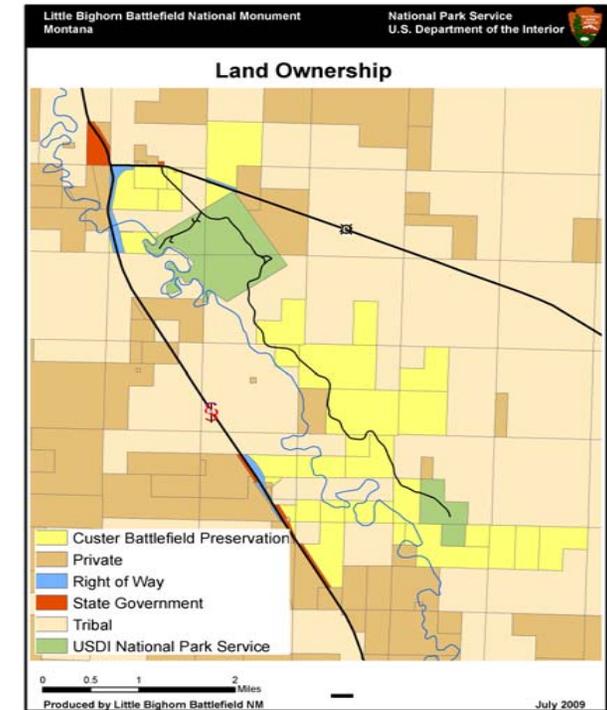
The Organic Act directs the NPS to manage parks for the

enjoyment of the American people—to “leave them unimpaired for future generations.” That means the main duty of every park superintendent is managing use while conserving scenery and natural and historic objects.

One of Little Bighorn's main resources is its relatively unspoiled historic battlefield landscape. As the 1986 plan observed, “landscapes within the primary viewshed surrounding the national monument are an important element of the national monument's historic resources. Preservation of those viewsheds in a natural-appearing condition is necessary to maintain the element of historic association the visitor feels with the landscape” of Little Bighorn Battlefield.

The plan recommended expanding the park by 11,800 acres. It suggested that the land within this expanded boundary be protected through a variety of means, including NPS ownership, acquisition of easements, or acquisition of land with lease-back. It also pointed out that development outside the park could undermine the park's sense of place.

Since the 1986 plan, a non-profit group called the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee has acquired 3,300 acres within the proposed expanded boundary, intending to donate them to the NPS. But the NPS doesn't have the legislative authority required to accept this land, and its future has been left in limbo.



Critical Issues and Opportunities for the 21st Century



After Decades Of Unresolved Debate, It's Time To Act

Little Bighorn's management issues have reached a critical stage that demand attention

Is the park's 1986 General Management Plan still valid, and if so, how do we implement it?

- The issues presented here have remained unresolved for decades and are worsening.
- Is the 1986 General Management Plan still valid, or is a new plan needed?
- Your feedback is important. Please attend our listening sessions, or contact us directly.

Managers at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument have wrestled for decades with the major management issues presented in this document.

Now those issues have reached a critical stage, and creative thinking and a spirit of compromise are needed to move forward.

The NPS is seeking to determine whether the vision outlined in the 1986 plan is still valid or whether new approaches ought to be considered by undertaking a new general management planning process. If the long-term vision remains desirable, how should problems like protection of the museum's artifacts and the transportation issues be resolved until we can get enough money—estimated at \$50 million in 2010 dollars—to put the 1986 plan into effect?

If the essence of the General Management Plan is still valid, what steps are necessary to move that effort forward? What

are current views about boundary expansion among interested groups such as the Crow, and the public at large?

It's important to remember that Little Bighorn is also a powerful economic engine for south-central Montana, resulting in 187 jobs and \$10 million in economic effects from spending by the 282,000 visitors in 2008. Improvements to the visitor experience could even enhance visitation.

For these reasons, the NPS is now soliciting feedback about these issues from tribal, state, county and local governments, as well as from stakeholder groups, visitors, scholars and anyone else who wants to comment. Listening sessions will be held soon to familiarize the public with these issues and hear your thoughts.

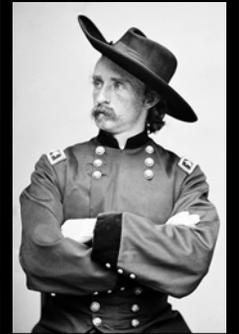
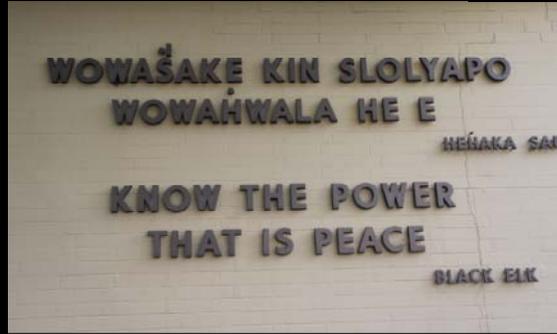
At the conclusion of this effort, the NPS will determine whether to continue trying to implement the 1986 General Management Plan, to begin a new planning process, and/or to develop plans for specific issues such as transportation and museum collections.

Please let us know what you think.



Right, and far right: Representatives of the Arikara and Lakota nations participate in a recent memorial ceremony at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.





Little Bighorn Battlefield Is A Living Memorial To A Lost Way Of Life

A visit to the monument invites reverence, and opportunity to reflect on what it means to be American

If you haven't visited Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, you should.

In strict factual terms, the monument memorializes the June 25, 1876 battle between about 700 soldiers in the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry who'd been ordered to force Indians back to their reservations and several thousand Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne warriors who were fighting to preserve their way of life. More than 60 warriors and 260 U.S. soldiers, including Lt. Col. George A. Custer, died here.

The Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn also contains the graves of nearly 5,000 veterans and their dependents, including veterans of the Indian Wars and veterans of other U.S. military actions up to the Vietnam War. It was officially closed in 1978 but is still used

to bury veteran's spouses and dependents.

But however epic Custer's last stand has become in the public imagination, the park represents more than a single battle between the army and Lakota and Cheyenne warriors. It is a living memorial to one of the last armed efforts of the Northern Plains Indians to preserve their independent, nomadic way of life. It also represents a crucial turning point in the history of American culture.

Little Bighorn fascinates people around the world today because it symbolizes heroism and suffering, brashness and humiliation, victory and defeat, triumph and tragedy. It is all those things, of course, but most of all it is a place that invites us to deep reverence for life and

spirituality, as well as to consider the importance of cultural survival and what it means to be an American.



Northern Cheyenne Chief Two Moons fought at Little Bighorn.



Sioux veterans gathered at Little Bighorn in 1926 to observe the battle's 50th anniversary.

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For more information or to comment, please contact:

Superintendent Kate Hammond
Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument
P.O. Box 39
Crow Agency, MT 59022

kate_hammond@nps.gov
406-638-3201

