

Dry Tortugas National Park Visitor Use Management Meeting

Phase I Outcomes Report

July 31st and August 1st, 2017

Meeting synopsis

A National Park Service interdisciplinary team met for a total of 7 hours over the course of two days to begin discussions on visitor use management at Dry Tortugas National Park. As phase 1 of the larger visitor use management topic, discussions focused on issues and goals related to the ferry service.

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Background

The purpose of Dry Tortugas National Park is to preserve and protect the unique subtropical marine ecosystem and natural, cultural, and scenic resources of the Dry Tortugas for the education, inspiration, scientific understanding, and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Fundamental to the park’s purpose are offering outstanding recreational opportunities in a historic and marine environment. Access and visitation remains a key issue as identified in the foundation document and was also identified as a priority planning need for the park. Issues directly related to visitor use were discussed in Phase I of the visitor use management (VUM) planning effort and are described below.

Initial conversations during Phase I of the VUM project tiered off of the Foundation document and the General Management Plan (GMP). For instance, discussions included a review of desired conditions as they relate to visitor use management. In the Phase I workshop, participants further articulated visitor use and experience goals through a multi-phase approach; identified potential ideas for addressing visitor use issues or opportunities that have emerged since completion of the GMP; and began discussions around how the outcomes of Phase I can inform the upcoming concession prospectus development.

Desired Conditions

Understanding desired conditions for resources and visitor experience is an important aspect of the VUM framework (IVUMC 2016). During the meeting park staff reviewed desired conditions that are described by management zone within the 2001 General Management Plan Amendment (GMPA). Park staff were asked to highlight aspects of desired conditions that are particularly relevant to the ferry service. Below are excerpts from the GMPA desired condition that park staff discussed during the meeting.

Historic Preservation/Adaptive Use Zone

- The probability of encountering other people and NPS staff will be moderate to high, but at certain times of the day or season opportunities will exist to experience solitude and quiet.
- At all times, visitors will be encouraged to act in a manner that respects others' use and enjoyment of the park
- Visitors should expect moderate intrusions to the natural soundscape by boats, planes, mechanical systems, and other people.
- The setting within this zone will be predominantly historic, and the integrity of significant historic resources will not be compromised.
- Nighttime light levels will remain low so that visitors can enjoy the impressive night skies.
- Appropriate visitor activities may include learning about the park's natural, cultural, and human history and its ecological and historical relevance, birdwatching, photography, walking, picnicking, swimming, snorkeling, scuba diving, camping, boating, and recreational fishing.
- Some of these activities may be provided by commercial operators. A range of interpretive, educational, and orientation programs will be provided, with orientation and interpretation of resources taking place mostly onsite.

Natural/Cultural Zone

- Visitors will generally expect to find solitude. There will be the expectation that other individuals or small groups will sometimes be encountered, but concentrations of use will be low and visual and soundscape intrusions will be minimal.
- The natural scene will remain largely intact, with natural processes predominating.

- There will be little lasting evidence of recreational impacts.

Research Natural Area Zone

- Visitor travel and behavior in the zone will be highly controlled to maintain the highest levels of resource quality.
- In the research natural area the natural land, sea, and soundscapes will predominate.
- There will be no lasting signs of recreational use, and no manipulation of natural or cultural resources will be permitted
- The research natural area will offer outstanding opportunities for scientific research and learning about natural systems, and public education and interpretation will be important activities in this zone.
- Visitors will experience a sense of remoteness and peace in a vast expanse of sea and sky.
- Areas and resources will be interpreted so that visitors can understand the reasons for establishing the research natural area.
- There will be a low to moderate expectation of seeing NPS staff, and a high expectation of encountering commercial guides.
- There will be a low expectation of encountering other tour groups, and tour group sizes will be small.
- Under certain conditions chances will exist to experience solitude, tranquility, and quiet, and to see rare or sensitive species.
- Non-consumptive activities, such as wildlife viewing, snorkeling, sightseeing, boating, photography, and diving, will be managed so that resources will not be degraded.
- Recreational fishing and other consumptive activities will not be allowed. Commercial tour providers and private boaters will be required to use mooring buoys. The use of anchors will be prohibited in the research natural area.

Special Protection Zone

- The special protection zone will be established to provide added protection for certain exceptional and critical resources and will be managed to allow natural processes to occur without disturbance or impacts from humans - i.e., no activity, except research, will be allowed.
- Natural land, sea, and soundscapes will predominate within the zone. Lasting signs of recreational use will not be apparent, and no manipulation of resources will be permitted, except actions aimed at restoring natural conditions or preserving special cultural resources.
- There will be no tolerance for resource degradation or disturbance.

Key Issues Related to Visitor Use

Note, the key issues described below could inform the prospectus development. For instance, many of these issues could inform the selection factors for prospectus evaluation.

- **Impacts to swim areas.** Resources such as corals, beaches, and seagrass are fundamental to the park. Issues include trampling of sensitive species, damage to corals, visitor use in unauthorized areas, introduction of chemicals (e.g. sunscreen), etc.
- **Crowding.** Visitor may experience crowded and congested conditions along tours and in key destinations at the park. Issues related to crowding also include informal trail creation where visitors disembark from the ferry.
- **Presence of litter.** The presence of litter can cause resource impacts as wildlife mistake it for food and change their behavior as they associate a specific area or activity as a food source. In addition, natural systems become polluted and visitor experience is diminished. Issues include visitors off-boarding the ferry with trash items, limited trash receptacles, and disposal of litter.
- **Visitor safety and its relationship to damaging resources.** Visitor use can cause both intended and unintended impacts to important natural and cultural resources that are fundamental to the park. Issues include visitors being in unauthorized areas, climbing or stepping on fragile historic structures, vandalism or theft, and impacts to resources to support safe visitor experiences (e.g., handrails on the fort).
- **Diversity and quality of visitor opportunities.** Visitors often come to the park with specific expectations. Issues include weather conditions resulting in challenging swimming or snorkeling conditions, high water turbidity causing low visibility while swimming or snorkeling, and visitors being unprepared for cold or stormy conditions at the site are not communicated to visitors before their arrival and therefore their visit to DRTO does not also meet their expectations.
- **Visitor information and education.** To protect resources and have a high quality visitor experience, visitors need to know the rules and regulations of the park as well as how they can have a good experience while not inadvertently causing harm. Opportunities related to this issue include pre-trip planning so that visitors know what activities are available and potential conditions to be prepared for, increased awareness of fundamental resources and values, management zoning, history of the site, resource protection efforts underway at the park, and also appropriate behaviors and activities.

Visitor Use and Experience Goals – Multi-phased Approach

During the meeting, the IDT team developed visitor use and experience goals relating to the multiple phases of the ferry service. The intent of the goals are to articulate what the park would like to see occur regarding visitor experiences from the beginning of the visitor experience (e.g., trip planning) to the completion of their trip and reflections on their time at DRTO (e.g., memories). Goals were informed by the desired conditions contained in the GMP management zones. Note, the goals listed below would be relevant to varying degrees during prospectus development and could be the responsibility of the NPS, concessioner, or both.

Pre-trip Planning

- Visitors have a comprehensive understanding of logistics, how they are getting to the park and back including the often required overnight in Key West before departing.
- Visitors have clear expectations and advanced understanding about what the trip may entail and are prepared for weather and other related challenges (including the potential for sea sickness and need to pack appropriate clothing)
- Visitors are aware of the opportunities available while on the ferry and at the park itself and are provided with information on how to prepare for them (e.g., packing list that could items like coral safe sunscreen)
- Visitors have a clear understanding of planning that is needed for specific activities before they arrive to Key West. For instance, camping is first come first serve, and site may not be reserved before arriving, except for group site.
- Visitors understand what alternate opportunities may exist if they are unable to obtain a camping spot at the park such as opportunities at Biscayne, and Big Cypress. In addition, visitors are aware of other opportunities that would complement their DRTO visit and support a holistic understanding of the park in the context of Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

At Key West (parking, tickets, getting ready to board, etc.)

- Visitors are easily able to navigate to the Key West parking lot and then to the ferry terminal through well-placed and effective signage and other wayfinding. As visitors travel to the terminal, they are aware of carts for gear and other convenience items.
- Visitors have done pre-trip planning before arriving to Key West and therefore understand the logistics, available opportunities, and have brought supplies to be adequately prepared for their trip (see goals for 'Pre-Trip Planning'). If visitors need any additional information, it will be readily available at the ferry terminal so that visitors can obtain additional supplies or modify their plans as needed before disembarking.
- Through signage, information and use of logos, visitors clearly understand that the ferry is an authorized concession and that they are traveling to a National Park Service site.
- Access to the park is secure in the long-term through available terminals regardless of the specific concessioner.
- Visitors are able to queue and board the ferry while experiencing minimal crowding or congestion.

On the Ferry (Traveling to Dry Tortugas)

- The ferry ride itself is a high-quality visitor experience that provides information to visitors focused on the fundamental resources and values of the park. Visitor information and education includes comprehensive discussions about the entire range of reef tract from Miami to Dry Tortugas. Information focuses on the story of marine protected areas, the

park's role in the larger system at the west of the reef tract, and the rich human history and cultural resources that are so integral to the Dry Tortugas National Park mission.

- Information and educational messaging is delivered in an effective and dynamic manner through a variety of mediums such as a high-quality sounds system, in-person interpretive talks, videos, or social media
- The timing of information and educational material is deliberate to give key messages at relevant times. In addition, the timing of information corresponds to the ferry route itself and the natural and cultural resources that are passed or being approached

Arrive at Park Boundary and Disembarkation

- As the ferry approaches, visitors are able to view the park and gain a complete orientation to the park. The speed of the ferry allows visitors to view the park and gain an orientation to the park (different keys).
- Visitor experience a sense of excitement throughout the ferry ride and akin to other NPS 'gateway' experiences and increased sense of excitement as they approach the last leg of the ferry trip.
- As visitors disembark from the ferry they understand the potential recreational activities, cultural resource and wildlife viewing and education opportunities available and where to go next. Visitors will have gained this information before they step on the site as well as effective wayfinding once they arrive.
- Visitors have an understanding of the cultural and natural resources of the park before they arrive as well as rules and regulations that are intended to keep themselves and the resources safe.
- Visitors disembark the ferry with an understanding that weather and sea conditions may change while they are at the site as well as what hazards may be present (e.g. uneven and slick surfaces, sensitive marine environments).

On-site Opportunities

- Visitors have diverse opportunities for safe, convenient, and sustainable access to park resources and experiences including a variety of tour types (e.g. NPS ranger led, ferry concessioner led, self-guided).
- Visitors are able to maximize their time on site and find opportunities that fulfill their expectations and desired experiences to the extent possible.
- Throughout their visit, visitors are able to quickly determine how to get to destinations at the park.
- No matter what opportunities they choose, visitors receive meaningful information about the purpose and significance of the park.

Travel back to Key West, post-trip memories

- The ferry back to Key West offers experiences and environments that allows visitors to relax and reflect on their experiences in a variety of ways (i.e. quiet spaces for reflection, social spaces for story telling).
- Visitors have the opportunity to provide feedback and recommendations about their experience on the ferry and at the park.
- Visitors are aware and encouraged to visit other museums and areas that facilitate a deeper understanding of the park in the context of Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.