

Park System Planning

Park planning helps define the set of resource conditions, visitor experiences, and management actions that, taken as a whole, will best achieve the mandate to preserve resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of present and future generations. NPS planning processes will flow from broad-scale general management planning through progressively more specific strategic planning, implementation planning, and annual performance planning and reporting, all of which will be grounded in foundation statements.



Public participation in planning and decision making will ensure that the Park Service fully understands and considers the public's interests in the parks.



2.1 General Principles

2.1.1 Decision-making

The National Park Service will use planning to bring logic, analysis, public involvement, and accountability into the decision-making process. Park planning and decision-making will be conducted as a continuous, dynamic cycle, from broad visions shared with the public to individual, annual work assignments and evaluations. Each park will be able to demonstrate to decision-makers, staff, and the public how decisions relate to one another in terms of a comprehensive, logical, and trackable rationale.

2.1.2 Scientific, Technical, and Scholarly Analysis

Decision-makers and planners will use the best available scientific and technical information and scholarly analysis to identify appropriate management actions for protection and use of park resources. Analysis will be interdisciplinary and tiered. Tiering is a staged approach to environmental analysis that addresses broad programs and issues in initial or systems-level analyses. Site-specific proposals and impacts are analyzed in subsequent studies. The tiered process supports decision-making on issues that are ripe for decision and provides a means to sustain those decisions. The focus of analysis starts with the park as a whole (including its global, national, and regional contexts) and then moves to site-specific details. At key points of planning and decision-making, the Park Service will identify reasonable alternatives and analyze and compare their differences with respect to

- ◆ consistency with the park's purpose,
- ◆ the quality of visitor experiences,
- ◆ the impacts on park resources,
- ◆ short- and long-term costs, and
- ◆ environmental consequences that may extend beyond park boundaries.

2.1.3 Public Participation

Public participation in planning and decision-making will ensure that the Service fully understands and considers the public's interests in the parks, which are part of the public's national heritage, cultural traditions, and community surroundings. The Service will actively seek out and consult with existing and potential visitors, neighbors, American Indians, other people with traditional cultural ties to park lands, scientists and scholars, concessioners, cooperating associations, gateway communities, other partners, and government agencies. The Service will work cooperatively with others to improve the condition of parks; to enhance public service; and to integrate parks into sustainable ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic systems.

(See Cooperative Conservation Beyond Park Boundaries 1.6; Civic Engagement 1.7; Public Involvement 2.3.1.5; Consultation 5.2.1. Also see Director's Order #75A: Civic Engagement and Public Involvement)

2.1.4 Goal Orientation

Managers will be held accountable for identifying and accomplishing measurable long-term goals and annual goals that are incremental steps to carrying out the park mission. Such planning is a critical and essential part of the NPS performance management system that is designed to improve the Park Service's performance and results. Park staff will monitor resource conditions and visitor experiences and plan, track, and report performance. If goals are not being met, managers will seek to understand why and take appropriate action. The goals will be periodically reassessed, taking into account new knowledge or previously unforeseen circumstances, and then the planning cycle will be reinitiated at the appropriate point.

(See Park Management 1.4)

2.2 Major Elements of Park Planning and Decision-making

A documented, comprehensive, logical, trackable rationale for decisions will be created through several levels of planning that are complementary and become increasingly detailed. The process begins with determining why the park was established and what resource conditions and visitor experiences should exist there; the process will become increasingly focused on how resource conditions and visitor experiences should be achieved.

The following planning elements are part of an interrelated framework that will inform NPS decision-making:

- ◆ **Foundation Statement** — The planning process begins with the development of a foundation statement that is based on the park's enabling legislation or presidential proclamation and that documents the park purpose, significance, fundamental resources and values and primary interpretive themes. It also includes any relevant laws and executive orders that apply to the national park system or to the individual park unit. The foundation statement is generally developed (or reviewed and expanded or revised, if appropriate) early as part of the public and agency scoping and data collection for the general management plan (GMP). Once a park has developed a complete foundation statement, it should remain relatively stable from one GMP cycle to the next, although new scientific and scholarly information may require expansion and revision to reflect the most current knowledge about what is most important about the park. General management planning is the most appropriate context for developing or reviewing a foundation statement because of the comprehensive public involvement and NEPA analysis that occurs during general management planning. The foundation statement may be vetted within the agency and with the public, then formally adopted as part of the final general management plan, or may be produced as a stand-alone foundation document for the park unit.
- ◆ **General Management Plan** — This is a broad umbrella document that sets the long-term goals for the park based on the foundation statement. The general management plan (1) clearly defines the desired natural

and cultural resource conditions to be achieved and maintained over time; (2) clearly defines the necessary conditions for visitors to understand, enjoy, and appreciate the park's significant resources, and (3) identifies the kinds and levels of management activities, visitor use, and development that are appropriate for maintaining the desired conditions; and (4) identifies indicators and standards for maintaining the desired conditions. For wild and scenic rivers and national trails, the analogous documents are a comprehensive river management plan and comprehensive management plan, respectively. Each of these plans has requirements very similar to a general management plan, so units usually refer to these plans as GMPs. Additional requirements for river and trail studies are covered in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the National Trails System Act.

- ◆ **Program Management Plans** — These more detailed documents follow the general management plan and provide program-specific information on strategies to achieve and maintain the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, including identification of appropriate visitor use where applicable (for example, resource stewardship strategy and comprehensive interpretation plan).
- ◆ **Strategic Plans** — These plans provide 1- to 5-year direction and objective, measurable, long-term goals. The long-term goals will define the resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved in the near future, for which the superintendent will be held accountable. Results on progress towards these goals will be reported annually. These goals are based on the park's foundation statement; an assessment of the park's natural and cultural resources; park visitors' experiences; and the park's performance capability given available personnel, funding, and external factors.
- ◆ **Implementation Plans** — These plans provide project-specific details needed to implement an action in an area of a park and explain how the action(s) helps achieve long-term goals.
- ◆ **Annual Performance Plans** — Annual goals and an annual work plan that will guide park efforts for a fiscal year are in annual performance plans.
- ◆ **Annual Performance Reports** — These reports contain an accounting of annual results in relation to annual goals.

Park managers and regional directors are responsible for ensuring that planning is properly conducted within this planning framework and making management decisions that are supported by public involvement, the best available information, and analysis. However, many parks may initially lack one or more of these planning elements. In the interim, management will be guided by the park's foundation statement, strategic plan, and other current approved plans. No major new development or other major commitment of park land or natural or cultural resources will be authorized without an approved general management plan.

(See *Visitor Use 8.2*)

2.3 Levels of Park Planning

The order of plan development will generally flow from broad general management plans to progressively more specific implementation plans.

When determining a plan's scope, it will be important to distinguish which issues can most appropriately be addressed by general management planning, and which can be most appropriately addressed by more detailed strategic or implementation planning. Each level of planning has a distinct function, and all levels are designed to interrelate with a minimum of duplication and confusion. At each level, plans will be written to make the links and relationships among the planning levels apparent to readers.

Environmental analysis of alternatives and public involvement required under section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (42 USC 4332(2)(C)) will be conducted at any level of planning in which the decisions to be made constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Normally, NEPA analysis and public participation will be done at the general management planning level, when the overall direction for the park's future is decided, and again at the implementation planning level before funding and resources are committed to carry out specific actions (see 2.3.1 and 2.3.4, below). In keeping with the Council on Environmental Quality guidelines for NEPA compliance, environmental analysis for more specific programs or actions will follow, or flow from, earlier NEPA documents for the broader general management plan.

(See *Civic Engagement 1.7*. Also see *Director's Orders #2: Park Planning*, and *#12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making*)

2.3.1 General Management Planning

The Park Service will maintain a general management plan for each unit of the national park system. The purpose of each general management plan, which will begin with the development of a foundation statement for the park unit, will be to ensure that the park has a clearly defined direction for resource preservation and visitor use. This basic foundation for decision-making will be developed by an interdisciplinary team, in consultation with relevant NPS offices, other federal and state agencies, local and tribal governments, other interested parties, and the general public. The management plans will be based on full and proper use of scientific and scholarly information related to existing and potential resource conditions, visitor experiences, environmental impacts, and relative costs of alternative courses of action.

The approved plan will create a realistic vision for the future, setting a direction for the park that takes into consideration the environmental and financial impact of proposed facilities and programs and ensures that the final plan is achievable and sustainable. The plan will take the long view, which may project many years into the future, when dealing with the time frames of natural and cultural

processes. The first phase of general management planning will be the development of the foundation statement. The plan will consider the park in its full ecological, scenic, and cultural contexts as a unit of the national park system and as part of a surrounding region. The general management plan will also establish a common management direction for all park divisions and districts. This integration will help avoid inadvertently creating new problems in one area while attempting to solve problems in another.

(See Decision-making Requirements to Identify and Avoid Impairments 1.4.7; Visitor Use 8.2)

2.3.1.1 Statutory Requirements

General management plans will meet all statutory requirements contained in 16 USC 1a-7(b) and will include

- ◆ the types of management actions required for the preservation of park resources;
- ◆ the types and general intensities of development (including visitor circulation and transportation patterns, systems, and modes) associated with public enjoyment and use of the area, including general locations, timing of implementation, and anticipated costs;
- ◆ visitor carrying capacities and implementation commitments for all areas of the park; and
- ◆ potential modifications to the external boundaries of the park—if any—and the reasons for the proposed changes.

For NPS-administered components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System and the National Trails System, comprehensive management plans will meet all the statutory requirements of 16 USC 1271-1287 or 16 USC 1244.

(See Visitor Carrying Capacity 8.2.1)

2.3.1.2 Management Zoning

Each park's approved general management plan will include a map that delineates management zones or districts that correspond to a description of the desired resource and visitor experience conditions for each area of the park. Management zoning will outline the criteria for (or describe the kind of) appropriate uses and facilities necessary to support these desired conditions. For example, highly sensitive natural areas might tolerate little, if any, visitor use, while other areas might accommodate much higher levels of use. Even in historic structures, one floor might be most appropriate for exhibits, while another could accommodate offices or administrative uses. Some desired conditions may apply parkwide, but the delineation of management zones will illustrate where there are differences in intended resource conditions, visitor experiences, and management activities.

2.3.1.3 Planning Team

Interdisciplinary teams, including park managers and technical experts, will prepare general management plans. Planning teams will work with the park superintendent and regional directors and consult with other park staff, NPS

leadership, other agencies with jurisdiction by virtue of law or expertise, other knowledgeable persons, and the public concerning future management of park resources. The superintendent will be involved with all phases of the plan's development. The superintendent and regional director have ultimate responsibility for the contents of the plan, ensuring that there is consistency in direction and decisions between parks with similar resources and values. The regional director is the official responsible for approving general management plans.

2.3.1.4 Science and Scholarship

Decisions documented in general management plans and other planning products, including environmental analyses and documentation, will be based on current scientific and scholarly understanding of park ecosystems and cultural contexts and the socioeconomic environment both internal and external to the park. The collection and analysis of information about park resources will be a continuous process that will help ensure that decisions are consistent with park purposes.

(See Decision-making Requirements to Avoid Impairments 1.4.7; Planning for Natural Resource Management 4.1.1; Planning 5.2)

2.3.1.5 Public Involvement

Members of the public—including existing and potential visitors, park neighbors, American Indians, other people with traditional cultural ties to lands within the park, concessioners, cooperating associations, other partners, scientists and scholars, and other government agencies—will be encouraged to participate during the preparation of a general management plan and the associated environmental analysis. Public involvement strategies, practices, and activities will be developed and conducted within the framework of civic engagement. (Whereas civic engagement is the philosophy of welcoming people into the parks and building relationships around a shared stewardship mission, public involvement—also called public participation—is the specific, active involvement of the public in NPS planning and other decision-making processes.) Public involvement will meet NEPA and other federal requirements for

- ◆ identifying the scope of issues,
- ◆ developing the range of alternatives considered in planning,
- ◆ reviewing the analysis of potential impacts, and
- ◆ disclosing the rationale for decisions about the park's future.

The Park Service will use the public involvement process to

- ◆ share information about legal and policy mandates, the planning process, issues, and proposed management directions,
- ◆ learn about the values placed by other people and groups on the same resources and visitor experiences, and

- ◆ build support for implementing the plan among local interests, visitors, Congress, and others at the regional and national levels.

Whenever groups are created, controlled, or managed for the purpose of providing advice or recommendations to the Service, the Service will first consult with the Office of the Solicitor to determine whether the Federal Advisory Committee Act requires the chartering of an advisory committee. Consultation with the Office of the Solicitor will not be necessary when the Service meets with individuals, groups, or organizations simply to exchange views and information, or to solicit individual advice on proposed actions. This act does not apply to intergovernmental meetings held exclusively between federal officials and elected officers of state, local and tribal governments (or their designated employees with authority to act on their behalf) acting in their official capacities, when the meetings relate to intergovernmental responsibilities or administration.

(See Civic Engagement 1.7; Consultation 5.2.1. Also see NPS Guide to the Federal Advisory Committee Act. Also see Director's Order #75A: Civic Engagement and Public Involvement)

2.3.1.6 Alternative Futures

Alternative futures for the park will be explored and assessed during general management planning and environmental analysis. Within the broad parameters of the park mission and mission goals, various approaches to park resource preservation, use, and development may be possible, some of which may represent competing demands for the same resource base. The general management plan will be the principal tool for resolving such issues. The range of alternatives will examine different combinations of management zoning, within the limits of laws, regulations, and policies governing national parks.

2.3.1.7 Environmental Analysis

The analysis of alternatives will meet the program standards for NPS implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act and related legislation, including the National Historic Preservation Act. In most cases, an environmental impact statement (EIS) will be prepared for general management plans. In a few cases, the regional director, in consultation with the NPS Environmental Quality Division, through the Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, may approve an exception to this general rule if

- ◆ completion of scoping demonstrates that there is no public controversy concerning potential environmental effects, and
- ◆ the initial analysis of alternatives clearly indicates there is no potential for significant impact by any alternative.

Where the National Environmental Policy Act and sections 106 and 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act (16 USC 470f and 470h-2, respectively) both apply,

NEPA procedures will be used to inform the public about undertakings having the potential to affect properties listed on, or eligible for listing on, the National Register of Historic Places, consistent with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's regulatory provisions governing coordination with the National Environmental Policy Act and the NPS nationwide programmatic agreement on section 106 compliance (36 CFR Part 800). The tiered approach to environmental analysis will be used as often as possible, in accordance with 40 CFR 1502.20.

(See Evaluating Environmental Impacts 4.1.3; Planning 5.2. Also see Director's Order #12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making)

2.3.1.8 Cooperative Planning

General management planning will be conducted as part of cooperative regional planning and ecosystem planning whenever possible. NPS participation in cooperative regional planning will be undertaken with the hope of better coordinating and focusing the independent efforts of multiple parties. NPS participation in such planning efforts will acknowledge the rights and interests of other landowners. While being consistent with NPS *Management Policies* and park goals, plans will identify and consider potential effects outside and inside park boundaries, and plans will identify ways to enhance beneficial effects and mitigate adverse effects.

2.3.1.9 Wild and Scenic Rivers

Potential national wild and scenic rivers will be considered in planning for the use and development of a park's water and related land resources. The Park Service will compile a complete listing of all rivers and river segments in the national park system that it considers eligible for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. General management plans and other plans potentially affecting river resources will propose no actions that could adversely affect the values that qualify a river for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. After a determination of eligibility is made, a decision concerning whether or not to seek legislation to designate a river or river segment may be made only through a general management plan, an amendment to a general management plan, or the legislative review process.

2.3.1.10 Wilderness

The Wilderness Act directs agencies responsible for managing wilderness to study wilderness resources and values. The Park Service will develop wilderness studies and plans as part of the comprehensive planning framework for each park. Managers are encouraged to incorporate these studies and plans within general management plans when possible. To preserve Congress's prerogative to designate wilderness, general management plans and other plans potentially affecting eligible wilderness resources will propose no actions that could adversely affect the wilderness characteristics and values that make them eligible for consideration for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Lands and waters found to possess the characteristics and values of wilderness, as defined in the Wilderness Act, can be studied to develop a recommendation to Congress for wilderness designation in a general management plan/wilderness study. Where designated wilderness exists, park managers have a responsibility to develop and maintain a wilderness management plan or equivalent planning document to guide the preservation, management, and use of these resources. A comprehensive management plan for wilderness is appropriately done in tandem with a general management plan, and wilderness should be taken into consideration in subsequent program management and implementation plans.

When wilderness eligibility and suitability are evaluated as a part of the GMP process, a determination of eligibility or suitability will not necessarily mean that the Service will seek designation. After the determination is made, a decision concerning whether to seek legislation to designate wilderness may be made only through a general management plan, an amendment to a general management plan, or the legislative review process.

(See Wilderness Review Process 6.2)

2.3.1.11 Alaska Park Units

General management plans for park system units in Alaska that were established or expanded by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act will address the provisions for conservation and management planning specified in section 1301 of that act (16 USC 3191).

2.3.1.12 Periodic Review of General Management Plans

As necessary, general management plans will be reviewed and amended or revised, or a new plan will be prepared, to keep them current. GMP reviews may be needed every 10 to 15 years, but may be needed sooner if conditions change significantly. If conditions remain substantially unchanged, a longer period between reviews would be acceptable. Even in parks with strong traditions and established patterns of use and development, managers will be responsible for assessing whether resources are threatened with impairment, the visitor experience has been degraded, or the park's built environment is difficult to sustain. Periodically reassessing the general management plan will give everyone with a major stake in the park an opportunity to revalidate the park's role in the nation and in the region and reevaluate whether the kinds of resource conditions and visitor experiences being pursued are the best possible mix for the future. An approved management plan may be amended or revised, rather than a new plan prepared, if conditions and management prescriptions governing most of the area covered by the plan remain essentially unchanged from those present when the plan was originally approved. Amendments or revisions to a general management plan will be accompanied by a supplemental environmental impact statement or other suitable NEPA analysis and public involvement.

(See Chapter 1: The Foundation; Chapter 3: Land Protection; Chapter 4: Natural Resource Management; Chapter 5: Cultural Resource Management; Chapter 6: Wilderness Preservation and Management; Chapter 8: Use of the Parks; Chapter 9: Park Facilities; Chapter 10: Commercial Visitor Services. Also see Director's Orders #2: Park Planning; and #12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making)

2.3.2 Program Management Planning

Program management planning for a park provides a bridge between the broad direction provided in the general management plan and specific actions taken to achieve goals. These plans provide a comprehensive approach for a single park program area across most or all of the park. Program management planning may include special emphasis plans, such as a park resource stewardship strategy, a comprehensive interpretive plan, a land protection plan, a visitor use plan, a fire management plan, an asset management plan, or a management stewardship plan. Integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to program planning are encouraged. Program management plans will provide comprehensive recommendations about specific actions needed to achieve and maintain the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences.

2.3.3 Strategic Planning

The Service is committed to performance management and accountability. Managers are responsible for the quality and timeliness of program performance, increasing productivity, controlling costs, mitigating the adverse aspects of agency operations, and ensuring that programs are managed with integrity and in compliance with applicable laws. Strategic planning will be conducted for the National Park Service as a whole, and every park, program, and central office will be covered by a strategic plan. Strategic plans will address both Service-wide and local outcomes. Park-related strategic plans will be recommended by the superintendent, approved by the regional director, and consistent with the department's overall strategic plan. Strategic plans will contain

- ◆ mission statement and purpose from the foundation document
- ◆ long-term performance goals (with performance targets)
- ◆ a short description of the strategies chosen to accomplish the goals
- ◆ a description of how the annual goals will relate to the long-term goals
- ◆ a description of the analysis used to establish or revise goals
- ◆ a section that identifies the civic engagement strategy used to involve stakeholders and communities in the development of the strategic plan
- ◆ an identification of the key external factors that could significantly affect achievement of the goals
- ◆ a list of those who developed the plan

Information in park strategic plans is used to compile Service-wide achievements; therefore, these plans must contain similar information.

(See Management Accountability 1.9.5)

2.3.3.1 Relationship between the Strategic Plan and the General Management Plan

The park's strategic plan will be consistent with the Department of the Interior's strategic plan and the park's general management plan, and it will build from the foundation statement. Parks that lack a current general management plan will work from their existing plans or an updated foundation document. A strategic plan will focus on a shorter time frame than a general management plan, target measurable results; and not require the comprehensive resource analysis, consultation, and compliance required for a general management plan.

Should a park decide, through its strategic planning process, that a major shift in direction or emphasis is needed, the strategic plan will identify the need for a new general management plan or a GMP amendment. Strategic plans may also identify the need for more detailed program management or implementation plans.

2.3.4 Implementation Planning

Implementation planning will focus on how to implement activities and projects needed to achieve the desired conditions identified in the general management plan, strategic plan, and program management planning documents. Implementation plans may deal with complex, technical, and sometimes controversial issues that often require a level of detail and thorough analysis beyond that appropriate for other planning documents.

Implementation plans may concentrate on individual projects or components of the general management plan, and they may specify the techniques, disciplines, equipment, infrastructure, schedule, and funding necessary to accomplish outcomes.

Implementation plan details may vary widely and may direct a finite project (such as reintroducing an extirpated species or developing a trail) or a continuous activity (such as maintaining a historic structure). Examples of implementation plan details include management plans for specific species and habitats, site designs, off-road-vehicle management plans, and interpretive media plans. Details will generally be deferred until the activity or project under consideration has attained sufficient priority to indicate that action will be taken within the next two to five years and will be included in an annual work plan. This will help ensure that decisions about how to best achieve a certain goal are relevant, timely, and based on current data. As a means for providing flexibility in the face of changing natural conditions, park managers are encouraged to use an adaptive management approach when appropriate (see glossary for definition of adaptive management).

Technical specialty teams under the direction of the program leader in the park (usually a division chief) or in the regional office will develop implementation plans, and the plans will be approved by the superintendent (or at a higher level when appropriate).

Development of an implementation plan may overlap other planning efforts if this is appropriate for the purposes of planning efficiency or public involvement. However, the decisions made for the general management plan will precede—and direct—more detailed decisions regarding projects and activities. Major new development or rehabilitation and major actions or commitments aimed at changing resource conditions or visitor use in a park must be consistent with an approved general management plan.

2.3.4.1 Environmental Analysis

Many actions taken by the National Park Service, unless categorically excluded from further NEPA analysis, require public involvement and analysis of alternatives. They also require compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and related legislation. Although general management planning addresses key environmental quality and cultural resource issues at the programmatic level over the long term, resolution of resource issues must continue during implementation planning. This will generally be accomplished through the appropriate NEPA and NHPA section 106 compliance processes and the application of the tiered approach to environmental analysis.

(See Park Management 1.4; Chapter 3: Land Protection; Chapter 4: Natural Resource Management; Chapter 5: Cultural Resource Management; Chapter 6: Wilderness Preservation and Management; Chapter 8: Use of the Parks; Chapter 9: Park Facilities; Chapter 10: Commercial Visitor Services. Also see Director's Orders #2: Park Planning; Director's Order #12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making (and the related Environmental Screening Form); Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low Income Populations))

2.3.5 Park Annual Performance Planning and Reporting

Each park will prepare annual performance plans (articulating annual goals for each fiscal year) and annual performance reports (describing the progress made in meeting the annual goals). The development of the annual performance plan and report will be synchronized with NPS budget development.