



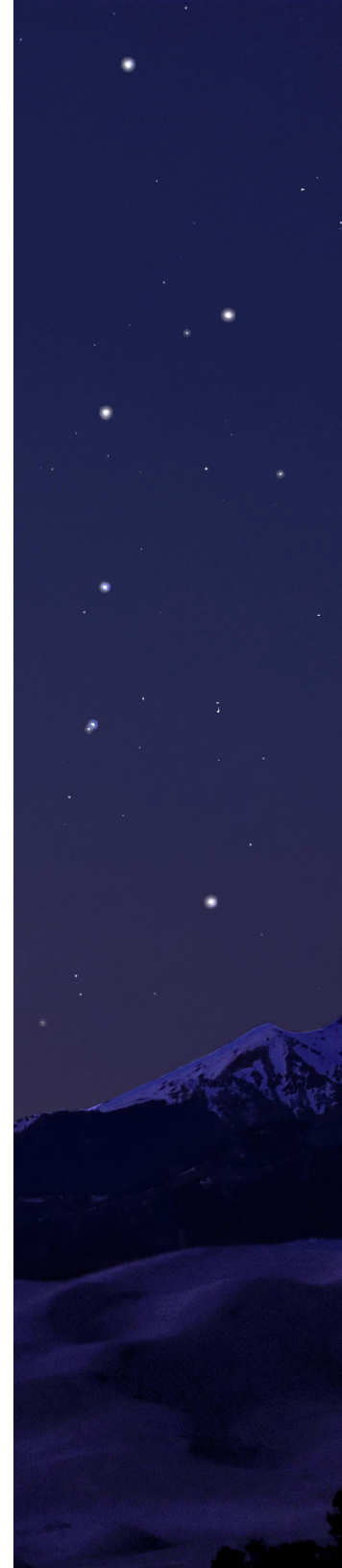
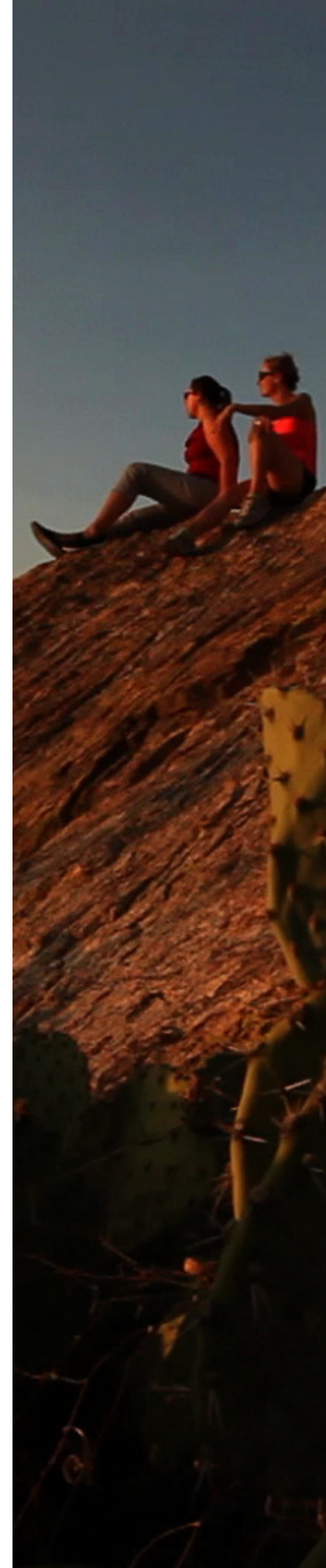
National Park Service

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# **Wilderness Interpretation and Education Strategy**

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Updated: March 2025



# Recommendation and Approval for Inclusion in Reference Manual 41

*Recommended by the WASO Wilderness Stewardship Division:*

Signature: **ROGER SEMLER** Digitally signed by ROGER SEMLER  
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*Approval for inclusion in Reference Manual 41 by WASO Visitor and Resource Protection Directorate:*

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**Cover Image:** Left to right - Glacier Bay Wilderness (*NPS/Adrienne Lindholm*), Hawai'i Volcanoes Wilderness (*NPS*), Saguaro Wilderness (*NPS*), Great Sand Dunes Wilderness (*NPS/Patrick Myers*). The last page of this document displays the same images.

**Image on following page:** Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area (*NPS/Jacob Holgerson*)

***In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.***

- Section 2(a) of the Wilderness Act, 1964



# INTRODUCTION

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System and provides the highest level of protection for our federal public lands through wilderness designation.

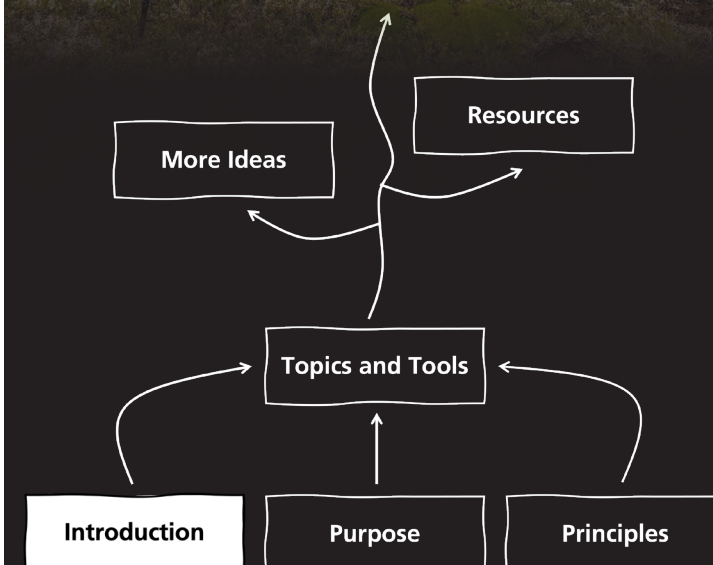
As stated at the beginning of the Wilderness Act, this is "an Act to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people..." The Wilderness Act, like the Organic Act, is visionary, complex, and imperfect. How do we implement and interpret this visionary law today?

The National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) now protects over 111 million acres of federal public land managed by the National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and US Forest Service. Designation of federal wilderness areas can only be done by an act of Congress.

The NPS endeavors to broaden awareness and understanding of wilderness for all people. Interwoven within this goal is the need to nurture a sense of belonging shared between people and wilderness which helps to "assure an enduring resource of wilderness for future generations."

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Image: Denali Wilderness (Denali Education Center - Adam Pettee)



# PURPOSE

The purpose of the NPS Wilderness Interpretation and Education Strategy is to provide a consistent, national foundation for NPS wilderness interpretation and education programs and products. From this foundation, parks and support offices can create meaningful, place-based content.

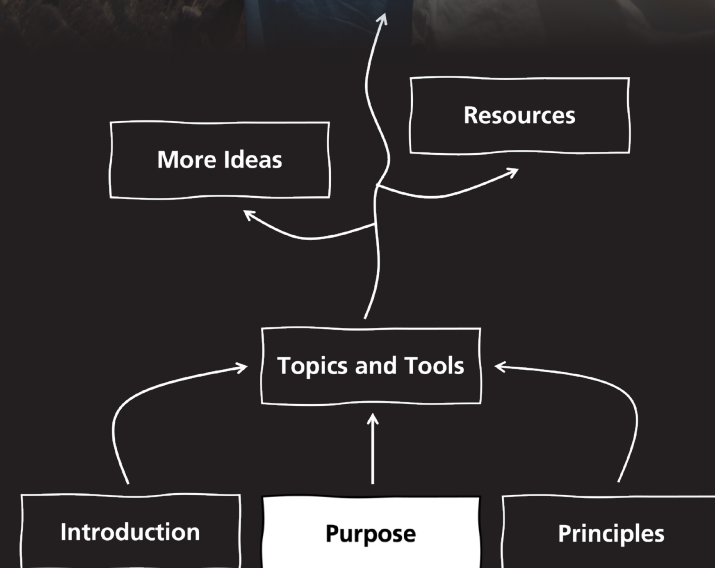
This Strategy supports wilderness interpretation and education efforts, providing a foundation from which thoughtful, place-based products and programs will develop.

Addressing both internal and external audiences will help achieve broad, holistic, interdisciplinary wilderness understanding and engagement. For this Strategy, in-reach, or internal communications, is equally important to outreach (to the public and other external audiences).

**This Strategy is not curriculum or prescribed programming. Instead, users should plan to build exceptional opportunities to connect with wilderness using this Strategy as a supportive reference or framework.**

The NPS Wilderness Interpretation and Education Strategy, which replaces the *NPS Wilderness Education and Partnership Plan* (2002), complements other NPS and interagency interpretation and education initiatives, further helping to integrate wilderness into larger interdisciplinary efforts.

Image: Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area (NPS)



# PRINCIPLES

NPS wilderness interpretation and education is founded on principles of law, policy, and integral interdisciplinary concepts.

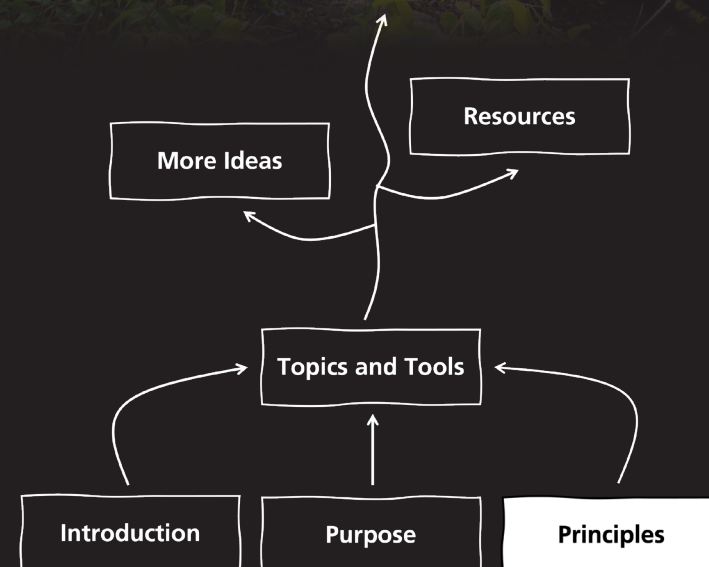
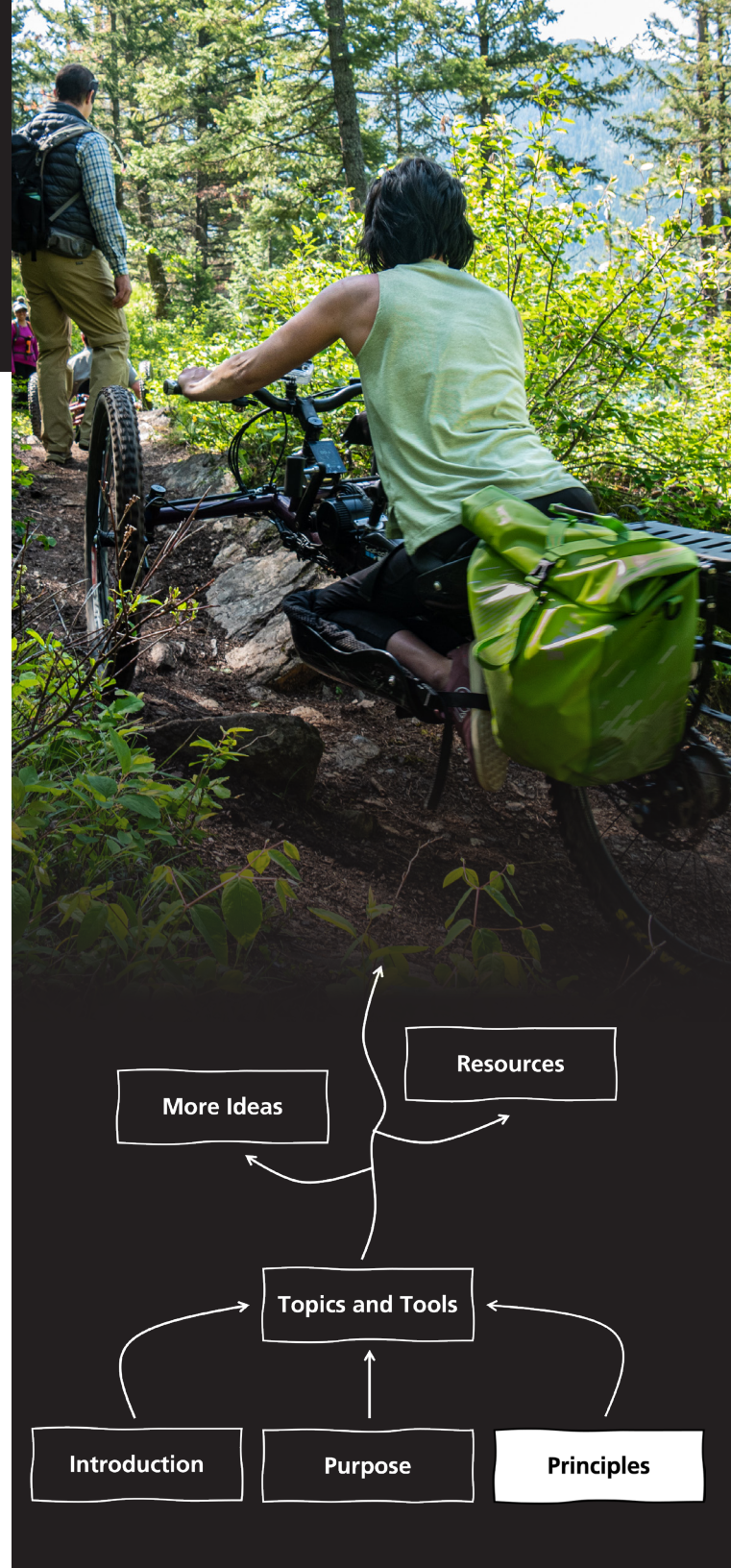
Wilderness is a resource included in the NPS preservation mission. Stewarding this resource can take many shapes, including helping others to understand, access, and connect with wilderness through interpretation and education.

Given the historical, cultural, scientific, recreational, philosophical, and spiritual associations with wilderness, wilderness stewardship is a shared concept.

Accordingly, NPS wilderness interpretation and education is based on the following principles:

1. **Framed by laws**
2. **Consistent with NPS policies**
3. **Aligned with integral wilderness stewardship concepts**
4. **Aligned with interpretation and education best practices**

Image: Glacier National Park recommended wilderness (NPS)



## 1 Framed by laws

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### Organic Act

“... The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations hereinafter specified by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purposes of the said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

### Wilderness Act

“An Act to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes.”

### Other Laws

Wilderness interpretation and education is informed by many other federal laws too. These laws include the Americans with Disabilities Act, NPS Centennial Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act, National Historic Preservation Act, Endangered Species Act, and more. Awareness of these laws means that interpreters are knowledgeable of the legal context of topics showcased in interpretation and education efforts.

## 2 Consistent with NPS policies

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### Management Policies 2006 - Chapter 6.4.2 **Wilderness Interpretation and Education**

“...national park system units with wilderness resources will (1) operate public education programs designed to promote and perpetuate public awareness of and appreciation for wilderness character, resources, and ethics while providing for acceptable use limits; (2) focus on fostering an understanding of the concept of wilderness that includes respect for the resource, willingness to exercise self-restraint in demanding access to it, and an ability to adhere to appropriate, minimum-impact techniques; and (3) encourage the public to use and accept wilderness on its own terms—that is, the acceptance of an undeveloped, primitive environment and the assumption of the potential risks and responsibilities involved in using and enjoying wilderness areas....”

### Management Policies 2006 - Chapter 7.1 **Interpretation and Education Programs**

“... The Service is committed to extend its leadership in education, build on what is in place, and pursue new relationships and opportunities to make national parks even more meaningful in the life of the nation. Within the rich learning environments of national parks and facilitation by NPS interpreters, visitors will be offered authentic experiences and opportunities

to immerse themselves in places where events actually happened, experience the thrill of connecting with real objects used by previous generations, enjoy some of the most beautiful and historic places in United States, and understand the difficult moments our nation has endured...”

### Director's Order 41 - Section 6.14 **Interpretation and Education**

“... Wilderness character, resources and stewardship should be included in the park's interpretation, education, and outreach programming and should be included as an integral component of the park's long-range interpretive plan and annual implementation plan. Staff education is an integral part of wilderness stewardship. Therefore, wilderness awareness training will be incorporated into all appropriate training programs for [all staff, partners, and volunteers].”

### 3 Aligned with integral wilderness stewardship concepts

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#### ***A place of connection***

Wilderness is a concept created by people. Successful wilderness stewardship means that individual, cultural, and communal connections to wilderness are recognized. Integrating the ways that people relate to, value, and use wilderness into communications cultivates belonging and connection to wilderness.

#### ***Interagency collaboration***

The Wilderness Act established one National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) consisting of the designated wilderness areas managed by four federal agencies: the NPS, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and US Forest Service. Successful stewardship of the NWPS requires consistent collaboration between agencies.

#### ***Outdoor ethics***

Leave No Trace (LNT) principles and practices apply to all forms of recreation management within wilderness. LNT principles should be incorporated into interpretive activities and products such as hikes, talks, brochures, maps, and websites. All commercial guides leading trips into wilderness should attend LNT training and be required to incorporate LNT into their trips. Park staff who work in wilderness should attend LNT training.

#### ***Preservation of wilderness character***

The term “wilderness character”, first referenced in the Wilderness Act, is the defining attribute that makes federal wilderness unique and distinct from other public lands. The Wilderness Act states that federal agencies are responsible for preserving the wilderness character of wilderness areas.

#### ***Shared connections***

Wilderness stewardship builds upon the shared connections between people and the land. What we see today is the culmination of thousands of years of intentional land stewardship by the many people connected to these places - connections that existed long before national parks and federal wilderness areas. Recognizing, respecting, and integrating this understanding into current wilderness stewardship is important.



It is important to recognize that federal wilderness areas are the homelands of many Indigenous peoples. Avoiding use of descriptors like ‘pristine’ or ‘untouched’ demonstrates that we recognize the longstanding role of people on now-wilderness landscapes. Furthermore, using imagery that shows all types of people in wilderness helps convey our continued connections to NPS wilderness, rather than landscape-only imagery that may unintentionally suggest that wilderness is a place where people do not belong.

### 4 Aligned with interpretation and education best practices

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#### ***Co-create content***

The NPS tells the stories that shaped our nation’s past and reflect society today. By co-creating narratives with the people who visit and are connected to our national parks, these stories become more compelling and engaging for audiences.

#### ***Highlight previously untold stories***

The history of the US is long, complex, and challenging. Interpretation and education of history through the lens of NPS sites should aim to address the history of all peoples, not just those associated with the common narrative(s) of a place.

#### ***Images carry meaning***

Photos and other images used in interpretation and education can carry as much significance as words. The selection and sourcing of images warrants thoughtful planning to ensure images support the desired takeaways for the audience.

# TOPICS AND TOOLS

This section identifies nationally significant topics for NPS wilderness interpretation and education that are paired with relevant tools to help with implementation.

Wilderness interpretation and education can address many topics. Balancing locally important issues with concepts related to the entire National Wilderness Preservation System, this Strategy identifies several topics that can speak to both wilderness universals and place-based specifics.

**Topics and tools are organized into two overarching categories:**  
**1) Wilderness Foundations and 2) Wilderness Today.**

To support relevant, co-created content and idea development, every topic within 'Wilderness Foundations' and 'Wilderness Today' includes:

- Context
- Questions for topic exploration
- Resources

Image: Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness in Everglades National Park (NPS/Jane Gamble)



# HOW TO USE THIS SECTION



Review these instructions prior to referencing the rest of the 'Topics and Tools' section.

The categories of 'Wilderness Foundations' and 'Wilderness Today' should be referenced in sequence, so that users have a firm grasp of 'Wilderness Foundations' before proceeding to 'Wilderness Today.'

Both categories list multiple topics for wilderness interpretation and education. Every topic includes the following elements:

| Category and Topic Title  |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Context   | Topic Exploration  | Resources  |
| <p><b>1</b></p> <p>This is the first stop in the topic's contents. Review the context for the topic, pausing to consider why this topic is nationally significant and how it might relate to the specific wilderness area you have in mind.</p> <p>Context establishes a consistent reference, informed by relevant law and policy, from which place-based details and tailoring can expand to make the topic meaningful and relevant to local audiences.</p> | <p><b>2</b></p> <p>Equipped with topic context, next consider one, some, or all of the questions listed in the Topic Exploration column. What ideas does this question(s) prompt?</p> <p>Questions can be used for self-reflection, team discussion, program practice and preparation, and/or to engage audiences.</p> | <p><b>3</b></p> <p>Look through the list of resources to find additional information and tools to support your wilderness interpretation and education work on this topic.</p> <p>Resources take many forms, including documents, trainings, websites, and people.</p> |

Up first: Wilderness Foundations —————→



## **WILDERNESS FOUNDATIONS**

**Foundations are for new users and new audiences to wilderness.**

The word ‘wilderness’ existed, for some, long before the Wilderness Act, with no singular definition used universally. Instead, people over generations have developed personal and collective associations and definitions for ‘wilderness’.

Messaging about NPS wilderness should include the distinction of federal wilderness, principally informed by the Wilderness Act, and how this context may differ from other uses of the word.

Pages 12-17 introduce four topics that serve as the foundation for all interpretation and education of NPS wilderness.

**‘Wilderness Foundations’ topics include:**

- **The National Wilderness Preservation System**
- **Preservation of wilderness character**
- **Managing wilderness**
- **Public purposes of wilderness**

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Image: Daniel J. Evans Wilderness in Olympic National Park (NPS)

## Wilderness Foundations: The National Wilderness Preservation System

### Context

The [Wilderness Act](#) was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on September 3, 1964. This Act established the National Wilderness Preservation System “...for the permanent good of the whole people.” This law directs federal land management agencies, including the NPS, to manage designated wilderness areas and [preserve wilderness character](#).

Through subsequent acts of Congress, the National Wilderness Preservation System has expanded and now protects over 111 million acres of federal public land as designated wilderness. These areas are managed by the NPS, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and US Forest Service. When combined with NPS lands managed as wilderness per NPS policy, over 80 percent of all NPS lands are managed as wilderness.

### Topic Exploration

What does wilderness mean to you? What might be some perspectives on wilderness that are different from your own?

The Wilderness Act was signed in 1964 – what do you associate with the 1960’s?

Collaboration and compromise were central to the Wilderness Act legislation. How are collaboration and compromise represented in wilderness today?

What does “highest protection” for public lands mean and look like? For non-wilderness lands, what might not be protected?

How might an area be different if it wasn’t wilderness? What attributes would remain? What attributes would be lost?

What does it mean for something to be a system? What else do you know that operates as a system? What might it mean to have a national system of wilderness areas?

What is a value(s) of public lands to you? How might this value(s) be different for other people?

### Resources

[Wilderness Act](#)

[Wilderness in the NPS Resource Brief](#)

[Wilderness Overview webisode](#) (part of the America’s Wilderness series)

[NPS.gov/wilderness](#)

[Wilderness Connect](#) (interagency website for the National Wilderness Preservation System)

Meet with the park wilderness coordinator to discuss unique aspects and place-based specifics of wilderness at your park.

Connect with the park’s interdisciplinary wilderness team to discuss wilderness priorities in the park (if available).

Read the legislation designating the park and your wilderness area for unique qualities, meaning, and significance.

Research the history of the Wilderness Act and the history of the legislation of the wilderness area.

Review the park’s wilderness management documents.



Use essential and dialogic questions to explore what was happening more broadly in the US (and world) leading up to the establishment of the Wilderness Act in 1964. Discuss the histories, cultures, and connections that helped influence the idea of federal wilderness at that time. Consider how perspectives have changed and evolved. How does this inform our understanding of federal wilderness in the years since the passage of the Wilderness Act? And what does establishing something for the ‘permanent good of the whole people’ mean to each of us?

## Wilderness Foundations: Preservation of Wilderness Character

### Context

A commonly asked question is “How is federal wilderness different from national parks?” The concept of wilderness character, which is referenced in the Wilderness Act, is one of the most prominent attributes that distinguishes federal wilderness from other federal public lands. Wilderness character underpins wilderness in the NPS. The Wilderness Act states that wilderness areas “shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character.”

Wilderness character is a holistic concept based on the interaction of biophysical environments, personal experiences, and symbolic meanings. Each NPS wilderness area has a unique sense of wilderness character, informed by both intangible and tangible qualities.

**Intangible qualities** might include the spiritual connections, cultural identity, sense of adventure, or artistic inspiration inherent to a particular wilderness area. These intangible qualities are often the first things that come to mind when reflecting on connections to wilderness, and can be both deeply personal and sometimes difficult to articulate.

Alongside the intangible qualities of wilderness character, there are five tangible qualities (based on specific references in the Wilderness Act):

**Natural** - *Wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.* In other words, this quality recognizes the importance of healthy, intact ecosystems and challenges us to limit our negative effects on the functionality of these systems.

**Untrammeled** - *Wilderness is essentially free from the intentional actions of modern human control and manipulation.* In other words, this quality recognizes the importance of people co-existing with our planet, where people are thoughtful about actions they take that might interfere with the rest of the natural world.

**Undeveloped** - *Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation.* In other words, this quality recognizes that while developments and use of motorized equipment are appropriate in many places, wilderness gives us a chance to consider more traditional ways of interacting with the rest of the natural world.

**Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation** - *Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.* In other words, this quality recognizes many activities are appropriate and compatible with wilderness, especially those that rely on human power and give us a chance to ‘unplug.’

**Other Features of Value** - *Wilderness may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.* In other words, this quality recognizes the centuries-old and rich cultural traditions of Indigenous people and other residents to lands now managed as wilderness. These important cultural and historical connections can be explored in this quality, along with the values we place on things like scenery, science, and education.



Wilderness character preservation applies to all categories of NPS wilderness, including designated, recommended, proposed, eligible, and potential wilderness.

### Topic Exploration

How can wilderness character be compared to human character?

What does “the earth and its community of life” mean to you?

What does “natural” look and feel like to you?

"Untrammeled" is a unique concept. Why do you think this word was used in the Wilderness Act?

What is the value of something being "untrammeled"—for the ecosystem? For you? For others?

How does an "undeveloped" area influence your sense of adventure?

Do you think that you have to be alone to experience "solitude"?

What does “unconfined” mean to you? Is there a difference between nature being unconfined and people being unconfined?

Are there unique “features of value” present in the wilderness you have in mind? What “features of value” are meaningful to you?

How might the qualities of wilderness character interact? How might these qualities support or contradict each other? If there are contradictions, how might preservation decisions be made?

### Resources

[Wilderness Act](#)

[NPS Wilderness Character Resource Brief](#)

[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

Interagency Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center [Wilderness Character Toolbox](#)

Review the park’s Wilderness Character Building Blocks Report (if available).

Connect with the park’s interdisciplinary wilderness team to discuss how wilderness character is translated into management priorities (if available).

Listen to Indigenous communities, tribal nations, gateway communities, and park partners to learn about interpretations of wilderness character and the qualities of wilderness character that extend beyond park staff. *Be sure to first coordinate with the park tribal liaison before reaching out to tribes.*

## Wilderness Foundations: Managing Wilderness

### Context

Preserving wilderness character requires a distinct approach to land management. The Wilderness Act prompts managers with a unique opportunity (and requirement) to take a step back and consider the impacts of management actions on wilderness character.

Because it is imperative to preserve wilderness character holistically, wilderness is managed with attentiveness and restraint. The short and long-term impacts of a potential management action on all qualities of wilderness character are considered, resulting in selective, thoughtful, and beneficial decisions for wilderness.



Wilderness management is not only informed by the Wilderness Act, but many other laws that influence management decisions. These laws include the Organic Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and more. Combined, all of these laws (and others) must be considered together when making decisions on behalf of wilderness and wilderness character.

### Topic Exploration

The Wilderness Act mandates human restraint. Why do you think restraint was included in the Wilderness Act? Do you think restraint would be included in the Act if created today? Where do you think restraint is practiced in our society today?

Are there ways that people practice restraint on public lands as individuals? Collectively?

Wilderness management requires managers to balance all qualities of wilderness character. How might balance and restraint intersect in decision-making for the wilderness?

Wilderness management is influenced by and affects many park topics. Are there any topic sources you think may not be commonly referenced but could help manage wilderness more effectively in the 21st Century?

What changes to the “earth and its community of life” or to the experience of people when an area of public land is designated as wilderness?

Would anything be lost if there was no designated wilderness? Why or why not?

What does it mean to “leave no trace” during a visit to public lands?

How might you steward wilderness from home?

What is your role in preserving and/or protecting wilderness?

### Resources

[Wilderness Act](#)

[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

[NPS Wilderness Stewardship Program SharePoint Site](#) [DOI employees only]

[NPS Minimum Requirements Analysis Resource Brief](#)

Interagency Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center [Online Courses](#)

- Writing an Minimum Requirements Analysis (MRA)
- Evaluating an MRA
- Wilderness Act
- ANILCA + Wilderness Stewardship in Alaska
- Natural Resource Management
- Cultural Resource Management

[NPS.gov/science](https://www.nps.gov/science)

[NPS.gov/TEK](https://www.nps.gov/TEK)

[Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics](#)

Meet with the park’s wilderness coordinator and/or interdisciplinary wilderness team to discuss examples of stewardship and management in action.

Work with the park wilderness coordinator to participate in the development of a Minimum Requirements Analysis.

[Wilderness Values Activity](#): Facilitate interaction and discussion about values and expectations in different wilderness scenarios [DOI employees only].

## Wilderness Foundations: Public Purposes of Wilderness

### Context

NPS wilderness areas are part of the federal public lands system, making them available for the use and enjoyment of everyone. The Wilderness Act recognizes this use and enjoyment can take many shapes and acknowledges these through the declaration of several public purposes of wilderness: “Except as otherwise provided in this Act, wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use.”

The **“recreation”** purpose of wilderness recognizes the outstanding opportunities for recreation in wilderness areas. The opportunities for accessing and exploring NPS wilderness areas are as varied as the landscapes these places help to protect. Recreational activities range from walking and adaptive hiking, climbing and mountaineering, to floating and paddling, horseback riding, skiing and snowshoeing, and more. In these activities, wilderness provides space to seek personal fulfillment like mental and physical health, artistic inspiration, and adventure.

The **“scenic”** purpose of wilderness invites us to enjoy the spectacular views showcased in wilderness, from the colorful vibrancy of plants and animals, to the cultural richness of important sites, to the vastness of large wild landscapes.

The **“scientific”** purpose reinforces the role of science in wilderness stewardship. Science, research, and traditional ecological knowledge helps managers preserve wilderness character by providing processes and information to observe and assess changes.

The **“educational”** purpose affirms that wilderness can be a place of learning and exploration for people of all ages. This allows for a growing a sense of personal connection to wilderness and concepts of conservation and stewardship.

The **“conservation”** purpose promotes the continued protection of wilderness as places of significant ecological and cultural importance for “the earth and its community of life.”

The **“historical”** purpose of wilderness reminds us that history and culture are integral and important to recognize in the context of wilderness. Through this purpose we celebrate the people, communities, and cultures that have historical and ongoing relationships with lands we now know as NPS wilderness.

*Note: Descriptions for each public purpose are not official definitions, but rather an interpretive exploration of each purpose.*



The public purposes of wilderness are not limited to in-person visits. These purposes represent intrinsic benefits of wilderness that can be appreciated from afar too. How might remote communications (websites, social media, public meetings, visitor center displays, etc.) about wilderness foster understanding and appreciation that tap into these public purposes?

## Wilderness Foundations: Public Purposes of Wilderness *(continued)*

### Topic Exploration

Does one of the public purposes of wilderness especially resonate with you? If so, why?

What do you seek from your wilderness recreation? Is this unique to wilderness?

What does wilderness scenery look like to you? What does it include? What is not included?

How does science, research, and traditional ecological knowledge help inform and protect wilderness?

What have you learned (or what do you want to learn) in wilderness?

How does recreating and/or learning in wilderness help conserve these areas?

How can our recreation and/or learning in wilderness help highlight the history of these areas?

How might an understanding of the history of a wilderness enhance our recreation or learning opportunities in these areas?

### Resources

[Wilderness Act](#)

[America's Wilderness webisode series](#)

[NPS.gov/wilderness](#)

[NPS.gov/recreation](#)

NPS.gov/wilderness re: [wilderness recreation](#)

[NPS Wilderness Recreation Resource Brief](#)

[NPS.gov/scenicviews](#)

[NPS.gov/science](#)

[NPS.gov/TEK](#)

Interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute [Science Webpage](#)

[NPS.gov/conservation](#)

[NPS.gov/connectedconservation](#)

[NPS.gov/history](#)

Meet with park staff and partners that represent aspects of the six public purposes of wilderness, along with the park wilderness coordinator (and other wilderness staff) to discuss park-specific applications of these purposes.



## WILDERNESS TODAY

**'Wilderness Today' topics are for users and audiences that have experience with the topics previously described in 'Wilderness Foundations.'**

Because concepts of wilderness existed long before the Wilderness Act, and federal wilderness has now existed for several decades, contemporary interpretation and education of wilderness will navigate complex, challenging, and evolving ideas and issues.

Pages 19-22 introduce four of these topics and offer national context to consider as place-based and co-created content is developed. This is not an exhaustive list of all emerging topics and should be used in tandem with information referenced in the 'Wilderness Foundations' section.

**'Wilderness Today' topics include:**

- **Fostering a sense of belonging**
- **Accessibility**
- **Wilderness benefits**
- **Climate change**

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Image: Shenandoah Wilderness (NPS)

## Wilderness Today: Fostering a Sense of Belonging

### Context

Messages that ground a specific wilderness area in principles that are place-based and welcoming proactively invite people to connect with both the concept and experience of wilderness. This invitation to develop a relationship with wilderness that reflects personal experience, identity, and culture can help support lasting connections and ensure that wilderness truly is “...for the permanent good of the whole people.”

Authentic co-created messaging that emphasizes the intersection between an audience(s) and wilderness - including historical and cultural connections and challenges, representation, and values - invites long-term relationship building and ongoing conversations with the audience(s).

This co-created content can also help speak to a more full and holistic narrative arc of the past, present, and future. Acknowledging injustices and exclusionary practices that have limited or prevented people from connecting with wilderness validates the lived experience of all people and creates opportunities to identify a path forward together.

### Topic Exploration

How can we explore deeper into the question “What does wilderness mean to you?”

How would you describe past and ongoing human connections to the lands now managed as wilderness in this park?

What does your connection to wilderness look like? How does your connection differ when you are in versus away from wilderness?

How might perspectives on wilderness vary between people? What might be informing these differing perspectives?

What does a wilderness connection or experience feel like to you?

What is missing from your wilderness experience?

How might the park help support a variety of wilderness connections? How can you help support these connections?

### Resources

NPS.gov/wilderness re: [wilderness heritage](#)

[The Wilderness Act Today](#)

[DOI employees only]

*Wilderness and Traditional Indigenous Beliefs: Conflicting or Intersecting Perspectives on the Human-Nature Relationship?* [Article](#) and [Recorded webinar](#)

Discuss ways of cultivating a sense of belonging in wilderness with the park's interdisciplinary wilderness team.

Listen to Indigenous communities to better understand their connections to lands now managed as wilderness and support sustained relationship building. *Be sure to first coordinate with the park tribal liaison before reaching out to tribes.*

Partner with organizations that connect affinity groups with the park and/or wilderness area.

Collaborate with bilingual staff or partners on language translations projects.



It is important to understand what languages are commonly spoken by your audiences and offer translations for key concepts when possible. For some cultures and languages, concepts like “wilderness”, “untrammelled”, or “solitude” may not exist. We recommend you work with the NPS Wilderness Stewardship Program ([wilderness\\_stewardship@nps.gov](mailto:wilderness_stewardship@nps.gov)) when translating wilderness-specific terminology to ensure consistent use of key phrases.

## Wilderness Today: Accessibility

### Context

Exploring ways to improve accessibility of the wilderness experience means increasing opportunities for more people to meaningfully connect with NPS wilderness.

For example, many people are surprised to learn that wheelchairs are allowed in wilderness. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a wheelchair for use in federal wilderness as “a device designed solely for use by a mobility-impaired person for locomotion, that is suitable for use in an indoor pedestrian area” (Section 12207(c) (2)). How might interpretation and education help promote wheelchair use in wilderness?

Representation of accessibility topics in wilderness interpretation and education helps us speak more directly and thoughtfully to the diverse needs of our public and partners.

### Topic Exploration

What does it mean to “experience” wilderness? How might this experience vary from person to person?

What might a virtual trip to the wilderness area look and sound like?

Imagine that you are in a wilderness area. What smells, textures, and sounds can you think of? Are these different from smells, textures, and sounds you associate with places outside of wilderness?

Motorized equipment and mechanical transport are prohibited in wilderness. Why do you think wheelchairs are allowed in wilderness?

How might opportunities to access this wilderness differ from one person to another? What are some ways to improve the accessibility of wilderness visits? What are some of the challenges?

### Resources

[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

[NPS.gov/accessibility](https://www.nps.gov/accessibility)

Discuss potential barriers to wilderness access with the park's interdisciplinary wilderness team.

Listen to local disability-focused partners and communities to better understand a diversity of experiences in wilderness.

Confirm that digital and physical communications for wilderness meet the ADA's Section 508 compliance.



We can help ensure everyone understands how accessibility relates to wilderness. This includes proactively thinking about a spectrum of physical approaches, including wheelchairs and some mobility aids, as well as other means of transport including kayaks, canoes, rafts, and pack animals. Messaging that describes access and trail specifics, like trail widths, slope, terrain, and distance can be helpful.

## Wilderness Today: Wilderness Benefits

### Context

The benefits of NPS wilderness are simultaneously wide-ranging and site-specific, constant and ever-changing. Creating opportunities for people to connect with and identify their own benefits of wilderness is essential to the interpretive experience.

Offering space for people to self-identify wilderness benefits also helps cultivate sustained support for wilderness as these benefits can evolve with people as their own wilderness connections grow and change. Parks can also proactively communicate wilderness benefits that are rooted in familiar or relatable examples that may help engage a sense of appreciation for wilderness by addressing the common question of “Why is wilderness important?”

### Topic Exploration

Does wilderness benefit you? Does wilderness benefit all people? Why or why not?

Why might there be differing perspectives on the benefits of wilderness? Are there circumstances where wilderness benefits are not present?

What does it mean for something to be of benefit to you?

Do you think people benefit from wilderness when not physically in wilderness?

How does wilderness offer benefits beyond people-centered benefits? What do people (indirectly) gain from these benefits?

Knowing wilderness is a rare resource, why is it important to you and/or this park?

### Resources

[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

[Wilderness Benefits webpage](#)

Interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute's article: [A perpetual flow of benefits: Wilderness economic values in an evolving, multicultural society](#)

[NPS Healthy Parks Healthy People](#)

Listen to Indigenous communities, tribal nations, gateway communities, and park partners to learn about perceptions of wilderness benefits that extend beyond park staff. *Be sure to first coordinate with the park tribal liaison before reaching out to tribes.*



Benefits of wilderness span many different disciplines, including social sciences, natural and cultural sciences/studies, traditional ecological knowledge, and the arts. When combined, values and perspectives informing these disciplines ensure that wilderness benefits reflect the whole person.

## Wilderness Today: Climate Change

### Context

Climate change is complex, taking many shapes and forms and impacting our public lands, including wilderness, in many different ways. A sound understanding of the complexities and tradeoffs of wilderness character preservation is needed to communicate on the topic of climate change in wilderness.

This understanding will equip communicators with the knowledge to develop localized and nuanced messaging that helps audiences understand the nexus between wilderness and climate change.

Together, these discussions can move us forward as a society in protecting our communities and the rest of the natural world.

### Topic Exploration

Have you been to this wilderness area before? If so, can you see any changes since your last visit? What brought you back?

Is it ok for things to change in wilderness? Does it matter what is causing the change? Are there components of wilderness that should remain the same or stable?

What might wilderness look or feel like if it experienced significant environmental change?

How does wilderness protect areas from the impacts of climate change? How does climate change put unique pressures on wilderness areas?

How can management help protect wilderness from climate change impacts?

What might be something individuals can do to help protect wilderness from climate change impacts?

Do you think there are situations where managers should not intervene because of wilderness character?

Consider the preface of the Wilderness Act “For the permanent good of the whole people”. How do we think about “permanent good” in the context of climate change?

### Resources

NPS.gov article: [Wilderness in a Changing World](#)

[NPS.gov/wilderness](#)

[NPS.gov/climatechange](#)

[NPS Climate Change Response Program](#)

[NPS National Climate Change Interpretation and Education Strategy](#)

Interagency Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center [Climate Change Toolbox](#)

Interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute [Climate Change Research](#)

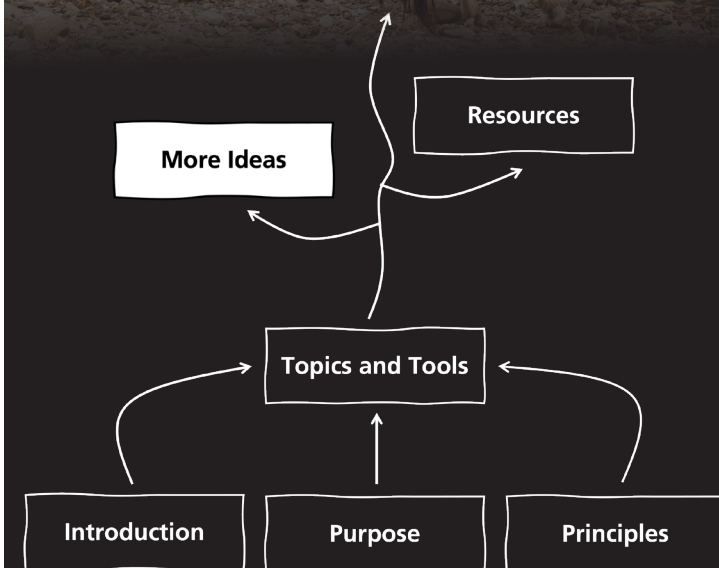
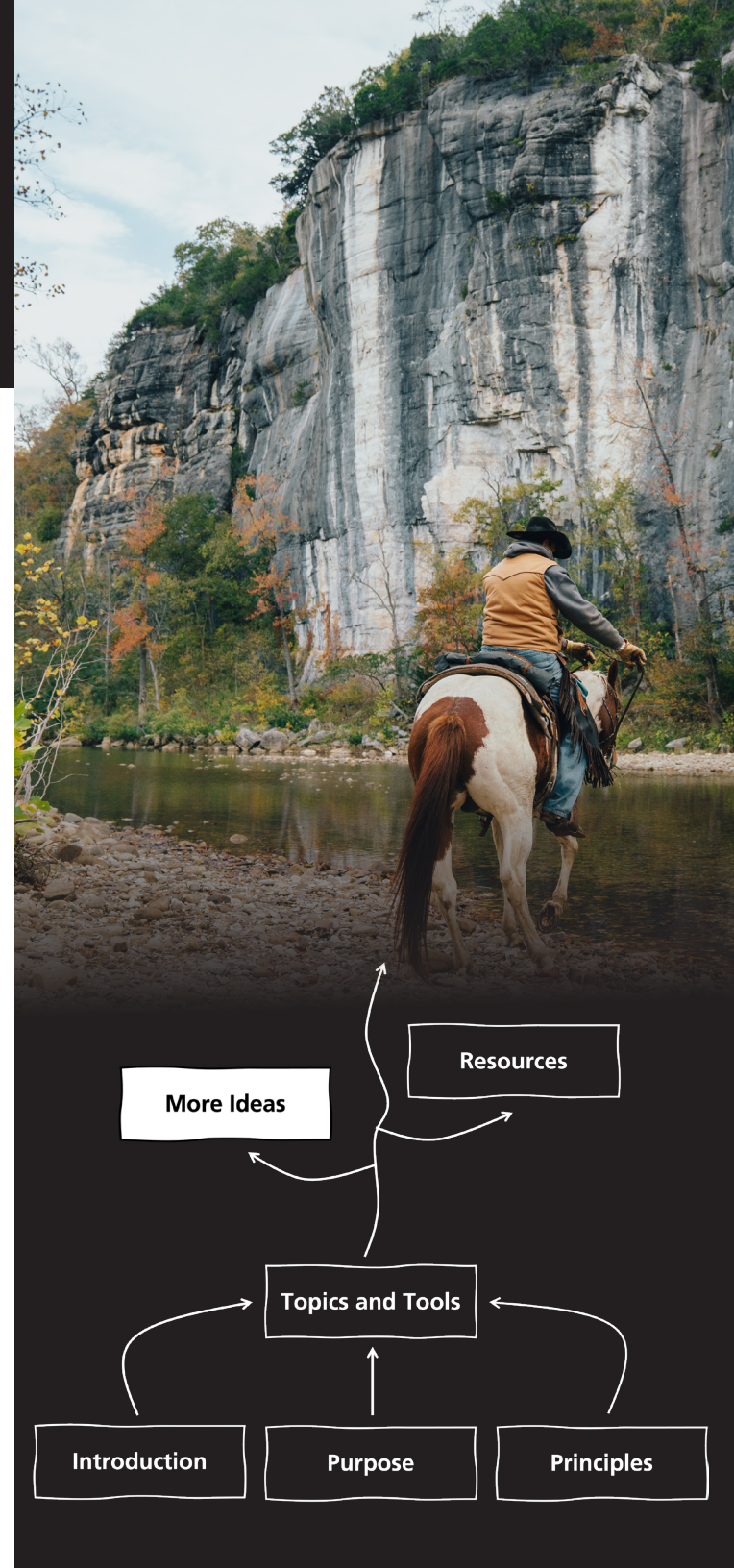
Meet with the park wilderness coordinator and resource management staff to discuss climate change impacts to the wilderness area.

# MORE IDEAS

Looking for more ideas to promote awareness and foster connections with wilderness? Implementing these 10 ideas will amplify NPS wilderness interpretation and education.

- 1** Concepts from this Strategy are integrated into park interpretation and education efforts.
- 2** Park unigrid includes wilderness boundary on map and reference to wilderness in text.
- 3** Park website provides wilderness information and imagery that includes people in wilderness.
- 4** Park printed media integrates designated wilderness location, description, and interpretation, and imagery includes people in wilderness.
- 5** Waysides, interpretive panels, and trailhead signs include location of and information about wilderness. Within wilderness, signs are limited to the minimum required for visitor safety or to protect sensitive resources in wilderness.
- 6** Annual interpretation and education training for seasonal staff includes wilderness information and resources. Opportunities are created to meet with resource managers and the park wilderness coordinator.
- 7** Program leads for interpretation and education, and other interpretation staff, attend agency and interagency wilderness trainings.
- 8** Long Range Interpretive Plan, and similar interpretation and education strategies, includes wilderness as an interpretive theme.
- 9** Park's interdisciplinary wilderness team includes a representative(s) from the interpretation and education program.
- 10** Experience your wilderness! Create opportunities to explore wilderness in person.

Image: Buffalo National River Wilderness Area (Jeff Rose)



# RESOURCES

A supplemental list of relevant wilderness and general interpretation and education resources to support implementation of this Strategy.

## NPS Wilderness Resources

Introductory information, policies,, messaging, and tools to better understand wilderness in the NPS.

[NPS Wilderness Stewardship Program](#)

[SharePoint Site](#) [DOI employees only]

[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

## Interagency Wilderness Resources

Information, training, and science related to the interagency National Wilderness Preservation System.

[Wilderness Connect](#)

[Interagency Arthur Carhart Wilderness Training Center](#)

[Interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute](#)

## NPS Interpretation and Education Resources

Guidance and training on foundational elements of cntemporary interpretation and education in the NPS.

[Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers](#)

[SharePoint Site](#) [DOI employees only]

Image: Capitol Reef National Park recommended wilderness (NPS/Claire Giordano)

