

WHY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE PLANS

The National Park Service (NPS) plans for one purpose — to ensure that the decisions it makes will carry out, as effectively and efficiently as possible, its mission:

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world. (*Management Policies 2006*, p. ii)

In carrying out this mandate, NPS managers constantly make difficult decisions concerning

- ways to preserve significant natural and cultural resources for public enjoyment
- competing demands for limited resources
- priorities for using available funds and staff
- differing local and nationwide interests and views of what is most important (See the text box for an example of the types of decisions.)

Planning provides methods and tools for resolving these issues in ways that minimize conflicts and promote mutually beneficial solutions — solutions that articulate how public enjoyment of the parks can be part of a strategy for ensuring that resources are protected unimpaired for future generations.

The National Park Service is subject to a number of legal requirements for planning, all intended to support the best possible decision making for the agency and the public it serves. By law, the National Park Service is required to conduct comprehensive general planning as a guide for more specific projects, to base decisions on adequate environmental information and analysis, and to track progress made toward goals. Together these processes make the National Park Service more effective, more collaborative, and more accountable.

Planning provides a balance between continuity and adaptability in a dynamic decision-making process. The success of the National Park Service will increasingly

Planning — Deciding about Tradeoffs, Priorities, Solutions

Are there parts of the battlefield at Gettysburg where rehabilitation would be preferable to preservation? To what extent should the natural values of the landscape be enhanced? What are the highest priority actions for restoring natural ecosystem functioning in Everglades National Park? How can traffic congestion be reduced at Zion National Park? Should visitors be encouraged or required to use a public transportation system? How can transportation alternatives enhance visitor experience opportunities? What role should the National Park Service play in partnership with the local community to preserve and interpret the history of New Bedford Whaling? What are the desired resource conditions and associated opportunities for visitor experiences at Saguaro National Park, where a 50% increase in use over the past 10 years is causing resource damage and significant conflicts among visitors seeking different types of experiences?

depend upon the abilities of its employees to continuously process new information and use it creatively, often in partnership with others, to resolve complex and changing issues. Within this working environment, planning provides a logical, trackable rationale for decision making by focusing first on why a park was established and what conditions should exist there before delving into details about specific actions. Defining the desired conditions to be achieved and maintained provides a touchstone that allows management teams to constantly adapt their actions to changing situations while staying focused on what is most important about the park.

The planning process ensures that decision makers have adequate information about benefits, environmental (natural, cultural, and socioeconomic) impacts, and costs. Analyzing the park in relation to its surrounding ecosystem, historic setting, community, and a national system of protected areas helps park managers and staffs understand how the park can interrelate with neighbors and others in systems that are ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable. Decisions made within this larger context are more likely to be successful over time. Progressively more site-specific and detailed analysis helps minimize adverse natural, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts and the costs of particular actions.

Good planning helps provide everyone who has a stake in the decisions with an opportunity to be involved in the planning process and to understand the decisions as they are being made. As sites with symbolic value to the American public, national parks are often the focus of intense public interest. Public involvement throughout the planning process provides focused opportunities for park managers and the planning team to interact with the public and to learn about public concerns, expectations, and values. Understanding the values that people hold in relation to park resources and visitor experiences is often the key to success in coming to decisions that can be implemented. Public involvement also provides opportunities for public officials to share information about park purposes and significance, as well as opportunities and constraints regarding the management of park lands and surrounding areas.

Finally, planning helps ensure and document that management decisions are promoting the efficient use of public funds, and that managers are accountable to the public for those decisions. The public and their elected representatives are increasingly concerned about how scarce tax dollars are being spent and what results are being achieved. The ultimate outcome of planning for national parks is an agreement among the National Park Service, its partners, and the public on why each area is managed as part of the national park system, what resource conditions and visitor experiences should exist there, and how those conditions can best be achieved and maintained over time.