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Feasibility and Need for NPS Management

Photos (clockwise): 1. Dam, Angeles National Forest. Photo by Eric Lowenbach 2. San Gabriel Slender Salamander. Photo by David Wake. 3. Workman House. NPS Photo. 4. Canyon Road, Angeles National Forest. Photo by Eric Lowenbach.



# Chapter 5: Feasibility and Need for NPS Management

## Introduction

### Feasibility

To be feasible as a new unit of the national park system, an area must be (1) of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to ensure sustainable resource protection and visitor enjoyment (taking into account current and potential impacts from sources beyond proposed park boundaries), and (2) capable of efficient administration by the National Park Service (NPS) at a reasonable cost. In evaluating feasibility, the NPS considers a variety of factors for a study area, such as the following:

- size
- boundary configurations
- current and potential uses of the study area and surrounding lands
- landownership patterns
- public enjoyment potential
- costs associated with acquisition, development, restoration, and operation
- access
- current and potential threats to the resources
- existing degradation of resources
- staffing requirements
- local planning and zoning
- the level of local and general public support (including landowners)
- the economic/socioeconomic impacts of designation as a unit of the national park system

The feasibility evaluation also considers the ability of the NPS to undertake new management responsibilities in light of current and projected availability of funding and personnel.

An overall evaluation of feasibility is made after taking into account all of the above factors. However, evaluations may sometimes identify concerns or conditions, rather than simply reach a yes or no conclusion. For example, some new areas may be feasible additions to the national park system only if landowners are willing to sell, or the boundary encompasses specific areas necessary for

visitor access, or state or local governments will provide appropriate assurances that adjacent land uses will remain compatible with the study area's resources and values (NPS 2006).

Some management options are more feasible than others. The national park system includes many types of sites, and a range of ownership and management approaches. When many people think of national parks, they think of the large and mostly natural parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone. However, the national park system includes many other types of sites, such as small historic sites, wild and scenic rivers, and long distance trails. Some NPS sites are small parks located in urban areas, relying on partnerships, with little, if any, federal landownership or management. Other NPS sites are large natural areas where multiple park agencies cooperate to conserve land and provide public services. The NPS also offers grant and technical assistance programs that help local communities achieve their goals for conservation and recreation.

### Evaluation of Feasibility Factors

The following evaluation explores the potential for a range of different types of national park sites and management roles, while acknowledging the existing ownership and uses of land within the study area.

### Boundary Size and Configuration

An acceptable boundary for an envisioned unit of the national park system should provide for the inclusion and protection of its primary resources; sufficient surrounding area to provide a proper setting for the resources or to interrelate a group of resources; and sufficient land for appropriate use and development.

The study area covers more than 700,000 acres (1,000 square miles) in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, one of the most densely populated areas of the United States. The study area includes a large portion of the Angeles National Forest, plus rural agricultural areas, highly urbanized communities and large natural areas that contain nationally significant resources. As described in Chapter 3, *Resource Significance*, the nationally significant areas are concentrated in the San Gabriel Mountains and foothills (approximately 500,000 acres) and the Puente-Chino Hills (approximately 17,000 acres). These areas support native plant communities, rare and endangered species, and are large enough to connect multiple resource types, provide a natural setting for them, and provide regional habitat connectivity. The San

Gabriel Mountains and Puente Hills also provide the region with recreation opportunities, fresh drinking water, and flood protection.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study area is of adequate size to include and protect the area's nationally significant resources.

## **Land Use, Ownership Patterns, Planning and Zoning**

Two-thirds of the study area is owned and managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) as part of the Angeles National Forest (approximately 415,000 acres). These lands are currently managed by the USFS for multiple uses, including public recreation, utility corridors and watershed management, with recreation as the primary use. Early in the study process, the NPS compared the size and scale of the Angeles NF to the NPS ability to take on new management responsibilities, and determined that continued USFS management would be necessary and desirable.

Because of this determination, the NPS committed to consider in this study only those alternatives that retain USFS management of the Angeles NF. Appropriate roles for the NPS that complement USFS management and enhance resource protection and public enjoyment opportunities also exist.

One third of the study area is primarily privately owned, consisting of urbanized land in the San Gabriel Valley and Los Angeles Basin, and rural/agricultural areas north of the ANF. This land is spread among 57 communities, 38 of which are incorporated, with the remainder subject to area-specific planning and zoning regulated by Los Angeles County. Various parks, infrastructure and large land areas are owned and managed by individual municipalities, county, and state government agencies.

The nationally significant resources in this part of the study area include portions of the San Gabriel foothills and the Puente-Chino Hills and where land ownership in these areas is more scattered. Landowners in the eastern Puente Hills want to retain ownership of their land and have limited interest in cooperative management with the NPS. The Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority, the largest recreational open space in the urbanized part of the study area, has stated that the area could potentially benefit from a non-traditional partnership with the NPS. The NPS is considering only management approaches that respect and retain the land use authority of jurisdictions within

the study area, and would consider land acquisition or land management only in specific areas that are found to be nationally significant, meet NPS criteria for suitability and feasibility and where there are supportive landowners.

## **CONCLUSION**

The complexity of existing land uses complicates designation of a large, traditional park unit. Designation of a collaborative national park unit that works with local, state, and federal managers to protect natural and cultural resources, provide recreation, public access, interpretation, education, and other compatible uses could, however, be compatible with existing ownership patterns and regulatory authorities. For example, there may be opportunities to provide habitat and recreational opportunities that could also improve water quality, provide water retention for flood protection or water conservation, and expand upon the ongoing efforts of local organizations. Given the size and scale of the Angeles National Forest, the NPS determined that continued USFS management would be necessary and desirable. Many potential collaborators, such as the Angeles National Forest, worked with the NPS in developing the alternatives presented in this document.

## **Access and Public Enjoyment Potential**

Approximately 1.5 million people live within the study area. Millions more in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area use the open spaces and parklands of the study area. Publicly accessible open space includes the Angeles National Forest as well as state, regional and local parks.

Comprising over 70% of Los Angeles County's open space, the Angeles National Forest serves as a recreational day-use opportunity for local residents. Data from 2009 estimate almost 3.5 million visitors to the forest annually (USFS 2009). The forest offers river access and miles of trails through a wide array of landforms and habitats. Recreational activities on the forest include camping, hiking, climbing, horseback riding, off-highway vehicle use, fishing and swimming. Approximately 1.1% of the forest lands within the study area have developed recreational opportunities (e.g. roads, parking areas, restrooms, etc.). The developed areas around the San Gabriel River are the most popular destinations in the forest. Visitors are attracted to this area for its water-based recreation opportunities.

Within the urbanized areas and rural communities there are numerous open spaces and parklands

available for public recreation, such as local, regional, county and state parks, golf courses, wilderness parks, historical parks and cultural sites, equestrian areas and Bureau of Land Management lands. These sites make up approximately 2% of the study area. Although access to some rivers and creeks is restricted for water supply and flood protection purposes, many waterways have adjacent bike trails as well as nearby parks that provide recreational opportunities.

The largest recreational open space area in the urbanized portions of the study area is the land owned by the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority (Preserve) which includes 3,860 acres of land. The jurisdictional boundary for the Preserve includes a total of 20,000 acres in the eastern Puente Hills, extending from the San Gabriel River east to the Chino Hills. Over time the Preserve plans to continue to acquire key parcels of land within the jurisdictional boundary for conservation and recreational uses. Other major recreational open space areas include Whittier Narrows Recreation Area, Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area, Bonelli Regional Park, municipal wilderness parks in the San Gabriel foothills, and numerous city and county parks.

The study area contains seven trails designated under the National Trails System. Regional and local trails also provide recreational access.

Despite the considerable public open space and recreation opportunities in the area, there are many unmet needs and interests, including:

- need for linkages between regional open spaces and local parklands to protect habitat and wildlife corridors and provide more recreational opportunities for the growing region;
- demand for additional recreation;
- limited or difficult access to recreational opportunities for people who do not have automobiles, and from urbanized communities with greater numbers of children, low income residents and people of color;
- the need to plan for additional recreation opportunities to meet the demands of future population growth.

## CONCLUSION

There is considerable potential for public access and enjoyment within the study area. There are opportunities for a wide variety of recreational uses in the nationally significant San Gabriel Mountains and Puente-Chino Hills, and there is ample

potential for development of additional recreation opportunities and improved access elsewhere.

## Existing Resource Degradation and Threats to Resources

The San Gabriel Mountains and Puente-Chino Hills contain significant resources with a high degree of integrity. These areas make up over two-thirds of the study area. Isolated pockets of significant resources exist within other portions of the study area where extensive urbanization has fragmented and impacted the integrity of the resources.

The Angeles National Forest contains highly significant resources, however, certain areas are impacted by a variety of factors, including infrastructure, private inholdings, concentrated visitor use, and recreational activities such as off-highway vehicle use. River-based recreation activities are extremely popular, and the San Gabriel Canyon often hits its capacity on warm summer weekends and the U.S. Forest Service has to close the area. High use visitor areas within the Angeles National Forest have higher incidences of litter, graffiti and other types of vandalism. Some visitors alter river bed geomorphology by creating rock dams for swimming areas.

Regional population growth and future development pose a threat to significant resources within the study area. Existing and proposed urban development threatens coastal sage scrub habitat in the Montebello Hills and walnut woodlands and coastal sage scrub in the eastern Puente-Chino Hills. Proposals for transportation projects, including road widening and freeway development, water and sewer projects, and new housing development threaten significant resources throughout the study area. Development proposals in the Puente-Chino Hills could degrade resource integrity and threaten the area's important wildlife connection to the Santa Ana Mountains. Although areas of the Soledad Basin and Antelope Valley within the study area are relatively undeveloped with pockets of significant habitat, these areas are also the fastest growing regions of Los Angeles County. Without careful planning and protection, important wildlife corridors to the San Gabriel Mountains could be lost.

Impacts from climate change may threaten area water supply and wildlife habitat. Rising temperatures and altered rainfall may cause additional stress on native habitat and increase air pollution. Such changes may cause native and endemic plants to move northward and toward the coast, following the shifts in their preferred climate. Native and endemic plants in southern California

could move up mountains into cooler but highly vulnerable refugia. The San Gabriel Mountains are predicted to be an area for native plants and animals seeking refuge when the climate change begins to impact their habitat. Enhanced protection of these areas and their connections to other significant habitat areas in the region may help to offset future habitat stressors from global climate change. Protecting corridors through which plants and animals can move to such refugia, and assisting plants and animals in reestablishing themselves in new regions, may help conserve these species (University of California 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite these resource impacts and threats, approximately two-thirds of the study area contains protected lands with significant resources of high integrity. These areas are not subject to resource degradation or threats that would preclude management as a unit of the national park system.

## **Public Interest and Support**

Extensive public involvement efforts, first in 2005 and 2006, and then again in late 2009, identified strong interest in additional NPS involvement in the region to help protect significant resources and provide additional recreation and public enjoyment opportunities.

The NPS held numerous meetings with federal, state and county agencies that are responsible for conservation and recreation within the study area. These agencies have been supportive of a National Park Service management and/or technical assistance role in the study area. They also stressed the value of having another federal partner to leverage the funds necessary to conserve lands for open space and recreation.

In the public scoping period, public suggestions for an appropriate NPS role ranged from creating momentum in bringing communities together to address resource protection and recreational needs to providing park rangers along the San Gabriel River. It was also suggested that the NPS could play a role in coordinated or joint management with and among existing agencies and jurisdictions. Emphasis was placed on the potential for the NPS to leverage more resources for the region.

Concerns about an NPS presence in the study area included the potential for duplication of efforts, the need to maintain local land use control, water rights and private property rights, and concern over unnecessary regulatory overlays. In response to these concerns, the NPS considered only those

alternatives that respect and retain the local land use authority of jurisdictions within the study area, and considered limited land acquisition only in areas where there are willing sellers.

In 2009, when alternative management concepts were first presented to the public, support for an expanded NPS role intensified. Almost 5,000 written comments were received, with the vast majority supporting more NPS involvement and designation of a larger park unit than previously proposed. While some cities and agencies, along with a number of individuals, expressed concerns about possible loss of local control or restrictions on their ability to carry out necessary functions, the majority of governmental and private respondents, including seven Congressional representatives, the U.S. Forest Service, and the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC), supported an NPS-led, partnership-based national recreation area.

## **CONCLUSION**

Public outreach for this study including numerous meetings with public officials and land management organizations, has demonstrated significant public interest and support for the NPS to play a collaborative role in the area in partnership with other land management and resource protection organizations.

## **Social and Economic Impact**

Designation of a national park unit within some portion of the study area would likely have a number of economic and social impacts on the area. Most of these impacts would likely be beneficial. Social and economic benefits could follow from improved public access to open space and recreational opportunities. Socioeconomic issues identified during the public scoping process included requests for evaluating any potential impacts to property values and the local economy within and adjacent to the proposed area. It was also suggested that the NPS evaluate potential recreation opportunity effects on traditionally underserved communities. A more complete analysis of social and economic impacts is explored in Chapter 7, *Environmental Consequences*.

## **CONCLUSION**

The social and economic impacts appear to be largely beneficial and would support the feasibility of NPS designation.

## Costs Associated with Operation, Acquisition, Development and Restoration

Costs associated with a national park unit include annual operations costs and periodic costs of land acquisition, development of facilities, and resource restoration.

Operations costs of national park units vary widely, depending on the amount and type of resources managed, number of visitors, level of programs offered, and many other factors. Operating costs for a partnership park unit or NPS technical/administrative assistance would typically be lower than the operating expenses of a traditional national park. Chapter 6, *Alternatives*, explores potential operational costs in more detail for each management alternative. The tables in that chapter provide some comparative base budget numbers for various partnership-based park units. Budgets for park units with very little NPS landownership range from approximately \$1.2 million to \$3.5 million. By comparison, a more traditional, larger national park unit (not recommended by this study) could require an annual operating budget of \$2-15 million. The smaller budgets for partnership parks typically provide funding for core staff to handle park coordination and outreach, assist partners with conservation planning, and provide interpretive and educational programs. Operational partnerships with other land management organizations, such as the Angeles National Forest and Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, would create more efficiency in staffing across various agencies.

Land acquisition costs cannot be estimated without more specific proposals for acquisition of specific areas. NPS funds for land acquisition are very limited, and proposed acquisitions compete for funds nationally with many other worthy sites. Given the high cost of land in Los Angeles County, only acquisition of targeted sites would be feasible. Subject to available funds, the NPS would consider land acquisition or land management in specific areas that are found to be nationally significant, meet NPS criteria for suitability and feasibility, and where there are interested and supportive sellers and landowners.

Collaborative management between the NPS and other land management agencies would provide greater advantages for obtaining land acquisition funding which is highly competitive and requires considerable public and political support. Partnerships with existing organizations such as the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy that have

access to land acquisition funds would be essential. Funding could be obtained from multiple sources over time for targeted lands as those areas become available for acquisition.

Development costs of new national park units vary widely, depending on existing conditions and facilities and the types of conditions and facilities desired. New national park units frequently invest funds to inventory and document park resources, developing management or treatment plans for those resources, developing educational and interpretive materials, and developing or improving facilities for visitors and for park operations. Under partnership park scenarios, the NPS could share facilities with existing agencies or share costs for any new facilities deemed necessary.

For the purposes of this study, the NPS has developed cost estimates that are based on very broad needs typically associated with the operational requirements of a new park unit. If a new unit is established, the NPS would prepare a general management plan that would guide future management of the area, and would include more detailed cost estimates for operations and facilities development.

### CONCLUSION

Costs for establishment of a national park unit appear to be feasible, provided that partnership opportunities are pursued to support collaborative operations, land acquisition, and development. Given the high cost of land in Los Angeles County, only acquisition of targeted sites would be feasible, and only where there are supportive landowners.

### Feasibility Summary

The study team has found that a collaborative partnership-based park unit, which respects the complex mix of land use, ownership, and regulatory authority in the study area is feasible. Opportunities for collaborative management with local, state and federal managers to protect natural and cultural resources, provide recreation, public access, interpretation and educational opportunities, and other compatible uses in an NPS partnership-based park unit have been demonstrated to exist. A large traditional national park unit, owned and operated solely by the National Park Service, is determined to be infeasible.

**Table 8: Feasibility Factors Issues and Conclusions**

<b>Boundary size and configuration</b>	The study area is of adequate size and configuration to include and protect the area's nationally significant resources.
<b>Land use, ownership patterns, planning and zoning</b>	Designation of a collaborative national park unit that works with local, state, and federal managers to protect natural and cultural resources, provide recreation, public access, interpretation, education, and other compatible uses could be compatible with existing ownership patterns and regulatory authorities.
<b>Access and public enjoyment potential</b>	There is considerable potential for public access and enjoyment within the study area. There are opportunities for a wide variety of recreational uses in the nationally significant San Gabriel Mountains and Puente-Chino Hills, and there is ample potential for development of additional recreation opportunities and improved access elsewhere.
<b>Existing resource degradation and threats to resources</b>	Approximately two-thirds of the study area contains protected lands with significant resources of high integrity. These areas are not subject to resource degradation or threats that would preclude management as a unit of the national park system.
<b>Public interest and support</b>	Outreach for this study including numerous meetings with public officials and land management organizations, has demonstrated significant public interest and support for the NPS to play a collaborative role in the area in partnership with other land management and resource protection organizations.
<b>Social and economic impact</b>	The social and economic impacts appear to be largely beneficial and would support the feasibility of NPS designation.
<b>Costs associated with acquisition, development, restoration and operation</b>	Costs for establishment of a national park unit appear to be feasible, provided that partnership opportunities are pursued to support collaborative operations, land acquisition, and development. Given the high cost of land in Los Angeles County, only acquisition of very targeted sites would be feasible, and only where there are supportive landowners.

## Need for NPS Management

The need for direct NPS management is the final criterion for a favorable recommendation for a proposed unit of the national park system. The criterion requires a finding that NPS management would be superior to other potential alternative management arrangements by other entities.

The study team has determined that a collaborative or partnership-based management approach which includes a leadership role for the national park service is a superior management option for meeting the complex conservation and recreation needs of the study area.

- The NPS has the ability to work in a coordinated fashion, on a regional basis, to address the current lack of equitable access to open space and to protect significant resources. Existing land management agencies have not been able to address these issues and have specifically requested assistance from the NPS.
- The NPS is well-known and respected for its expertise in interpretation and education, and can use this expertise in partnership with other land managers to increase the level of understanding of the area's significance.
- Existing NPS assistance programs are currently insufficient to address these needs.

## COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT AND REGIONAL PLANNING

As identified in the issues to be addressed in Chapter 2 of this study, the area's natural, cultural, and recreation resources lack a comprehensive management plan and could benefit from a regional planning structure. Regional planning needs include greater cooperation among regional land managers, governments, and other organizations to leverage resources for protection and public enjoyment, share scientific information, create a regional identity and public understanding about resource significance, and to meet the needs of a complex social and ecological region.

The NPS is well-suited to administer a partnership park in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region. The nearby Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, which has been working cooperatively with agencies and organizations to protect resources of the Santa Monica Mountains for over three decades, is a model for partnership management. There are many lessons learned and excellent cooperative management models to draw

from. The Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the San Francisco Bay Area also provides an excellent model of partnership management in California.

## NEED FOR COORDINATED INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

The study area lacks coordinated educational and interpretative opportunities about the significance of the area's resources. An improved understanding of resource significance would help to expand people's awareness of the natural systems, cultural heritage, and recreational opportunities in their communities, and increase the political and financial viability of conservation and recreation-related projects. Increased education about resource significance could also help to reduce visitor-related impacts in highly used recreation areas.

## NEED FOR ASSISTANCE BEYOND EXISTING NPS PROGRAMS

The NPS ability to provide regional planning and coordinated management through existing technical assistance programs such as the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) is limited. The NPS RTCA program currently provides planning and conservation assistance to organizations and communities in the southern California region on a case-by-case basis, with assistance typically lasting no more than two years. The long term regional planning and assistance needed in the San Gabriel Mountains and Watershed goes beyond the function of this program. Coordinated interpretation and education about the area's significance is also lacking in the study area.

The study team held several workshops with primary land management and recreation agencies within the study area and southern California-based RTCA staff to assist in the development of preliminary alternatives for the special resource study. Agency representatives expressed that the National Park Service's proven leadership in partnership/collaborative management, interpretation, and education is needed to address the previously mentioned gaps in current management.

## CONCLUSION

NPS management in partnership with existing agencies and organizations is the best option for enhancing protection of significant resources, for improving access to recreational opportunities in the region, and for providing coordinated interpretation and education about significant resources.

