

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Great Falls Park, administered by George Washington Memorial Parkway and located in northern Virginia, is a distinctive place within the Washington DC metropolitan region. It includes dramatic vistas of the Potomac River cascading 76-feet over jagged rocks, through a series of cataracts, and surging through the Mather Gorge. It also includes the preserved ruins of the Patowmack Canal, a designated National Historic Landmark that is a physical reminder of George Washington's efforts to make the river a navigable waterway. Adjacent to the Canal ruins are the ruins of an abandoned settlement, the town of Matildaville, built to support trade along the Canal. The park is also located at the northern end of the 15-mile Potomac River Gorge, one of the country's most ecologically diverse areas that serves as a confluence for more than 200 rare plant species and biological communities. Each year, nearly 500,000 people including local residents and tourists enjoy activities such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, rock climbing, kayaking, fishing, picnicking, as well as the spectacular views offered at this 800-acre park.

The General Management Plan (GMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is the basic guidance document for managing Great Falls Park (the park). The purpose of the plan is to specify resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved at the park over the next 10 to 15 years. It will provide the foundation for decision-making and the preparation of specific resource and recreational activity plans for the park. The EIS documents potential effects that the GMP will have on environmental resources, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The GMP and EIS are collectively referred to as "the plan" in this document.

The final GMP will be the first comprehensive plan prepared for Great Falls Park. The National Park Service (NPS) began the planning process in the Fall of 2002. Towards the end of 2002, and the beginning of 2003, NPS conducted public scoping meetings and sent out a newsletter (Newsletter #1) soliciting comments in order to determine issues and concerns that should be addressed in the plan. Issues and concerns that were identified included: access and circulation; natural and cultural resource management; visitor activities; park facilities; and visitor safety.

Based on internal discussions among NPS staff, and comments received through public scoping, the following items were identified as the major resource conditions and visitor experience issues to be addressed in this plan: (1) How should natural and cultural resources be managed to optimize the preservation of both? (2) What are the most appropriate levels and locations for visitor interpretation and education in the park? (3) What are the appropriate levels and locations of recreational activities such as picnicking, kayaking, dog walking, biking, horseback riding, climbing, fishing, and boating in the park? (4) How should trails be managed with regard to use, connections to trails outside the park, and locations? (5) How should traffic and associated elements (parking spaces, time limits, etc.) be managed? (6) What are the most advantageous locations to support administration and operation functions with respect to minimizing resource disturbance?

PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES

The GMP/EIS process requires the exploration of a range of possible alternative future conditions and management strategies for the park. Ten preliminary alternative scenarios were investigated during the development of the GMP/EIS. In a newsletter (Newsletter 2), that was published in November 2003, three of the GMP alternatives were carried forward and presented for public evaluation. Subsequent to public and agency comments that were received, as well as additional review by the internal planning team, these alternatives were revised to two consolidated alternatives that were presented and evaluated in the June 2005 Draft GMP/EIS.

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The Draft GMP/EIS was released for public comments in Fall/Winter 2005. Following more than 190 public and agency comments that were received, NPS has revised the two alternatives as follows:

- Alternative A (Continuation of Current Conditions) maintains the status quo in the park, and describes resource conditions where existing practices continue to guide park management.
- Alternative B (Preferred Alternative) would balance the protection of natural and cultural resources with the provision of a variety of recreational opportunities for visitors.

Description of Alternatives

The two alternatives considered for Great Falls Park are conceptual and offer possibilities of how the park could be managed in the future. Under Alternative A, the NPS would continue current practices to manage the park, whereas, under Alternative B, the NPS would modify existing practices to pursue an overall goal of balancing opportunities for recreation while protecting sensitive natural and cultural resources. These alternatives are summarized in Table ES.1: Description of Alternatives, and illustrated on Figures ES.1: Alternative A, and ES.2: Alternative B. The alternatives are described in greater detail in Section 2.1 of this document.

Table ES.1: Description of Alternatives

	Alternative Concept A: Continuation of Current Conditions	Alternative Concept B: Preferred Alternative
Description	<i>Continue current management practices.</i>	<i>Balance the protection of natural and cultural resources with the provision of a variety of recreational opportunities for visitors.</i>
Natural/Cultural Resource Management	Preserve unexposed cultural resources by leaving them in place, below the surface.	Preserve unexposed cultural resources by leaving them in place, below the surface except in a few locations where uncovering them would significantly benefit interpretation at the park and not damage the resource. Improve interpretation related signage at the visitor center (VC) and at resources.
	Develop an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) to protect sensitive cultural resources from potential vegetation damage. Also, adopt best management practices (BMPs) to protect cultural resources, especially those that are either listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places.	Same as Alternative A.
	Continue existing policies to manage Matildaville.	Develop a plan to stabilize Matildaville.
	Continue current policies regarding maintaining existing viewsheds.	Prepare a Viewshed Management Plan to preserve, maintain or restore sensitive viewsheds.
	Continue existing water resource management policies.	Provide technical assistance to neighbors on water resource management, including stormwater management techniques aimed to reduce run-off from impervious surfaces and improve water quality. Demonstrate the use of these techniques within the park when enhancing the VC or constructing the new operations facility (at the existing maintenance facility site).

	Alternative Concept A: Continuation of Current Conditions	Alternative Concept B: Preferred Alternative
Recreation Management	<p>Evaluate existing undesignated trails and eliminate any that adversely impact resources.</p> <p>Maintain existing multi-use trails. Allow access to pedestrians, bikers, and horse-riders into the park from adjacent trails/properties.</p>	<p>Prepare a Trail Management Plan (TMP), in partnership with the public, to ensure that horseback riding, hiking and mountain biking activities, as well as access to key areas for other activities such as climbing or interpretation continue on designated trails in the park in a manner that is consistent with NPS’s responsibility of protecting park resources. In general, the TMP is anticipated to address the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Examine the existing system of designated and undesignated trails and recommend whether the designated trail system should be expanded, realigned, kept the same, or closed in segments where resource impacts are identified. ○ Potentially close specific trails on a temporary, periodic, or permanent basis, if necessary for protection of cultural and natural resources. ○ Focus on reducing the number of undesignated trails in the park, and adopting practices to avoid the creation of new undesignated trails. Designate those undesignated trails that are found appropriate to provide access to key areas. ○ Recommend best practices, especially in areas where trails are located within or adjacent to sensitive resources. Such practices could include requiring an access pass for specific areas or uses if necessary, or fencing off areas to avoid sensitive resources. ○ Discuss the reasons why the management strategies are necessary, including evidence of impacts if appropriate.
	<p>Connect park trails to the Cross County Trail (CCT), Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (PHNST), and Georgetown Pike Trail (GPT).</p>	<p>Same as Alternative A.</p>
	<p>Continue to allow climbing activities on a first-come first-serve basis.</p>	<p>Prepare a Climbing Management Plan (CMP) in partnership with the public and the climbing community, to ensure that climbing as a traditional visitor use continues in the park in a manner that is consistent with NPS’s responsibility of protecting park resources. In general, the CMP is anticipated to address the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Examine climbing routes on a case-by-case basis and recommend whether they should be expanded, kept the same, or reduced. ○ Examine access to the climbing areas from adjacent trails. In areas where access is provided on undesignated trails, the park would explore designating the trail, or developing alternative access routes in situations where the trail adversely impacts sensitive resources. ○ Recommend best practices, especially in areas within or adjacent to sensitive resources. These practices could include the limited use of fixed anchors or an access pass for specific areas if necessary to avoid sensitive resources. ○ Potentially close specific areas on a temporary, periodic, or permanent basis, if necessary for resource protection, along with describing the process that would be undertaken if such closure is recommended. <p>On a trial basis, prior to the preparation of the CMP, designate an access trail to three climbing routes (Gorky Park, Microdome and Flat Iron) to minimize potential for damage to globally rare Central Appalachian/ Piedmont riverside prairie located between the southern end of Overlook #3 and the Sand Box climbing area. An ‘access pass’ will be issued on a trial basis requiring all visitors to use this access trail. During issuance of the access pass, visitors would be provided with educational information regarding particular resource concerns, as well as safety information. This pass would be provided seasonally, in unlimited quantities, and free of charge.</p>
	<p>Continue access to Fisherman’s Eddy/AA Gorge for non-motorized boats, while protecting the Forge site.</p>	<p>Same as Alternative A.</p>

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	Alternative Concept A: Continuation of Current Conditions	Alternative Concept B: Preferred Alternative
Visitor Services	The VC would function similar to existing conditions, with educational and food facilities.	Rehabilitate VC to improve exhibits and establish an educational component that would focus on resource interpretation, as well as providing information on safe and responsible use of park resources for recreation.
	Rehabilitate restroom facilities.	Rehabilitate and expand existing restroom facilities at current locations.
	Maintain seasonal food service concession at current levels.	Evaluate existing services provided by the concessionaire to determine whether to expand or reduce services.
Traffic Management	Check parking lots and inform visitors waiting in line to expect delays when Old Dominion Drive experiences back up because the park is full. When parking lots are full, suspend entry into the park and allow only emergency vehicles to enter.	Same as Alternative A.
	Introduce technology that expedites payment and other operational functions at the entrance station to provide more efficient visitor entry into the park.	Same as Alternative A.
	Continue to provide manual message board at the intersection of Georgetown Pike and Old Dominion Drive.	Provide traffic and parking message boards at satellite locations along transportation routes leading to the park, as needed. Ensure that signs located along Georgetown Pike are sensitively designed in recognition of the road's scenic byway designation. Provide a radio announcement that informs visitors about traffic conditions at the entrance station.
Administration	Maintain staff offices at the visitor center. Retain USPP facilities at the current trailer.	Demolish existing maintenance/US Park Police (USPP) facility and construct a replacement facility at the same location. Locate maintenance personnel/equipment and law enforcement staff offices at this replacement facility. Relocate staff offices from the VC to this replacement facility.
	Continue renting stables for USPP horses outside the park.	Explore constructing USPP stables within the park, off Jackson Lane.
	Maintain existing use of well-based water system with existing holding tank on Jackson Lane.	Maintain existing use of well-based water system with an expanded holding tank on Jackson Lane. If necessary in the future, explore bringing public water to the park's facilities.

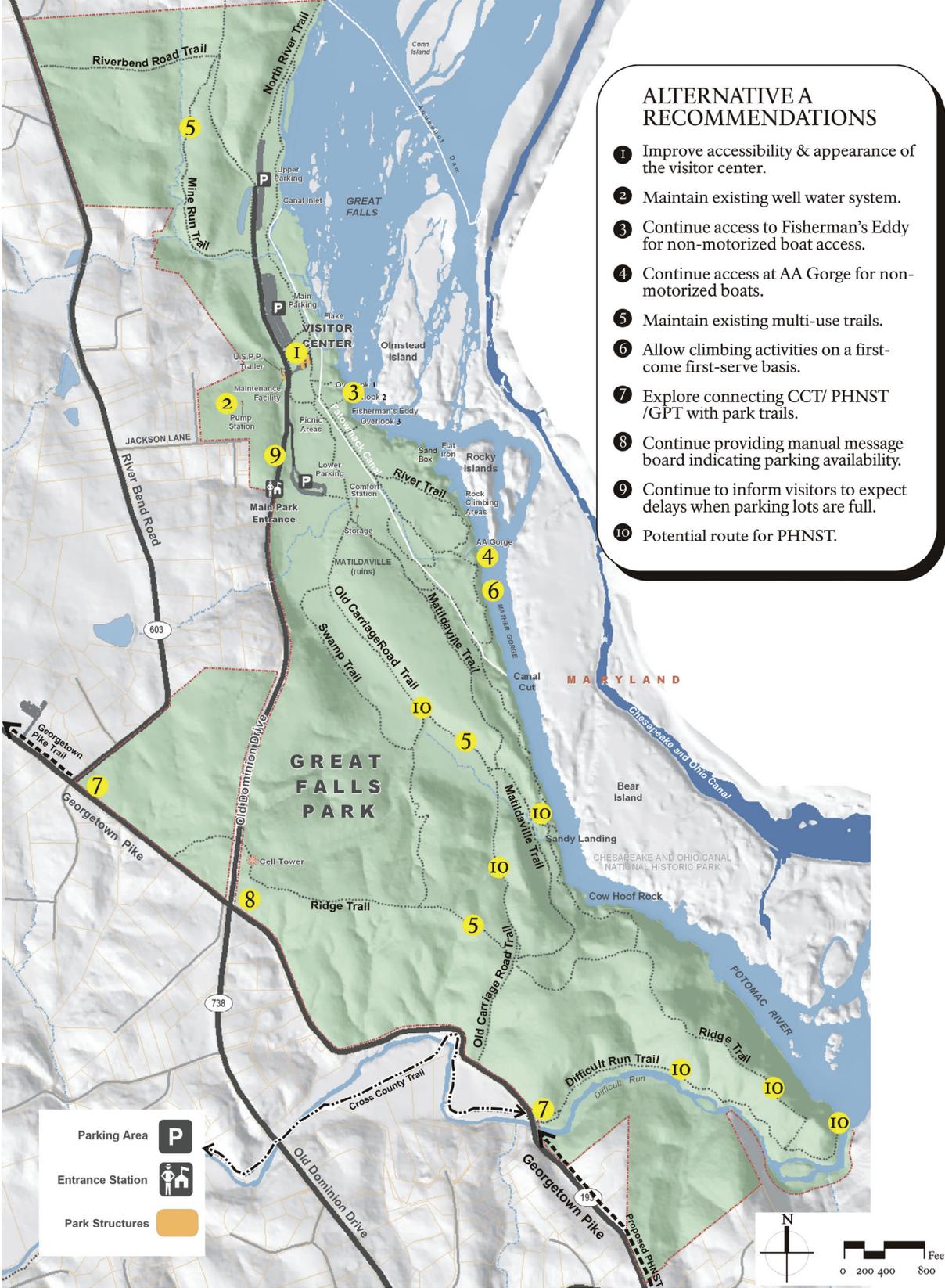


Figure ES.1: Alternative A (Continue Current Management Practices)

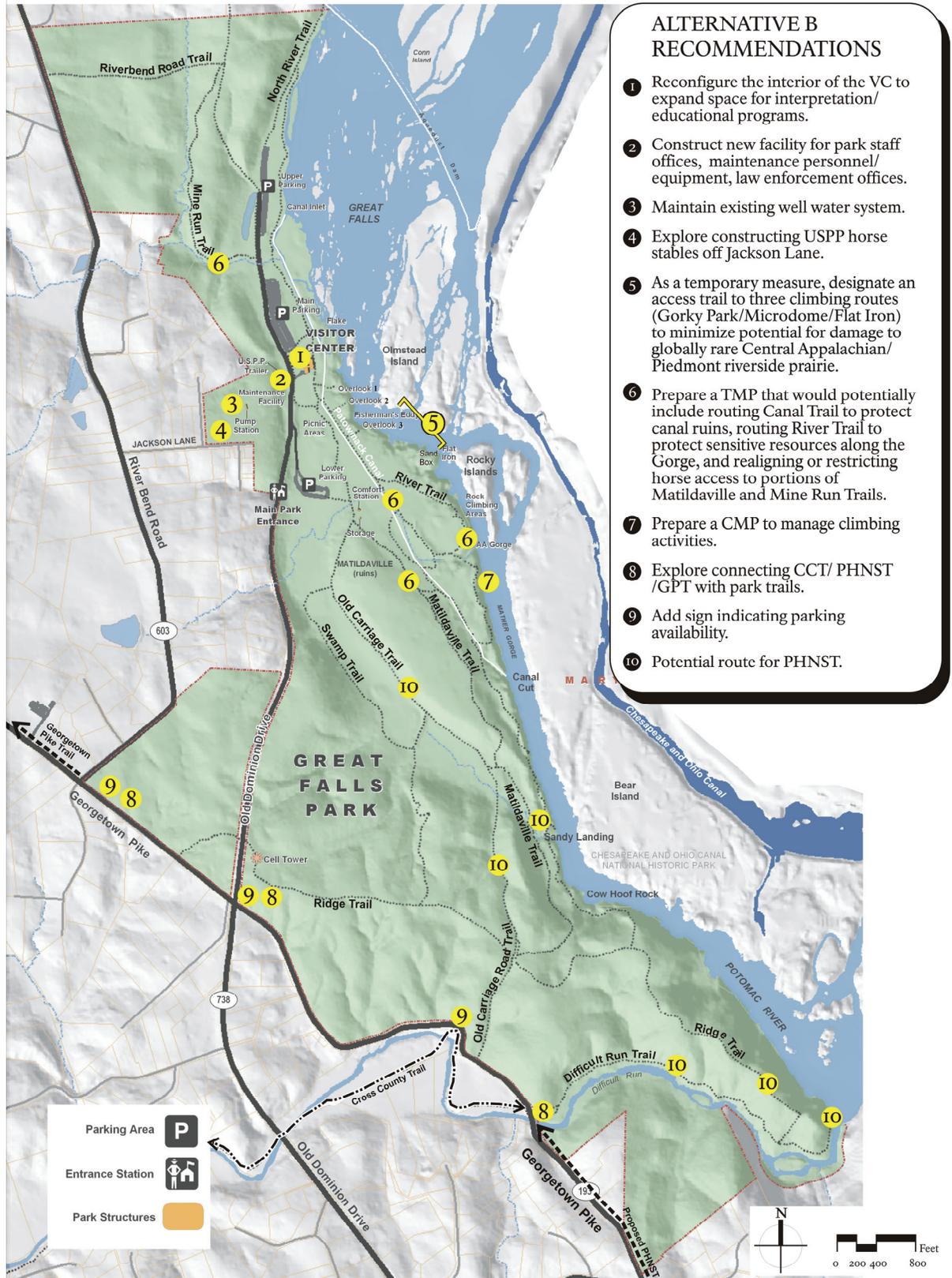


Figure ES.2: Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)

SUMMARY OF IMPACTS

Specific resources and values, called impact topics, were used to focus the planning process and the assessment of potential consequences of the alternatives. The criteria used to identify these impact topics include the following: resources cited in the establishing legislation for the park; resources critical to maintaining the significance and character of the park; resources recognized as important by laws or regulations; and values of concern to the public during scoping.

The resource areas that were assessed in this plan, and are potentially affected by the proposed alternatives, are summarized in Table ES.2: Summary of Impacts and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this document.

Table ES.2: Summary of Impacts

	Impacts of Alternative A: Continuation of Current Conditions	Impacts of Alternative B : Preferred Alternative
Land Use and Socio-Economic Conditions	No impacts on surrounding land uses.	Potential minor, short-term adverse impacts on surrounding uses from potential simultaneous construction activities within the park and construction of proposed regional trails outside the park.
	Land uses within the park function similar to existing conditions.	Land uses within the park function similar to existing conditions.
	Minimal visitation change anticipated in the short term. Over the long term, potential adverse impact from increase in visitation due to regional increase in population.	Minimal visitation change anticipated in the short-term. Over the long term, potential adverse impact from increase in visitation due to regional increase in population.
	Minor, short-term impacts on visitors due to renovation of VC and restrooms. However, the long-term impacts would be positive. Minor positive impact on visitor experience due to improved orientation and reduction of user conflicts resulting from improved trail signage.	Minor, short-term adverse impacts on visitors due to renovation of VC and restrooms, as well as demolition/construction activities at the maintenance facility. Positive impact on visitor experience due to: expansion of interpretive programs at the VC; and increased interpretation of Matildaville and other resources.
	No impacts on neighboring population and neighboring socio-economic conditions. No cumulative impacts on land use and socio-economic resources are anticipated.	Potential impacts on trail users would be determined during the preparation of the Trails Management Plan (TMP). In accordance with NPS Management Polices, the park may have to close specific areas on a temporary or permanent basis to prevent adverse impacts on natural and cultural resources. The TMP will provide guidance in determining unacceptable levels of impacts to park resources or values, and will identify which designated or undesignated trails will be modified. The park will work with the public to prepare the TMP and to develop measures that minimize any adverse impacts on trail use. Potential impacts on climbers would be determined during the preparation of the Climbing Management Plan (CMP). The park will work with the public to prepare the CMP and to develop measures that minimize any adverse impacts. Potential positive impact on emergency access due to reduced back-ups along Old Dominion Drive resulting from technological improvements at the entrance station, message boards and radio announcements.

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	Impacts of Alternative A: Continuation of Current Conditions	Impacts of Alternative B : Preferred Alternative
Cultural Resources	<p>Potential positive impact on cultural resources from development of an IRMP and adoption of BMPs.</p> <p>Additional protection from practices such as adding fences along trails adjacent to sensitive resources are anticipated to result in a positive impact.</p> <p>Positive impact due to elimination of undesignated trails in conflict areas.</p> <p>Potential adverse impact due to continued trail use for horseback riding in the vicinity of sensitive resources.</p>	<p>Potential positive impacts due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of a TMP that would eliminate undesignated trails in conflict areas, restrict new undesignated trails and explore recommend best practices such as adding fences along trails adjacent to sensitive resources; • Creation of an education component at the VC focused on responsible use of park resources for recreation; • Continued preservation of buried ruins; • Plan to stabilize/protect Matildaville; and, • Preparation of an IRMP and adoption of BMPs.
	<p>No change to existing viewsheds.</p> <p>No cumulative impacts on cultural resources are anticipated.</p>	<p>A positive impact due to preparation of a Viewshed Management Plan that would identify policies for preserving/restoring important scenic views.</p> <p>Potential positive impact at the park entrance due to new facility at location of maintenance building.</p> <p>No cumulative impacts on cultural resources are anticipated.</p>
Natural Environment	<p>No impacts on geophysical resources.</p> <p>The VC and two northern parking lots would continue to function in the 100-year floodplain.</p> <p>Existing trails would continue to experience erosion-related impacts from current uses.</p> <p>Potential positive impact on natural resources from development of an Integrated Resource Management Plan and Best Management Practices.</p> <p>Additional protection from practices such as adding fences along trails adjacent to sensitive resources are anticipated to result in a positive impact.</p> <p>Positive impact due to elimination of undesignated trails in conflict areas.</p> <p>Potential adverse impact due to continued trail use for horseback riding in the vicinity of sensitive resources.</p>	<p>Potential minor adverse impact on vegetation if stables and paddock area for USPP horses are located near Jackson Lane.</p> <p>Potential minor adverse if portions of the new operations facility are located within the 100-year floodplain. In accordance with the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act, the amount of impervious surface within the floodplain would be kept the same as current conditions.</p> <p>Potential positive impact due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of an education component at the VC focused to provide classes/ information about responsible use of park resources for recreation. • Enhanced resource interpretation. • Designating a trail to access area between Overlook #3 and the Sand Box climbing area, and issuance of an access pass on a trial basis. • Preparation of a CMP that would recommend recreational practices in areas where climbing occurs adjacent to sensitive resources. • Preparation of a TMP that would recommend elimination of undesignated trails, as well as redesign designated trails, in areas where these adversely impact sensitive resources. • Use of BMPs in the construction of the new replacement facility to reduce stormwater run-off and improve water quality.

	Impacts of Alternative A: Continuation of Current Conditions	Impacts of Alternative B : Preferred Alternative
Natural Environment (cont.)	Potential minor positive impact on localized air quality due to reduction in vehicular back-ups resulting from technological improvements at the entrance station.	Minor short-term adverse impacts on air quality due to demolition of maintenance facility and construction of new replacement facility. Potential minor positive impact on localized air quality due to reduction in vehicular back-ups resulting from technological improvements at the entrance station.
	Temporary, minor short-term adverse impact from noise due to renovation of the VC.	Minor short-term adverse impact from noise due to demolition of maintenance facility and construction of new replacement facility.
	Potential adverse cumulative impacts from additional traffic or usage due to population growth in the region.	Potential temporary cumulative impacts due to construction activities within the park and construction of trails segments outside the park for the CCT, PHNST, & GPT.
Transportation System	Continued minor adverse impact on visitor access when parking lots are full and entry into the park is suspended. Continued adverse impact on properties along Old Dominion Drive when traffic to park is backed up.	Continued minor adverse impact on visitor access when parking lots are full and entry into the park is suspended. Continued adverse impact on properties along Old Dominion Drive when traffic to park is backed up.
	Positive impact on visitor access to the park due to technological improvements at the entrance station.	Positive impact on visitor access to the park due to technological improvements at the entrance station.
	Potential adverse cumulative impacts from additional traffic due to population growth in the region.	Potential positive impact on vehicular access due to proposed dynamic message boards/radio announcement. Potential temporary cumulative impacts due to construction-related vehicles on area roadways and from additional traffic due to population growth in the region.
Site Utilities	Negligible impacts on water and sanitary sewer systems due to improvements to existing restrooms.	Negligible impacts on water and sanitary sewer systems due to improvements to existing restrooms. Positive impact on water supply from expanded water tank off Jackson Lane.

MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTIONS

This section defines all of the Management Prescriptions that would be applied to Great Falls Park under Alternative B (Preferred Alternative). The management prescriptions define the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, including the appropriate kinds and levels of management, use, and development that would be applicable to the park. Under Alternative B (Preferred Alternative), Great Falls Park would consist of four management prescription zones – Canal Zone, Cultural and Natural Zone, Mather Gorge Zone, and Developed Zone. The four management prescriptions are summarized in Table ES.3: Management Prescriptions under Alternative B, and illustrated on Figure 2.3 (Alternative B - Application of Management Prescriptions), on Page 2.27 in Chapter 2.

Table ES.3: Management Prescriptions under Alternative B

Management Prescription	Concept
Canal Zone	The Canal Zone would include those areas of Great Falls Park that contain remnants of the historic Patowmack Canal and related structural features, including Matildaville. This zone would be managed with the principal focus being the preservation of historic canal resources. Visitor use would be limited to staying on maintained trails and learning about canal features and ruins from brochures, printed materials, and exhibit panels.
Cultural and Natural Zone	The Cultural and Natural Zone would be those areas of the park that have any archeological, cultural, or ethnographic resources related to the park’s prehistoric and historic periods, as well as those areas of the park that have any natural resources related to the diversity of fauna and flora in the Great Falls of the Potomac region. This zone would be managed with the primary goal of preserving a variety of cultural/natural resources, some of which include unexcavated archeological sites, the Old Graveyard, the Native American Indian Stout site, wetland areas, wildlife habitats and areas containing rare plant communities. Visitor access and use would be regulated and mainly dependent upon cultural/natural resource preservation needs.
Mather Gorge Zone	This zone would be located within Mather Gorge of the Potomac River, including the adjacent cliffs and shoreline. The zone would be managed to mainly preserve important cultural and natural resources and to protect employees and visitors. The cliffs, Gorge, and river have inherent natural dangers and are popular areas for recreational users who must have special skills (i.e., white water kayaking, rafting, and technical rock climbing). Visitors would be restricted to designated special use areas and alerted to potentially hazardous conditions and dangerous locations.
Development Zone	This zone is where administrative, maintenance, parking, and visitor facilities for Great Falls Park would be located. The developments in this zone serve the needs of park management and park visitors (i.e., maintenance facility, park water system, and VC). These developments would be located to minimize impacts on cultural, ethnographic, and natural resources in the park and provide basic visitor services. The public use areas of this zone would receive high visitation on a seasonal basis and other areas within this zone would be restricted to official use only.

CONCLUSION

The park has selected Alternative B as its Preferred Alternative. This alternative is also identified as the environmentally preferred alternative. The environmentally preferred alternative is defined as “the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in Section 101 of National Environmental Policy Act. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances the historic, cultural, and natural resources in the area where the proposed action is to take place.”¹

By protecting the sensitive natural and cultural resources while also providing opportunities to recreate under Alternative B, the park would meet its responsibility as a “trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;” assure “for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;” attain “the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety;” and, preserve “important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage.”²

¹ Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning Council on Environmental Quality’s National Environmental Policy Act Regulations, 1981

² Ibid.