

Great Smoky Mountains  
National Park

Cades Cove Opportunities Plan

**Appendix C**  
**Visitor Experience Report**

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United States Department  
Of the Interior  
National Park Service



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>National Park Service Guidance .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Park Enabling Legislation .....	1
Park Purpose .....	2
Park History .....	2
Park Significance.....	2
NPS Management Policies.....	3
Interpretation and Information .....	5
Visitor Use .....	5
<b>Education and Interpretive Themes.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Park-wide Themes .....	5
Cades Cove Themes .....	6
Primary Theme .....	8
<b>Existing Conditions.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Introduction.....	8
Education/Interpretation Staff.....	9
Resource Education Budget .....	9
Visitor Contact Facilities .....	9
Education and Interpretation Programs.....	12
Visitor Contact Statistics .....	16
<b>Visitation Trends and Forecast .....</b>	<b>17</b>
Forecast.....	17
Peak Visitation Periods.....	17
<b>Visitor Experience .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Public Input: Visitor Experience.....	18
Visitor Experience and the Alternatives.....	20
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>List of Tables</b>	
Table 1: Visitor Contact Facilities.....	11
Table 2: Visitor Activities Grouped by Category.....	20
<b>List of Figures</b>	
Figure 1: Seasonal Visitation Trends.....	18



## Introduction

The purpose of the Visitor Experience Report is to define the primary interpretive themes for Cades Cove and use them to develop a visitor experience narrative for each of the alternatives.

The development of the themes and visitor experience narratives has included input from the public as well as reference to the Park enabling legislation, Park goals, the General Management Plan (GMP) and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Comprehensive Resource Education Plan. This report also references the visitation and education goals set by the Opportunities Plan. The report identifies opportunities and actions for National Park Service (NPS) staff.

## National Park Service Guidance

### ***Park Enabling Legislation***

Legislative references for the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park have been included in this report to place the Cades Cove study area in context with the overall Park.

*“When title to lands within the areas hereinafter referred to shall have been vested in the United States in fee simple there are established, dedicated, and set apart as public parks for the benefit and enjoyment of the people...the tract of land in the Great Smoky Mountains in the States of North Carolina and Tennessee being approximately seven hundred and four thousand acres, recommended by the Secretary of the Interior in his report of April 14, 1926, which area, or any part or parts thereof as may be accepted on behalf of the United States in accordance with the provisions hereof, shall be known as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Provided, That the United States shall not purchase by appropriation of public moneys any land within the aforesaid areas, but that such lands shall be secured by the United States only by public or private donation.” – 16 USC 403*

*“An area of four hundred thousand acres within the minimum boundaries of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, acquired one-half by the peoples and States of North Carolina and Tennessee, and the United States, and one-half by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial in memory of Laura Spelman Rockefeller, is established as a completed park for administration, protection, and development by the United States.” – 16 USC 403g*

## ***Park Purpose***

Great Smoky Mountains National Park was established “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”<sup>1</sup> This purpose was stated by Congress in the act of May 22, 1926 that provided for establishment of the Park.

The purposes of the Park are derived from the Organic Act of August 25, 1916 that stated that the fundamental purpose of national parks is “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife 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.”

## ***Park History***

The idea for creating a national park in the Smoky Mountains germinated in a time of rapid change in the Southern Appalachians.<sup>2</sup> Among other pressures, business people were buying up lumber rights in the mountains of east Tennessee and practices such as clear cutting were widespread.

Local interests, aware of the booming growth of the tourism industry around the then-recently created Yellowstone National Park, began to advocate for the establishment of a national park in the Smoky Mountains. During the early part of the century, the governors of Tennessee and North Carolina worked to amass land that would eventually become a national park.

In May 1926, Congress authorized the Secretary of Interior to accept lands for the Park. The National Park Service appointed J. Ross Eakin as the first superintendent of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In January 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, he took on the challenge of creating the Park.

## ***Park Significance***

Great Smoky Mountains National Park is distinguished by its extraordinary diversity and abundance of plants and animals, the beauty of its mountain terrain and waterways and the quality of its early settler culture remnants. The Park preserves these exceptionally diverse resources and the dynamic natural processes of which they are components and provides for their enjoyment while leaving them essentially unaltered.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Great Smoky Mountains National Park – General Management Plan

<sup>2</sup> The term “Great” was added as part of the enabling legislation.

<sup>3</sup> Great Smoky Mountains National Park – General Management Plan p. 5

The following statements of significance define the role of Great Smoky Mountains National Park as a preserve and refuge of national and global significance:<sup>4</sup>

1. Great Smoky Mountains National Park – designated as an International Biosphere Reserve in 1976 and a World Heritage Site in December 1983 -- are world renowned for their diversity of plant and animal species. The Park is an exemplary outdoor laboratory for the study of the relatively undisturbed native flora, fauna, physical environs and processes of the southern Appalachians.
2. The Great Smoky Mountains are the finest example of the ruggedness, magnitude, height and scenic grandeur of the southern Appalachian Mountains.
3. As the largest federally protected upland area east of the Mississippi River, the Park offers its visitors a refuge from the stresses of everyday life within easy driving distance of two-thirds of the American population.
4. Archeological evidence shows that humans have lived near and used the resources here for 11,000 to 12,000 years. Such human influences include prehistoric and non-recorded Native American groups, Cherokee Indians, early European settlements, traditional Southern Appalachian lifestyles, commercial logging, early tourism development and the park preservation movement and associated consequences (e.g., gateway community development, regional and local transportation issues, etc.).
5. Notable among the cultural resources is an outstanding collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century log structures, unparalleled anywhere in the United States.

### ***NPS Management Policies***

The National Park Service's interpretive and educational programs are intended to provide the public with memorable educational and recreational experiences and to foster the development of a personal stewardship ethic.<sup>5</sup>

An effective park program includes the following elements:

- ◆ Informational and orientation programs that provide visitors with easy access to the information they need to have a safe and enjoyable park experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Great Smoky Mountains National Park – Comprehensive Resource Education Plan p. 5

<sup>5</sup> 2001 NPS Management Policies: Chapter 7 – Interpretation and Education

- ◆ Interpretive programs that provide both on- and off-site presentations that encourage visitors to form their own connections to the resource. All successful interpretive programs achieve significance by linking specific tangible artifacts, buildings and places with ideas, events and concepts.
- ◆ Curriculum-based educational programs that develop a thorough understanding of a park's resources in individual, regional, national and global contexts and of the Park's place within the national park system. These programs link park themes to national standards and state curricula and involve educators in planning and development. These programs usually include pre-visit and post-visit materials; address different learning styles include an evaluation mechanism; and provide learning experiences linked directly to clear objectives.
- ◆ Interpretive media that provide visitors with relevant park information and facilitate in-depth understanding and stronger personal connection with park themes and resources.

NPS Management Policy (chapter 7, subsection 7.6) encourages park officials to consider the use of volunteers, concessionaires, cooperating associations, field schools and institutes, friends groups and private individuals to supplement park staff and funds. While these measures are not intended to replace or substitute for park programs, they can result in beneficial programs that otherwise would not be possible.

The Park has a successful volunteer program in place as well as cooperating association, friends group and field school. Many local residents have unique knowledge and understanding of Cades Cove and the Smoky Mountains and can, with proper training and guidance, contribute to innovative interpretive and educational programs.

Management objectives of the GMP for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park mirror the service-wide policies and seek to "manage the park in a manner consistent with the purposes of preservation, enjoyment and benefits to humankind through scientific study of its distinctive combination of natural and cultural resources."

The following management objectives are taken from the GMP and are pertinent to the development of educational and interpretation themes and programs for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Cades Cove:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Great Smoky Mountains General Management Plan p. 54  
Cades Cove Opportunities Plan

## ***Interpretation and Information***

- ◆ To demonstrate by our (National Park Service) actions our concern for park resources and the environment beyond and to show that low-impact activities can be practical and pleasant.
- ◆ To make all resource information available, in forms that benefit and provide enjoyment for each major public interest group including scientists, historians, drive-through visitors, interested amateur “specialists,” employees and neighbors.
- ◆ To adequately inform visitors and potential visitors of the opportunities and limitations presented by the park in advance of as well as during visits to it and of the means of using it safely and responsibly.
- To convey to visitors, neighbors and the nation a sense of the tangible and intangible values associated with the great diversity of the park’s life forms, the unique combination of extent and accessibility of its wilderness sanctuary and the extraordinary remnants of Indian and pioneer culture found in it.

## ***Visitor Use***

The Park’s GMP also provides guidance for managing visitor activities through the management objectives listed below:

- ◆ To make available opportunities for resource-related visitor activities that optimize the visitor’s appreciation of the park’s natural, cultural and aesthetic values.
- ◆ To promote visitor activities at appropriate locations, levels and times that minimize adverse impacts on park resources and the visitor experience.
- ◆ To evaluate and control, as necessary, backcountry use of the park—including hiking, water-based activities, camping and horse use—and its impact on the park’s resources, the quality of visitor experience and sanitation/health conditions.
- ◆ To minimize the potential for user conflicts that impairs the quality of the park experience (e.g., conflicts between hikers and horseback riders, between tubers and fishermen and scene viewers, and between bicyclists and drivers).

## **Education and Interpretive Themes**

### ***Park-wide Themes***

The three primary themes for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park are:

1. Diversity and Abundance
2. Continuum of Human Activity
3. Refuge of Scenic Beauty

These themes are the focus of both resource education and interpretive programs that the NPS staff and volunteers develop and implement.

Diversity and Abundance: Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a sanctuary for a remarkably diverse array of native plants and animals. In contrast to most of the Eastern United States, much of the Park is a relatively undisturbed ecosystem that includes species with endemic gene pools that provide opportunities for scientific research and education. In this way, these natural systems can be considered a barometer of change for the local, regional, national and global environments.

A Continuum of Human Activity: Through an array of preserved historic structures, cultural landscapes, cemeteries, archeological sites, museum objects and archival documents, Great Smoky Mountains National Park offers a unique opportunity to appreciate the panorama of Southern Appalachian history and culture. The Park is also the keeper of such intangible resources as folklore, literature and music.

These treasures help to tell the stories of Native American and Euro-American peoples and enable us to connect one generation to another. Human influences on the land now within the Park have changed greatly over time. Before Euro-American settlement, Native Americans used the mountains for subsistence. Later settlers cleared land for farms and to graze livestock. In the early 20th Century, timber companies logged about three-quarters of the land. By the time the Park was authorized in the 1920s, preservation and recreation values had superseded such exploitation and development. The changing land ethic embodied in the history of Great Smoky Mountains National Park is central to understanding not only local and regional history but also the growth of a national environmental awareness.

A Refuge of Scenic Beauty: The Park's 800 square miles of mountain ridges, deep-cleft valleys, unspoiled streams, endemic life forms and unique cultural components provide visitors with profound visual and sensory pleasure. The Park provides opportunities for increasingly urbanized people to experience sanctuary, wilderness, solitude and respite from the impacts of a modern technological society.

### ***Cades Cove Themes***

As the planning process moves into future phases, several themes will guide the development of education and interpretive programs. For this reason, the project

team sought to understand the relationship between these park-wide themes and Cades Cove itself.

Before 1819, Cades Cove was part of the Cherokee Nation.<sup>7</sup> The Cherokee tried to integrate European technologies and culture with their own. They built log and frame houses, attended school and, by 1820, had developed a written language. The 1830 U.S. census showed that more than 1,000 slaves were working on Cherokee plantations.

However, many Americans wanted to move all Indians west of the Mississippi River. The discovery of gold on Cherokee lands in Georgia and Andrew Jackson's rise to the Presidency in the 1830s led to Indian removal and the tragic "Trail of Tears."

By 1850, the American population in Cades Cove had reached 685. Settlers farmed the fertile limestone-based soils, shopped at local general stores and made frequent trips to nearby Tuckaleechee Cove, now Townsend, Tennessee. With five roads in and out of the Cove, the settlers were not as isolated as the Cove appears today.

The majority of Cades Cove residents supported the United States during the Civil War. Harassed by their confederate neighbors, Cove families welcomed the end of the war and a return to their peaceful rural lifestyle. Churches and schools provided a social and spiritual education to young and old alike. Sacred Harp singing schools attracted hundreds of outsiders each year, and many Cove residents sent their children to colleges outside the Cove.

But America was expanding westward, and the Cove's population never returned to its pre-war growth and numbers. In 1900, the logging industry brought jobs and income to Cove residents. Alcoa opened its first factories in nearby Maryville, Tennessee, and more and more people began to leave the area. Moreover, the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park continued the outward migration from the Cove that ended in 1999 when the last resident, Kermit Caughron, died.

This local character and history can be integrated with the park-wide themes cited above in several ways:

Diversity and Abundance: From the open Cove floor to Gregory Bald (elevation 4949 feet), the cove includes many native species and habitats. The Cove contains an array of springs, seeps, ponds, falls, sinkholes and wetlands associated with the

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<sup>7</sup> Cultural Resources Summary Report, Cades Cove Opportunities Plan 2003  
Cades Cove Opportunities Plan

karst geology that forms the Cove floor. Several plant and animal species are supported by the diversity in Cades Cove.

A Continuum of Human Activity: The evolving patterns of settlement are evident in Cades Cove. Early in the Park management of Cades Cove, decisions were made to preserve the best examples of 'pioneer log construction' and to preserve the appealing nature of the Cades Cove open areas or meadows. Visitors have often stated that the cabins, churches, barns, cemeteries and open areas are important to their experience of Cades Cove. These features are highly visible remnants of the settlement period.

A Refuge of Scenic Beauty: Cades Cove is a refuge of scenic beauty, offering some of the best scenic qualities to be found in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in one location. Mountain ridges rise above open meadows, log cabins nestle in amongst towering trees, and wildlife abounds in the Cove. Visitors have commented that they visit Cades Cove because it is a place to commune with nature and seek peace and solitude. Others say that traffic, congestion and pollution from automobiles detract from their experience. These comments demonstrate how, during non-peak visitation periods, Cades Cove provides visitors with a strong visual experience. In contrast, during peak periods, public comments indicate that this quality experience has diminished as visitation levels have steadily increased.

### ***Primary Theme***

No one interpretive theme necessarily has precedence over the other interpretive themes in Cades Cove. However, the NPS decided early on to retain evidence of the Cove's cultural history and today Cades Cove is managed as a historic district, in line with its listing in the National Register of Historic Places. As a historic district, interpretation of the cultural heritage of the Cove is important to the visitor experience. The elements of this historic district include the historic structures along the Loop Road, archeological resources and landscape characteristics that evoke both pre-park and Early NPS Park development periods. Treatment of these cultural elements must be balanced with the treatment of the Cove's equally important natural resources. This management balance needs to portray the historic scene as accurately as is practical.

## **Existing Conditions**

### ***Introduction***

Visitors flock to the Great Smoky Mountains and Cades Cove, sometimes in overwhelming numbers. The Cades Cove study area, for example, received more

than two million visitors in 2001. This translates to nearly 700,000 vehicles. In the national park system, 37 parks have had annual recreational visitation levels of more than two million people. If Cades Cove were a national park in its own right, these figures would place it among the top 10 percent of most visited parks in the country.

Therefore, appreciating the magnitude of visitation in Cades Cove is vital for assessing the existing resources and condition of facilities and services that are used to manage visitation. This assessment has focused on levels of NPS staff, budget, visitor contact facilities, and the educational programs and opportunities provided to visitors.

### ***Education/Interpretation Staff***

The work of resource education and interpretation fall on a relatively small number of resource education staff and volunteers. The Cove's high visitation levels and limited budget for resource education have combined to overwhelm the staff responsible for resource education. In fact, data indicate that only 1 of every 100 visitors to the Cove has any direct contact with resource education staff.

Even with a full complement of NPS resource education staff and resource education volunteers, it is common for visitors not to be exposed to resource education staff during their time in the Cove. In these cases, visitors seeking information may end up talking to law enforcement rangers, maintenance employees, concession workers or volunteer staff not associated with resource education. These employees may lack the interpretive skills of resource education staff but have local knowledge of the Cades Cove District that enables them to inform visitors about the Cove. Concession operators, for example, often provide information or direct visitors to Park employees.

### ***Resource Education Budget***

Current funding for entire Resource Education Division of the Park is approximately eight percent of the total Park budget. Consequently, officials in the resource education program have attempted to do more with less. While visitation to the Park and Cades Cove as well as operating expenses (labor, printing, utilities, etc.) continue to rise, funding both for the Park and resource education has not kept pace.

### ***Visitor Contact Facilities***

The primary focus for resource education and interpretation in Cades Cove is at the visitor contact points along the Loop Road. The existing "roving ranger" programs attempt to reach visitors at several places: the open air visitor contact shelter at the beginning of the Loop Road, at Cable Mill, at the Ranger Station in the "developed"

portion of the Cove across from the campground and in the campstore, amphitheater and horse concession areas. Table 1 outlines the functions and effectiveness of each of these contact areas.

**Table 1: Visitor Contact Facilities<sup>8</sup>**

Contact Area	Use	Existing Conditions (as of Plan preparation)
Open Air Visitor Contact Shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four interpretive displays on Cades Cove</li> <li>• Auto Tour booklet</li> <li>• Information provided by volunteers during peak visitation periods</li> </ul>	<p>Staff Rating: Facility is inadequate to meet visitor demand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visitors often do not see the facility due to the small size and location. The size and type of facility make it inappropriate for continuous staffing or placing interpretive material at the shelter.</li> <li>• There are no restrooms.</li> </ul>
Cades Cove Historic Structures and Cemeteries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 31 historic structures and several cemeteries that are open to visitors</li> <li>• Includes cabins, farm buildings, houses and churches.</li> </ul>	<p>Staff Rating: Structures and cemeteries are considered “very good” opportunities for interpretation and education but there is a need for more personal services interpretation such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ranger/VIP talks</li> <li>• Demonstrations</li> <li>• School programs</li> <li>• Publications</li> </ul>
Cable Mill Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource education</li> <li>• Demonstrations</li> <li>• Sales</li> <li>• Exhibits</li> <li>• Interpretive exhibit/outdoor museum</li> <li>• Book store with museum exhibits</li> <li>• Other historic structures</li> </ul>	<p>Staff Rating: Inadequate facility to meet visitor demand. The gristmill is considered an excellent opportunity for visitors to interact with staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staffed by Great Smoky Mountains Association (Association) employees, NPS volunteers and occasionally with Park resource education staff.</li> <li>• The level of staffing is inadequate to provide interpretation and education to Cades Cove visitors.</li> <li>• Operating grist mill is in need of continuous maintenance and repair.</li> <li>• This area provides limited visitor information and orientation services.</li> </ul>
Ranger Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate law enforcement activity within the Cades Cove District</li> </ul>	<p>Staff Rating: Not available</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The primary function of this facility is not to provide information. However, the facility is highly visible and visitors stop at or are directed to the ranger station for information.</li> <li>• Campground information and bulletin board provide limited visitor information.</li> </ul>
Amphitheater/ Campfire Circles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campground programs</li> </ul>	<p>Staff Rating: Excellent programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The facilities are in need of repair or</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Staff ratings taken from the GRSM Comprehensive Resource Education Plan and are not available for all contact areas.

Contact Area	Use	Existing Conditions (as of Plan preparation)
		replacement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programs are presented by National Park Rangers in the evenings</li> </ul>
Horse Concession Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rent horses (guided trail ride)</li> <li>Horse and carriage guided tour</li> <li>Hay ride</li> </ul>	Staff Rating: Not available <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The primary function of this facility is not to provide information.</li> <li>Provides an alternate means for the visitor to experience Cades Cove.</li> <li>Minimal concession provided interpretation is available on the trail ride, carriage ride and hayride. Some hayrides incorporate a "ranger led" program.</li> </ul>
Campstore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concession operated facility provides supplies, snacks, and drinks to campers and visitors. Includes bicycle rental</li> </ul>	Staff Rating: Not available <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The primary function of this facility is not to provide information.</li> <li>Bicycle rental provide an alternate means for the visitor to experience Cades cove.</li> <li>During peak visitation periods the store area may be overwhelmed making it difficult to provide information to visitors.</li> </ul>
Townsend Visitor Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visitor information</li> <li>Sales</li> <li>Bookstore</li> </ul>	Staff Rating: Not available <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides information about the Park and items for sale to the public.</li> <li>Operated by the Townsend Chamber of Commerce.</li> <li>Located outside the park on State Route 321 in Townsend.</li> <li>Bookstore operated by GRSMA staff.</li> </ul>

### ***Education and Interpretation Programs***

The Comprehensive Resource Education Plan identifies programs that are core to the overall education of Park visitors as well as shortcomings related to programs for Cades Cove (a "core" program provides a level of interpretation that is core to the mission of the Park). It is clear that the development of interpretation and educational programs cannot simply mimic the Park's overall themes.

Resource education programs can be categorized into *personal services* and *non-personal services*. The following sections describe these services.

Personal Services: Personal services include staffed information desks, guided walks, evening campground programs, cultural demonstrations and environmental education programs. These services are the single most effective communicator of the Park's compelling stories. Park rangers also provide personal services, although high visitation levels and limited resources have required the Park to seek out partners to share in this important role.

*Visitor Center:* The visitor center at Cable Mill is the primary point of personal services along the Loop Road and serves more than 400,000 people each year. A combination of NPS, Great Smoky Mountain Natural History Association (Association) staff and volunteers operate the center. The center provides current information, news and orientation and resource education services.

Although these services are very useful, several issues related to the Center require attention:

- ◆ Because Cable Mill is more than five miles from the beginning of the Loop Road, it is not an ideal location for a visitor center. Ideally, visitors should be educated about their experience before it happens, and this is not possible at Cable Mill.
- ◆ Uniformed resource education staff is only intermittently stationed at Cable Mill because of limited staff resources.
- ◆ The visitors' center lacks space for any expanded exhibition of artifacts.
- ◆ The Cable Mill area lacks basic communication facilities (to assist with reporting disabled vehicles or other incidents) and utilities.

*Ranger-Led Walks, Talks and Evening Programs:* GRSM's ranger-led programs are regularly scheduled in the most heavily visited and developed areas, including the Cable Mill visitor center and Cades Cove campground. The schedule varies by season and ranger/volunteer availability. Rangers present evening programs in the Cades Cove amphitheatre several nights a week during the summer and fall. These programs traditionally have been aimed at campers, many of whom make the programs part of their visits.

*Demonstrations:* Periodic resource education demonstrations enhance visitor enjoyment and understanding of the Park's cultural history. Demonstrations generally are connected with historic structures and landscapes, are performed in conjunction with special events, or are part of the seasonal resource education program. Special demonstrations attract visitors and generate interest in the Park's cultural story.

One core demonstration program in Cades Cove features milling from April through October at the grist mill at Cable Mill. The operation of mills is intriguing to most

visitors and, as such, the demonstration provides an essential visitor service. Ongoing support is needed to:

- ◆ Ensure accuracy in both costume and demonstration techniques.
- ◆ Develop standard operating procedures for mill operations.
- ◆ Develop standard operating procedures for costumed interpretation.
- ◆ Provide training to the Association-funded millers at Cable Mill on historical accuracy, as well as NPS mission, interpretive techniques, safety and so on.

*Special Events:* It is beneficial for the Park maintain good relationships with nearby communities. The core special events that GRSM staff coordinate or participate in help foster positive relations with local constituents. Several special events, including “Old Timers Days” and “Decoration Day,” take place in Cades Cove and help to foster positive relations with local residents. Other events such as weddings and church services showcase historic structures and promote the importance of maintaining historic structures.

*Informal Contacts:* Informal contacts, also known as "roving," allow park rangers and volunteers to interact effectively with large numbers of people throughout the entire Park. These contacts also allow staff to maintain a visible National Park Service presence and inform visitors about critical resource issues, safety, provide orientation and to give directions. The visibility of a uniformed person at locations such as parking lots and historic structures helps to reduce vandalism and theft. Although informal contacts only reach a small percentage of Park visitors, these contacts are generally made in highly visible areas.

Non-Personal Services and Media: Given current staffing levels, many visitors never have the opportunity to learn about the Cove from a resource education ranger or volunteer. This limited interaction between rangers and visitors highlights the importance of the “non-personal services program” for Cades Cove.

Non-personal services used by the Park include publications, indoor and outdoor exhibits, pre-trip planning tools, the Travelers Information System (TIS), and the Park's film and other audio/visual programs.

*Publications:* The Association publishes a self-guided auto tour of Cades Cove as one of five tours of the Park. The 31-page Cades Cove tour guide, while labeled as an auto-tour, is also useful for visitors who bike or walk the Loop Road. This book includes a map of the Cove and describes the cultural resources located along the Loop Road. It also provides a self-guided walking tour of Cable Mill. It is the most widely distributed material about Cades Cove and is available at the open air visitor contact shelter, Cable Mill bookstore, and other Park visitor centers.

The Association operates bookstores in Cades Cove, at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont and in the Townsend Visitor Center. The materials offered for sale are carefully selected to provide an educational value to the Park visitor.

The Association also publishes two newspapers: the *Smokies Guide* (a quarterly) and the *Smokies Trip Planner*, which provides information on Park and Cades Cove orientation, resource management/safety and seasonal programs. These documents are available in the Cove and in gateway communities.

*Exhibits:* Park exhibits follow many forms, including wayside exhibits, bulletin boards; visitor center/museum exhibits, self-guiding nature trails and historic structures. These exhibits provide an effective way to deliver consistent messages in un-staffed areas of the Park. They also reach a greater audience than can be reached with staffing because they are constantly available.

Some historic structures have interpretative exhibits associated with them. Others are unfurnished but are interpreted through publications. Collections of structures, such as the Cable Mill complex, provide the opportunity to interpret southern mountain culture in a more comprehensive manner, either through self-guided tours or through contact with staff or volunteers.

Four wayside exhibits providing interpretative information are located at the open air shelter, John Oliver cabin, the Cades Cove overlook and at Cable Mill. A 1994 plan calls for enhanced porcelain enamel exhibits to be installed to replace these and other interpretive exhibits in the park.

A one-mile walking trail is located off the Loop Road. The Association has published a companion brochure that is available at nine stations along the trail. The brochure explains the 1820-30 settlement era and focuses on the relationship between plants in the Cove and their historic use such as building cabins and making jam from berries.

Bulletin boards are located at visitor comfort stations in the picnic area, and campground. They also are located at the beginning of the Loop Road, Cable Mill Visitor Center and at the ranger station. They are designed to provide after-hours information, safety messages, and other general park information.

*Pre-trip Planning Tools:* The Park's website ([www.nps.gov/grsm](http://www.nps.gov/grsm)) contains information about recreational opportunities, critical resource issues and orientation and provides an opportunity for the public to contact Park staff via e-mail. The site has links to tourist-related services in gateway communities and information about

Park partners. The site is central to the orientation, education and scientific missions of the Park and is one of the most visited in the entire park system (according to [www.nps.gov/statistics](http://www.nps.gov/statistics)).

A website for the Cades Cove Opportunities Plan ([www.cadescoveopp.com](http://www.cadescoveopp.com)), provides background on the planning process. This site has information about the recent high levels of visitation and traffic and the effect these have had on visitor experience. The site has provided the user an opportunity to comment on the planning process for Cades Cove including issues, goals and objectives, and the range of alternatives developed for the long range management of the Cove.

*Audiovisual Media:* Audiovisual media (AV media) have proven to be critically important to the Park's resource education program. However, no current facility in Cades Cove is suitable for this type of program. The Park's Comprehensive Resource Management Plan indicates that AV media could be an important component of any enhanced visitor center for Cades Cove and would maximize the visitors understanding of the Cove story.

*Travelers Information System (TIS):* The Traveler Information System broadcasts information on facilities, hazards and road conditions via AM radio (1610). The broadcast can be heard at park entrances, along the Foothills Parkway and in other heavily used areas. However, the broadcast system is in poor condition and the equipment is outdated.

Formal Environmental Education: The "Parks as Classrooms" initiative functions as an umbrella for the Park's environmental education programs (both day use and residential). The primary audience for this initiative is school groups from kindergarten through 8th grade. Several Parks as Classroom components are offered in Cades Cove, including a kindergarten/1st grade component focused on animals, 2nd grade component on cultural resources, 6th grade bike or hayride component on natural resources and a 7th grade component focused on wildlife and exotics.

### **Visitor Contact Statistics**

A 1996 survey by the Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho addressed both summer and fall visitation and helped to define a Great Smoky Mountains National Park visitor profile. The following are key data provided by the survey.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A total of 1,191 questionnaires were distributed and 919 were returned, for an overall response rate of 77%.

The survey found that almost one in four Park visitors came from Tennessee and North Carolina, while two percent were from outside the United States. More than half (52%) of Park visitors visited Cades Cove, making it the most popular destination, followed by the Sugarlands Visitor Center (36%) and Newfound Gap (35%).

In the five years preceding the survey, 65% of respondents were repeat summer visitors and 79% were fall visitors, while almost half of the summer visitors (49%) stayed in the area from two to four days.

## **Visitation Trends and Forecast**

Visitation to Cades Cove fluctuates from year to year. Since the adoption of the GMP, annual visitation in the Cove has increased from 1.2 million in 1982 to more than 2.1 million in 2001, or an average increase of almost 47,000 people each year over 19 years. This equates to an increase of 4 percent per year.

Visitation has changed in many dramatic ways since 1982. For example, in 1988, visitation dropped nearly 19 percent after growing steadily during the previous six years. Three years later, visitation began to increase modestly, only to drop off again in 1994 by nearly 6 percent. From 1995 through 1999, visitation again grew modestly, only to drop off in 2000 and 2001.

Recent national events, such as the terrorist attacks in 2001, have changed national travel patterns and preferences. More Americans are traveling by automobile. This trend is reflected in Cades Cove, where visitation has again increased since 2001 and where it is expected to continue to increase.

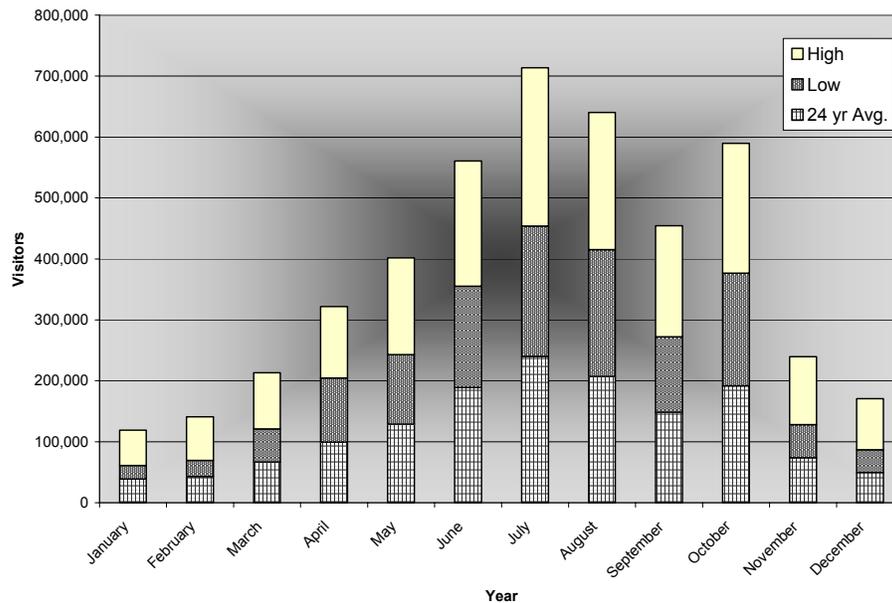
### ***Forecast***

Forecasts were developed for the years 2006, 2012 and 2022, based on the data from 1979 through 2002. From these data, one can conclude that the overall number of visitors is only one factor that merits consideration. A second is related when people visit.

### ***Peak Visitation Periods***

Peak visitation periods were identified from the transportation, traffic and visitor summary report of the Cades Cove Opportunities Plan. This report concluded that the majority of Cades Cove visitors arrive during the summer and fall. Figure 2 illustrates this seasonal pattern, based on 24 years of data:

### **Figure 1: Seasonal Visitation Trends**



Over the ten-year period from 1990 to 2000, visitation to the park as a whole grew significantly during the off-peak months of November through March. In 1990, approximately 1.51 million visitors came to the Park during these winter months. By 2000, this number had grown to over 2.36 million visitors. This trend is likely to continue, in the Cove and in the Park.

## Visitor Experience

### *Public Input: Visitor Experience*

Each stage of the Opportunities Plan process provided for extensive public input. The comments received were grouped into categories including those of visitation, resources, resource education and facilities/safety. The range of comments reflects the range of visitor experiences currently found in the Cove. Visitors expect to encounter other visitors in visitor use areas such as the developed area and Cable Mill complex. However, there are also opportunities for solitude if the visitor leaves behind the Loop Road and popular attractions.

The number of comments related to resource education in Cades Cove was relatively small in comparison to the total comments received. Nevertheless, the comments that were received offered valuable suggestions.

Many people who commented about congestion or traffic suggested that visitor education should play a role in resolving this issue. Another frequent comment was

that little or no resource education is provided in the Cove; therefore, many visitors touring the Loop Road do not know what they are seeing. Other people indicated that visitors should be educated on the rules for touring the Loop Road. Some suggested that a ranger notify each motorist entering the Cove that anyone who parks in the road to view wildlife will be ticketed.

These and other public comments indicate that many issues could be resolved by increasing the amount of contact that visitors have with rangers. Not only do many visitors lack information about the Cove's resources, better law enforcement is needed to educate visitors about the rules of the road and to break up "wildlife jams."

The visitor contact station was discussed in public meetings and comment forms. It was noted that the facility was too small, un-staffed and that many visitors drive by it not even knowing it is there. Other people suggested that artifacts collected from settlement-era residents should be displayed at a museum.

Other comments related to visitor experience or visitation topics reflected that users prefer to view the Cove at their own pace. Under current conditions in Cades Cove that pace is often dictated by the slowest driver in the line of vehicles ahead of them. Most of the people who provided input use a private vehicle to travel along the Loop Road, as well as Sparks and Hyatt Lane. Many people expressed concern that future management strategies would disrupt their ability to continue this pattern.

Other visitor activities cited in comment forms included viewing wildlife, visiting cabins, churches and cemeteries, and enjoying the scenic beauty of the valley and surrounding mountains. Many people like to partake in active recreation such as bicycling, walking the Loop Road, and picnicking (either in the picnic area or along the Loop Road). Public comments collected during the planning process indicated that people really enjoy periods when vehicle traffic is not allowed on the Loop Road, and many people asked for more of these opportunities.

Access for descendants of settlers was another issue raised at the public scoping meetings. Many of these descendants live in nearby communities and currently enjoy unrestricted access to family home and grave sites. In addition, special events including "Decoration Day" and "Old Timers" weekend recognize past residents.

Several people indicated that it is important to maintain access to family cemeteries and home sites as well as to preserve and protect these sites from overuse. Some suggested that a partnership be formed between descendant organizations and the NPS to preserve and restore these resources. Some descendants voiced concern that a reservation system or alternative transportation system would disrupt their access.

The public comments were used during the internal scoping process to identify visitor activities. These activities were categorized as appropriate, illegal or inappropriate. Determination of illegal activities was based upon the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), which provides a legal basis for managing visitor activities on federal lands (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Visitor Activities Grouped by Category**

<b>Appropriate Visitor Activities</b>	<b>Illegal Visitor Activities</b>	<b>Inappropriate Visitor Activities</b>
Visiting historic structures/sites	Harassing/feeding wildlife	Organized sports
Education	Plant/animal poaching	Creating unauthorized trails
Ranger led programs	Parking in fields	
Viewing wildlife	Underage driving	
Enjoying scenic beauty	Drunk driving	
Picnicking	Obstructing traffic	
Bicycling	Using firearms	
Camping	Vandalism of historic structures	
Day and back country hiking	Graffiti/Littering	
Horseback riding	Urinating/defecating outside or within historic structures	
Fishing		
Permitted special events		
Descendant access and events		
Hayrides		

***Visitor Experience and the Alternatives***

Each of the action alternatives developed for the Opportunities Plan would affect how visitors experience the Cove and present opportunities for visitor education and interpretive exhibits.

As the planning process moved forward, two goals related to the visitation or visitor experience and resource education were developed to guide the process.<sup>10</sup>

### Visitor Experience Goal Statement

Provide exceptional visitor experiences that respect the natural and cultural resources of Cades Cove.

#### *Objectives:*

1. Define appropriate visitor activities and recreational opportunities:
  - ◆ Provide quality visitor facilities and services.
  - ◆ Evaluate commercial visitor services to determine the appropriate level and type of services to meet visitor need.
  - ◆ Develop resource education opportunities to provide information, orientation, and education.
  
2. Provide information to the public prior to arrival, including:
  - ◆ Transportation options and information (estimated travel times)
  - ◆ Rules and regulations
  - ◆ Safety
  - ◆ Leave no trace
  - ◆ Wildlife
  - ◆ Maintenance activities (road and facility closures)
  - ◆ Air quality information
  
3. Provide transportation choices that accommodate appropriate visitor activities while ensuring resource protection.

### Education Goal Statement

Educate the public about resources in order to foster greater enjoyment, understanding, appreciation, and protection of natural and cultural resources within Cades Cove.

#### *Objectives:*

1. Ensure that resource education programs reflect the Park's three major education themes of biodiversity, refuge of scenic beauty and continuum of human activity, through providing a wide variety of educational

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<sup>10</sup> Other goals and objectives relating to Resources and Facilities and Safety were also developed and helped to guide the process.

opportunities, including:

- ◆ Media/publications
- ◆ Wayside
- ◆ Public programs
- ◆ Person-to-person contact
- ◆ Curriculum-based school programs

2. Create and maintain relationships with civic and community groups.

Given these goals and objectives, how will the visitor experience change in Cades Cove? This is an important question, for defining a desired future that will protect resources and maintain a quality visitor experience is central to the successful implementation of any management plan.

To understand what the visitor experience might be in the future, a narrative of the possible future under each alternative was developed:

***Alternative One: No Action***

Visitors would continue to have unrestricted access to the Loop Road in private vehicles and the pace of their visit may be dictated by others. Existing programs and facilities would continue to operate as they are today. Peak visitation periods in Cades Cove would continue to place the greatest amount of strain on natural and cultural resources, visitor facilities and staff.

The number of visitors to Cades Cove can be expected to increase. These changes can be discerned by reviewing the forecast visitation for June, July and August. In 2002, visitation was 615,000 (including 222,000 vehicles) during these months. In 2007, these figures are expected to increase to 807,000 and 291,000 vehicles, or an increase of 30 percent. The visitation forecast for these same months in 2022 show a 55 percent increase to 954,000 visitors and 344,000 vehicles. This level of visitation would further degrade the visitor experience and the natural and cultural resources of the Cove.

NPS resources for resource education, visitor management, resource protection and maintenance/preservation of facilities and natural and cultural are having difficulty meeting the challenges of current visitation levels. Logically, if no action is taken and visitation continues to increase, Cove resources and the visitor experience of those resources will be affected.

### ***Alternative Two: Communication***

Under Alternative Two, the visitor would experience little change in how they access and experience Cades Cove. Unrestricted private vehicle access would continue with the primary difference between Alternatives One and Two being the addition of a traffic monitoring system for Laurel Creek Road and the Loop Road. A series of variable message signs and the Park's website would post traffic information. As visitors become more aware of travel times in the Cove, they may choose to delay their trip or elect not to visit.<sup>11</sup>

The Alternative also includes the addition a visitor center at the beginning of the Loop Road. Visitors would be able to get information, including rules for driving, information about wildlife, have access to restrooms at the visitor center and get copies of Cove maps and program listings.

### ***Alternative Three: Reservation System***

In Alternative Three, visitors to Cades Cove from November to June would have unrestricted private vehicle access to the Cove (with the exception of established bicycle/pedestrian periods) and all public activities in the Cove would continue as they are today.

During peak visitation periods, a reservation system would be established to manage private automobile trips on the Loop Road within levels that can be supported by the resource and which provide an acceptable level of visitor service.<sup>12</sup> This management would seek to more evenly distribute visitation throughout the days of the week and hours of the day providing a level predictability currently unavailable. Reservations would be easy to obtain by calling an NPS reservation line, requesting one online, or making one at visitors centers and hotels in the gateway communities. Some reservations would be reserved for same day distribution, allowing for last-minute trips.

The variable message signs outside the Park and along the entry roads would notify visitors without a reservation that a reservation is required. Visitors who have not obtained a reservation would be able to access the Cove by bicycle or on foot and would be able to use facilities the developed area (picnic area, horse concession, visitor center etc.).

Alternative Three would include a moderately-sized (5,000-square foot) visitor center

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<sup>11</sup> Alternatives Three, Four and Five also include the communications program

<sup>12</sup> Capacity studies will be done to provide the basis for management levels.

to increase the opportunity for the public to learn about the Cove and talk to rangers and other staff. Exhibits and interpretive displays also would be available. Other visitor comforts at the visitor center would include a bookstore and restrooms.

***Alternative Four: Reservation System with Voluntary Transit System***

Alternative Four would provide the same elements and visitor experience as Alternative Three with the addition of a transit shuttle. During non-peak visitation periods, visitors would continue to access Cades Cove in their private vehicle, on bicycle, or by walking the Loop Road.

At minimum, the shuttle would operate during peak periods when the reservation system was in effect, providing access to those visitors unable to get a reservation or who prefer to take the shuttle. The shuttle would also accommodate hikers and bicyclists and their equipment. With frequent service and stops at key attractions and trail heads, the shuttle would offer the visitor the ability to travel at their own pace and enjoy their own desired activities.

An advantage of this alternative is that visitors would have a greater opportunity to interact with rangers and volunteers, view exhibits related to the Cove, and get information specific to Cades Cove. The shuttle offers the potential of ranger/VIP-led tours and/or personal "headset" tours.

Visitors with campsites in the Cove would access the campground with their private vehicles and would have access to the Loop Road shuttle service as a part of their campsite reservation.

***Alternative Five: Mandatory Transit System***

In Alternative Five, during peak season the shuttle system described for Alternative Four would be the only motor vehicle access to the Loop Road. With more riders under this alternative, the frequency of service would likely increase to provide even greater visitor flexibility. During non-peak periods, visitors would have unrestricted access to the Loop Road in their private vehicles.

Visitor centers both in Cades Cove and the gateway communities would provide expanded ranger and VIP contact and more amenities than under previous alternatives. Amenities could include space for displaying artifacts specific to Cades Cove, expanded exhibits and interpretive displays, snack shop service, bookstore, and restroom facilities.

## Conclusion

Cades Cove is a part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and, as such, the development of plans and programs related to visitation and education must be consistent with those of the park as a whole. Therefore, this Visitor Experience report recognizes the NPS's guidance through legislation and General Management Plan policy as the basis for the visitor experience recommendations in Cades Cove.

This visitor experience report only begins to describe the desired visitor experience for Cades Cove. Capacity studies are used to describe desired range of visitor experiences and resource conditions. As this planning process progresses a range of visitor experiences and resource conditions, and management zoning to accommodate this range will be more fully described.

The development of the primary interpretive themes for Cades Cove has focused on managing the Cove as a cultural district. The Cades Cove Opportunities Plan recognizes that this must be undertaken in context and in coordination with the overall themes for the GRSM. It also recognizes that the Cove is a unique area within the Park and the historic, cultural and natural resources require special treatment. For example, the historical scene should be portrayed as accurately as practical while representing the best of natural and cultural management practices.

Existing staff, budget, and facilities related to visitor management in Cades Cove are inadequate in relation to the current and forecasted levels of visitation. When no more than 1 out of every 100 visitors has contact with a park ranger, it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide even basic educational materials to visitors. Clearly, a need exists for additional resource education staff and needed facilities and/or other innovative means to reach the maximum number of visitors.

Each of the alternatives, including the no-action alternative, would affect visitation and the visitor experience. However, existing visitor activities (wildlife viewing, stopping at historic structures, walking, biking, lingering by a stream, and so on) would continue to be available, although the means of accessing these activities may change. These means would be provided in a manner that would be convenient, user friendly and offer the maximum flexibility to visitors.

Specifically, Alternative Two would provide visitors with information about the Cove via telephone, the internet and variable message signs. The central aim of Alternative Three, meanwhile, would be to maintain a balance between the number of visitors and the capacity of the Cove through the use of a reservation system. The fourth and fifth alternatives would establish alternative transportation system that would be

voluntary (Alternative Four) or required (Alternative Five) for visitors to access the Cove.

In all cases, opportunities exist for improving the visitor experience. These include increasing the number of people involved in resource education, improving the interpretive materials around the Cove, managing motor vehicle congestion, providing exhibit materials at the visitor centers, and providing additional educational programs. The implementation of any of the alternatives will require continued maintenance of existing programs and facilities and the development of new partnerships to achieve these project goals.

## References

Denver Service Center, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. General Management Plan Great Smoky Mountains National Park North Carolina – Tennessee, 1982. Overall management plan for the Park. Focus for this report was on visitor use and services including information and interpretation, recreational activities and concession services.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Division of Resource Education – Comprehensive Resource Education Plan. January, 2001. This plan provides policy and program direction for resource education and interpretive programs for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It also provides similar direction for the Cades Cove district within the Park.

Public Use Statistics – [www2.nps.gov/stats](http://www2.nps.gov/stats). Historical statistics on visitation for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park

10-157 Reporting – [www2.nps.gov/mpur/index.cfm](http://www2.nps.gov/mpur/index.cfm). Monthly public use report and special use data for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.