

Buffalo



N a t i o n a l R i v e r • A r k a n s a s

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS NEWSLETTER



Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Last summer we began the public involvement process for our general management plan so you could share with us your ideas and concerns about the future of Buffalo National River. Many of you participated in one of the seven open houses that were held across the area, read our spring newsletter, returned a comment card, or provided thoughts and suggestions through the internet. Hundreds of you expressed very specific ideas and concerns about the park and its future. I would like to thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to participate. Your input will be critical in helping the National Park Service develop a long-term plan for the preservation and management of Buffalo National River.

This newsletter summarizes what we heard from you. Please read what people are thinking and saying about Buffalo National River. These comments provide important insight about what park visitors, neighbors, other agencies, and organizations want to see from this general management planning process. For information on upcoming opportunities for public involvement, take a look at the enclosed schedule. This is your park and your opportunity to help shape the future. Thank you for being a part of the planning process!

Sincerely,

Kevin G. Cheri

Kevin H. Cheri

Superintendent

THE PARK'S PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT EFFORT

During the past year, the planning team has met with park employees, members of the public, a variety of agencies, and partner organizations to explore the issues, concerns, and ideas that people have about Buffalo National River and its future. The planning team has appreciated hearing your thoughts, ideas, hopes, and concerns for the future of the river.

Approximately 1,000 newsletters with comment forms were distributed to the public, and the overall turnout at the seven public open houses was tremendous. We held meetings at Springdale, Marshall, Jasper, Mountain Home, Yellville, Harrison, and Little Rock from July 8 to July 14, 2009. A total of 287 people signed in at these meetings and nearly 800 comments were recorded. In addition, the park received close to 600 responses in the form of letters, comment forms, and electronic messages. Although the space in this newsletter cannot cover every comment received, the following is a summary of the most commonly held ideas and most frequently heard concerns and issues.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM YOU

What characteristics of Buffalo National River are special to you and why?

We asked people to share with the planning team those special values about Buffalo National River that are most important to them. It is not surprising that most people commented on the natural beauty of the bluffs, the mountains, and the free-flowing river. Tranquility, peacefulness, and a sense that the park is a pristine wilderness were mentioned often, along with the ability to observe wildlife in a natural setting. The overall lack of development on and around the river is a major draw for most visitors.

Not only was the natural environment important to people, but the cultural resources in the park were also important. A sense of history, access to old homesteads,

and the ability to see how former inhabitants carved out an existence from a rugged environment were identified as an integral part of the park experience.

The abundant opportunities for recreation in the park were mentioned often as a special value of the park. Commenters noted how much they enjoy hiking, horse-back riding, canoeing, camping, caving, fishing, and climbing. The sheer number of recreational opportunities was frequently mentioned as important as well.

Other special characteristics of the park that were often mentioned included the natural sounds and scenery, the clean air, the freedom to explore by water or land, and a place to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

What concerns do you have about Buffalo National River that you believe the general management plan should address?

There is great concern about the overdevelopment of not only the park, but also the surrounding and adjacent lands. Many people are concerned with the loss of the scenic quality in the park as well as the ability to experience solitude on the river. The primitive nature of the park was mentioned repeatedly as the reason why the park is special, yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to experience this aspect due to development in the areas



surrounding the park. Commenters suggested that the Park Service and surrounding landowners work together to protect the area's natural and scenic quality, including the clear, clean water of the river.

Many commenters felt that the existing infrastructure was adequate to support future visitor use; however, the feeling that there should be no further development was not unanimous. Many people would like to see better campsites, especially horse campsites, in the park, as well as more visitor support facilities such as bathrooms, boat ramps, and RV/camper hook-ups. Commenters were divided about paving some of the roads in the park. Some would like to see the roads paved because it would improve access to certain parts of the park, reduce wear and tear on vehicles, and possibly cut down on sedimentation in the river. Others would not like to see the roads paved for various reasons. People expressed concerns that paved roads would increase vehicle speeds and reduce safety in the park. Some feared that the improved access

A Note about Commercial Services

Last summer we heard from several of you about commercial services. The National Park Service provides commercial visitor services that are necessary and appropriate for public use and enjoyment. At Buffalo National River (and all national park units), concession operations must be consistent, to the highest practicable degree, with the preservation and conservation of park resources and values. These operations must also demonstrate sound environmental management and stewardship.

The park's current management plans no longer provide adequate guidance for long-term decisions about commercial services. As this planning effort moves forward, the team will look at what services are being provided now and how they help achieve the park's purpose. The planning team will also consider whether other types of services may be necessary or appropriate to provide for future visitor use and enjoyment.

Currently, all of the commercial services at the park are focused on river use activities. Is there a place at the park for land-based services, such as guided horse rides, caving trips, or backcountry hiking? What are your thoughts? If you have ideas you would like to share about current or future visitor services, commercial or otherwise, please contact us at BUFF_Superintendent@nps.gov.



to certain parts of the park may promote further damage to sensitive resources and increase the number of people in the park. Many people wanted to make sure that in 20 years the park looks and feels the same way it does now, so that their children and grandchildren can enjoy this unique resource.

Another topic of much discussion was access to recreational opportunities in the park. Commenters mentioned many forms of recreation that could benefit from an increase in access to the park. Rock climbers, horseback riders, cavers, and ATV users would like to have more opportunities to experience the park. Climbers would like to see more routes available; horseback riders would like to see better parking lots (to accommodate trailers) and more and better horse camping opportunities; cavers would like to see more guided tours of the caves and more caves open to private exploration. Despite a prohibition on ATV use, ATV users want to see separate trails for their use. Some commenters also stated that there is a need for balance between private and commercial use on the river and that one should not be favored over the other. Some suggested avoiding further restrictions on recreational use. However, others stated that a reservation or permit system might be needed in the future to preserve the recreational experience.

Horseback riders mentioned on several occasions that they do not want to see their access taken away. A common comment was that horses provide access to the backcountry for those who might not otherwise be able to enjoy the experience (e.g., those with disabilities). Horseback riding was also perceived to be a historical use in the park that contributes to the local economy. Many also stated that horseback riding provides access to areas that can best be seen and enjoyed from horseback.

Several issues were raised about how the park is used and what kinds of activities are appropriate or compatible. The trails in the park accommodate multiple uses; this was seen as leading to conflicts between different user groups. Both horseback riders and hikers stated that developing separate trails for the different users would lead to a better experience for both. Both groups also mentioned that if this were to occur, better signage and improved trail maintenance would be needed for future management (it was suggested several times that local groups would be willing to help with trail maintenance). Although many commenters wanted separate trails for each activity, there were also many commenters who wanted to see more multiuse trails running the length of the river. This was seen as a way to cut down on the number of social trails that were said to be a problem in the park (especially in the Ponca Wilderness). Many comments also reflected the desire for either allowing dogs on park trails or developing trails specifically for dog walking. Different types of use were associated with different types of impacts. Hikers and campers were perceived to add to the litter problem in the park and to cause problems associated with noise (especially in the campgrounds). Horseback riders were perceived to cause damage to the trails (erosion) and to contribute to a decline in the quality of the water in the park and the trails (horse manure). Motor boaters were perceived to take away from the solitude of other visitors and to decrease the water quality (oil in the water). The number of boats (motorized and nonmotorized) on the river was mentioned as a concern. Too many boats on the river at one time was said to lead

to crowded conditions, not only on the river and gravel bars, but also at launch sites. There was the mention of specific conflicts in the park, such as the conflict between visitors trying to enjoy a peaceful experience and those visitors with “boom boxes,” as well as visitors wanting a fun family experience running into conflict with those there to “party” (with the associated alcohol-related behaviors).

Some solutions to the problem of competing uses were suggested:

- Provide trail maps to reduce use of social trails and to help less experienced users
- Provide more enforcement of current rules
- Limit use; require permits; establish quotas
- Limit group size (smaller groups would reduce crowding)
- Require people to carry out what they carry in (e.g., more education about LeaveNoTrace practices)
- Provide more education about use in the park at nonpeak times

Many commenters said that they do not have any issues with other users and that they have never had a conflict in the park.

Protection of the park’s cultural resources is a priority for many commenters. There is a wealth of cultural history in the park that many feel needs further protection and interpretation. Homesteads, farmsteads, and historic cemeteries were identified as places that should be preserved—it is felt by many that these sites are important



Steel Creek Horse Camp Environmental Assessment Update

In late 2007, Buffalo National River staff began a process to explore potential changes to the management and design of the Steel Creek horse camp. Four open houses were held, attended by a total of 104 individuals. The Park Service received 90 written comments from those who attended the open houses and those who submitted comments in other ways. Those comments have been recorded and analyzed; however, due to delays in developing the Steel Creek Environmental Assessment (EA), and the start-up of the general management plan, plans for Steel Creek will be included in the general management plan. No separate plan or environmental assessment will be produced.

Steel Creek comments will be considered as the planning team moves forward with developing a range of general management plan alternatives that address parkwide equestrian use. Here is a summary of what we heard regarding the Steel Creek Horse Camp.

The responses were almost evenly split between those in favor of enlarging and improving the horse camping facilities and those who would not like to see any improvement or are in favor of removing the horse camp. Some commenters suggested offering horse camps up and down the river as opposed to putting time and resources into just one horse camp at Steel Creek. Some people suggested that better education programs could be developed to cut down on impacts related to overuse and waste removal and disposal. Several commenters also recommended that a reservation system and/or an increase in user fees would help with the further development of horse camps and would help protect them from overuse in the future.

for understanding a way of life in this part of the country. These places have a story to tell and commenters recommended that more interpretive signs be provided to educate visitors about the local culture. A museum in the park was also suggested as a way to show visitors how life used to be on the Buffalo River.

Protection of the sensitive natural resources in the park is a priority for many commenters. At the forefront of many commenters' concerns is the overall quality of the water. The river is the reason for the park's existence and many comments stated that without pristine water quality the reason for the park's existence ceases to exist. Sources of possible contamination mentioned in the comments were horse manure, motor boat oil, over sedimentation of the river due to runoff and erosion from roads and trails next to the river, herbicides, and waste from campgrounds that are too close to the river. The comments suggest that improvement and maintenance of the water quality should be the park's primary management concern.

Many people commented on the importance of wildlife to the overall park experience. They considered the park as one of the few remaining areas where wildlife can be viewed in its native habitat. Comments about the elk herd focused on the fact that people love seeing the elk and desire more viewing opportunities. There was, however, a concern that the elk herd was growing out of control and causing damage to the park's natural resources and that some sort of program may need to be developed to con-

trol the herd (e.g., hunting). Many thought management of the fish population was critical as well, and thought educating visitors on catch and release practices would help maintain fish numbers. Finally, it was suggested that the National Park Service should conduct habitat restoration to enhance native species; however, the use of herbicides was seen as unacceptable by many commenters.



PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER

PARK PURPOSE

The park purpose identifies the reasons why Buffalo National River was established as part of the national park system. The purpose provides the foundation for the management and use of the national river. Purpose statements for national park system units are based primarily on the park's establishing legislation and legislative history.

The purpose of Buffalo National River is to preserve, conserve, and interpret a clear, clean, free-flowing river and its Ozark mountain setting of deep valleys, towering bluffs, wilderness, and pastoral landscapes. It is not one single quality, but the combination of natural, scenic, cultural, and scientific features that are protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.



PARK SIGNIFICANCE

Significance statements identify the resources and values that are central to managing the national river and express the importance of the national river to the nation's natural and cultural heritage. This helps to place the park in regional, national, and international contexts. Understanding the national river's significance helps managers make decisions that will preserve the resources and values necessary to accomplish the park's purposes.

BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER IS SIGNIFICANT FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS

A Free-Flowing River

Buffalo National River is an exceptional example of a free-flowing Ozark mountain river. Undammed and undiminished by the hand of man, it is the only river protected for its entire length within the Ozark Plateau. As a dynamic river ecosystem, Buffalo River is important for scientific discoveries and advances in ecosystem management and restoration.

Karst Geology

Buffalo National River contains a dense array of karst features, including over 360 caves and thousands of sink-holes, sinking streams, springs, and other natural features related to karst processes. In several places, the entire river runs underground for over a mile. Outstanding examples of faulting, landslides, ore mineralization, and world renowned fossil deposits have formed during its long geologic history.

Ozark Cultural Landscape

The entire park is an outstanding cultural landscape which embraces the overall story of Ozarks settlement and history from the first prehistoric inhabitants to today's living rural community of Boxley Valley, providing opportunities to study and interpret cultural, environmental, technological, and social adaptations.

A Complex Ecosystem

The convergence of northern and southern ecosystems, the joining of western and eastern species, a rich blend of botanical communities, and abundance of fire-adapted habitats creates an ecosystem recognized locally, nationally, and globally as unique.

Exceptional Recreation Setting

Buffalo National River's spectacular waterfalls, limestone bluffs, clear water, wooded canyons, and wilderness provide an exceptional setting for recreational opportunities unequalled in this part of the country.

WHAT IS NEXT?

The next step in the general management plan process is to develop a vision for the national river's future. To do this, the planning team will analyze the issues and concerns that have been identified and then collect and analyze information about park conditions. From this information, the planning team will develop several possible visions of the park's future (called "alternatives") that will explore different ways to address issues, achieve the park's purpose, and protect the significant qualities of the park. Evaluating a range of alternatives enables the planning team to compare and contrast the advantages of

one course of action over another, and provides a sound approach to decision making required by the National Environmental Policy Act. [Please note that much of park management is specified in laws and policies and are therefore not subject to alternatives.]

These preliminary alternatives will be presented to you through a newsletter and a series of public open houses in the near future and you will have another opportunity to participate in the planning process.

STEP AND TIMEFRAME	PLANNING ACTIVITY	PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES
1 Fall 2008 – Fall 2009	Initiate Project, Define Planning Foundation, and Identify Concerns The planning team assembles; examines and reaffirms the purpose and significance of the national river; holds public open houses; collects and analyzes information; and determines the primary issues and concerns for the General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement.	Newsletter 1, with comment form, was distributed. Seven public open houses were held in July 2009.
2 (We are here) Winter 2010 – Early Summer 2011	Develop and Present Alternatives Using staff and public input, the team will identify a range of reasonable preliminary alternatives for the national river's future. These will be presented to the public for comment.	Read this Newsletter 2. Read Newsletter 3 and send us your ideas and comments on the preliminary alternatives. Attend public open houses to provide input.
3 Summer 2011– Late Fall 2011	Select an Agency Preferred Alternative The team will analyze public comments on the preliminary alternatives, and review and revise the alternatives as appropriate. The National Park Service will then identify the agency's preferred alternative.	Go to the NPS planning website: www.parkplanning.nps.gov/buff . Read what the public had to say about the alternatives.
4 Late Fall 2011– Late Fall 2012	Prepare and Publish the <i>Draft General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement</i> The National Park Service will analyze all of the alternatives for impacts on the human environment, including natural and cultural resources, visitor experience, and socioeconomic conditions. A draft plan and environmental impact statement will be published and distributed to the public for comment.	Read the draft plan and send us your ideas and comments via mail or the internet. Attend public open houses to provide input.
5 Winter 2013 – Summer 2013	Prepare and Publish the <i>Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement</i> The team will analyze public comments on the draft document, prepare responses to substantive comments, and make appropriate revisions to the draft document. The final document will then be distributed to the public.	Read the final documents. Stay involved throughout the implementation of the plan.
6 Late Fall 2013	Implement the Approved Plan A "Record of Decision" will be issued to adopt the approved management plan. The plan will then be implemented as funding allows.	Stay involved throughout the implementation of the approved plan.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION...

You can stay informed about this ongoing planning effort and you can access project newsletters by visiting the following websites:

www.nps.gov/buff

www.parkplanning.nps.gov/buff
(click on General Management Plan)

Also, look for us on Twitter!

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER!