

Gulf Islands National Seashore

Crab Island Commercial Services Strategy

Request for Input

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The National Park Service is proposing to implement a Commercial Services Strategy to better manage commercial operations in the Crab Island Area of the Gulf Island National Seashore **and we want to hear from you.**



Overview

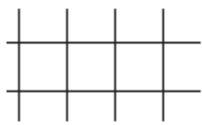
Crab Island is a large submerged sandbar located near the William T. Marler Bridge, on the eastern end of Santa Rosa Island within the Choctawhatchee Bay portion of Gulf Islands National Seashore (GUIS). This area of the national seashore is home to a large seagrass bed, which serves as a vital nursery area for Gulf of Mexico fisheries and has been identified as a critical resource in the national seashore. Seagrass habitat throughout the entire Gulf Coast, including in the waters of the GUIS, has experienced significant declines from multiple causes, including reduced water quality, storm events, and propeller scarring and turbidity caused by boat traffic.

Between 2002 and 2014, the National Park Service (NPS) developed a General Management Plan (GMP) with extensive public input. The GMP designates specific management zones detailing how it would manage the GUIS as an outdoor classroom for exploring the natural and human history of the Gulf of Mexico's barrier islands and coastal environments. The GMP designated the Choctawhatchee Bay portion of the GUIS as a mix of a "Natural Settings with Dispersed Recreation" zone and a "Seagrass Bed" zone.

The Crab Island area has become a highly popular recreational site, drawing hundreds of boats and numerous floating commercial services such as restaurants, water taxis, and mobile small craft vendors which traverse and anchor within the sandy and seagrass portions of the sandbar. The popularity of the sandbar has led to issues of concern shared by the National Park Service, state and local governments, agencies, and other stakeholders. These issues include life-threatening accidents and fatalities, damaged seagrass beds, and diminished water quality.

To address these concerns, the GUIS has begun a formal planning process to determine the level of commercial activity consistent with the national seashore's GMP, federal law and regulations, and local laws and ordinances. In preparation for this planning process, the NPS issued temporary commercial use authorizations during the 2019 and 2020 recreation seasons to assist with the current planning process. Prior to beginning the next stage of planning for this Commercial Services Strategy (CSS), the NPS is reaching out to stakeholders for input into the planning process.

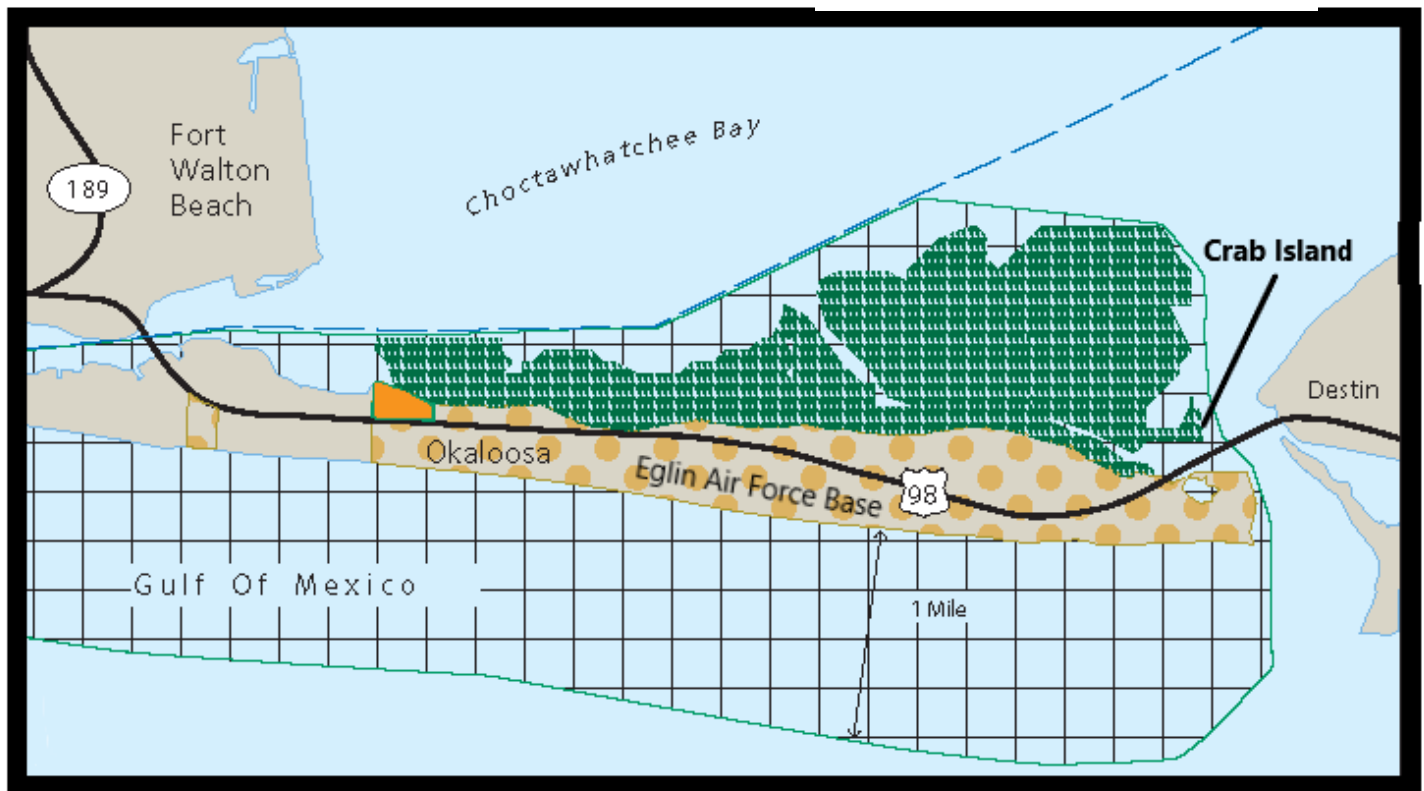
Management Zones in Crab Island Area



Natural Settings With
Dispersed Recreation



Seagrass Bed



What is a Commercial Services Strategy ?

The NPS defines a commercial service as any product, activity, or service offered to park visitors that uses park resources, and for which compensation is made to a third party. Commercial services play a vital role by offering park visitors services and activities that the government does not provide directly to the public.

A Commercial Services Strategy (CSS) allows a park to:

- Describe park conditions for visitor use and commercial services;
- Detail potential commercial service opportunities as informed by input from park staff, commercial partners, and other relevant stakeholders;
- Create a framework of necessary and appropriate criteria, to be used for evaluating commercial services;
- Map existing and potential services to the necessary and appropriate criteria framework, and provide reasoning behind services deemed inappropriate;
- Identify high-priority commercial services opportunities, including ideal locations, and authorization instruments; and
- Outline an action plan for implementation.

Why is a Commercial Services Strategy needed for Crab Island?

The **GUIS GMP**, which is the product of extensive public involvement and analysis of impacts on the human and natural environment, designates “**management zones**” within the national seashore. Management zones prescribe how different areas of the national seashore are to be managed. The Crab Island area is comprised of a “**Natural Settings with Dispersed Recreation**” zone and a “**Seagrass Bed**” zone.

According to the GMP, the “natural settings within the dispersed recreation zone” includes areas largely undeveloped, in their natural settings, and **managed for dispersed motorized and/or nonmotorized recreational activities**. The “seagrass bed zone” includes areas containing seagrass beds and/or areas of suitable habitat for seagrass establishment. These areas are **managed to prevent resource damage to seagrass beds from vessel groundings, anchoring, and propeller scarring**.

Aside from the GMP, **public health and safety** has become a major concern for the NPS and state and local government. **Life threatening accidents and fatalities** in this area are common. Crab Island is located immediately adjacent to East Pass, which connects Choctawhatchee Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. When the tide goes out, it creates a strong current that can drag those standing in the shallow Crab Island waters into the deeper waters of East Pass channel and the Gulf. **Multiple drownings occur at Crab Island each summer**. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends, hundreds of visitor incidents include **marine DUI, disturbances and altercations, boating and personal watercraft accidents, boat fires, medical emergencies, swimmer assists and rescues, and fatalities**.

How do we know which commercial services are necessary and appropriate at Crab Island?

Federal regulations governing the NPS dictates that a commercial service must be considered necessary and/or appropriate to be eligible to operate within national park boundaries. The NPS has developed official guidelines for determining whether a service is necessary and/or appropriate. Necessary criteria help answer the question “Why is this service important for this national seashore?” A necessary service accomplishes one or more of the following:

- Contributes to visitor understanding and appreciation of a national seashore’s purpose and significance
- Enhances visitor experiences consistent with the national seashore’s purpose and significance
- Assists the NPS in managing visitor use and educating national seashore visitors
- Provides an essential service or facility not available within a reasonable distance from the national seashore

Appropriate criteria help answer the question “Can the NPS authorize this commercial service without compromising the reasons the national seashore was established?” An appropriate service accomplishes all of the following:

- Consistent with the national seashore purpose and significance
- Consistent with laws, regulations, and policies
- Does not compromise public health and safety
- Does not cause unacceptable impacts to national seashore resources or values
- Does not unduly conflict with other park uses and activities
- Does not exclude the general public from participating in limited recreational opportunities

What would a Commercial Services Strategy look like?

Gulf Islands National Seashore has developed the following suite of preliminary Reasonable Alternative Concepts representing commercial service strategies which could be employed by the NPS to meet the needs of the park while addressing the concerns of local government and the public:

Alternative Concept #1: Fully Implement the Commercial Services Strategy (CSS).

- Implements the Commercial Services Strategy for Crab Island
- NPS would issue CUAs for compliant commercial services
 - Compliant with GMP Zones
 - Compliant with the Necessary and Appropriate (N&A) Criteria of the CSS
- Supports actions for maintaining and/or restoring the natural and human environment to the desired resource condition as defined in the GMP-EIS Record of Decision (ROD).

Alternative Concept #2: No Authorization of Commercial Services (No CUAs) .

- NPS would NOT issue CUAs for compliant commercial services
 - safety issues associated with the proximity of the East Pass and the subsequent strong currents during tidal exchanges
 - natural resource impacts due to the location within the Seagrass Bed Zone
- This alternative concept would be:
 - Compliant with GMP Zones
 - Compliant with the Necessary and Appropriate (N&A) Criteria of the CSS
- Supports actions for maintaining and/or restoring the natural and human environment to the desired resource condition as defined in the GMP-EIS Record of Decision (ROD).

No Action Alternative Concept:

- Pre-2019 baseline of unauthorized and unpermitted commercial use activities when federal laws and regulations were not being enforced.
- This alternative concept would be:
 - Non-Compliant with GMP Zones
 - Non-Compliant with the Necessary and Appropriate (N&A) Criteria of the CSS
 - Non-Compliant with local ordinances

Opportunities to learn more and provide your input:

Virtual Civic Engagement Opportunities

November 10, 2020 at 6pm Central Time and November 12, 2020 at 1pm Central Time

These online meetings will begin with a presentation by Gulf Island National Seashore staff, followed by a question and answer session.

To learn more or to register for one of these virtual events, please visit the NPS PECP Planning, Environment & Public Comment site:

<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/CrabIsland>

Submit Your Feedback

You can submit written comments through the PEPC website at:

<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/CrabIsland>

Or by mail to:

Crab Island Commercial Services Strategy
Attn: Jolene Williams
Gulf Islands National Seashore
1801 Gulf Breeze Parkway
Gulf Breeze, FL, 32563

Please note that comments will not be accepted by fax or email. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. **Please submit feedback by November 23, 2020.**