

Gulf Islands National Seashore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Gulf Islands National Seashore Crab Island Commercial Services Planning

Civic Engagement Meeting
November 10, 2020

Crab Island



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.

Crab Island - Overview

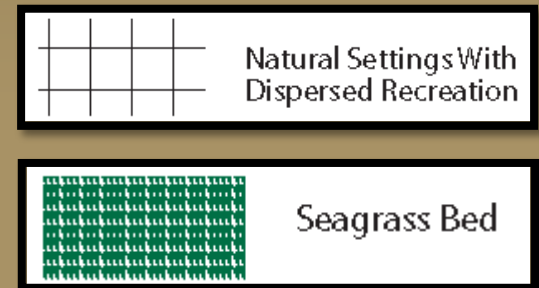
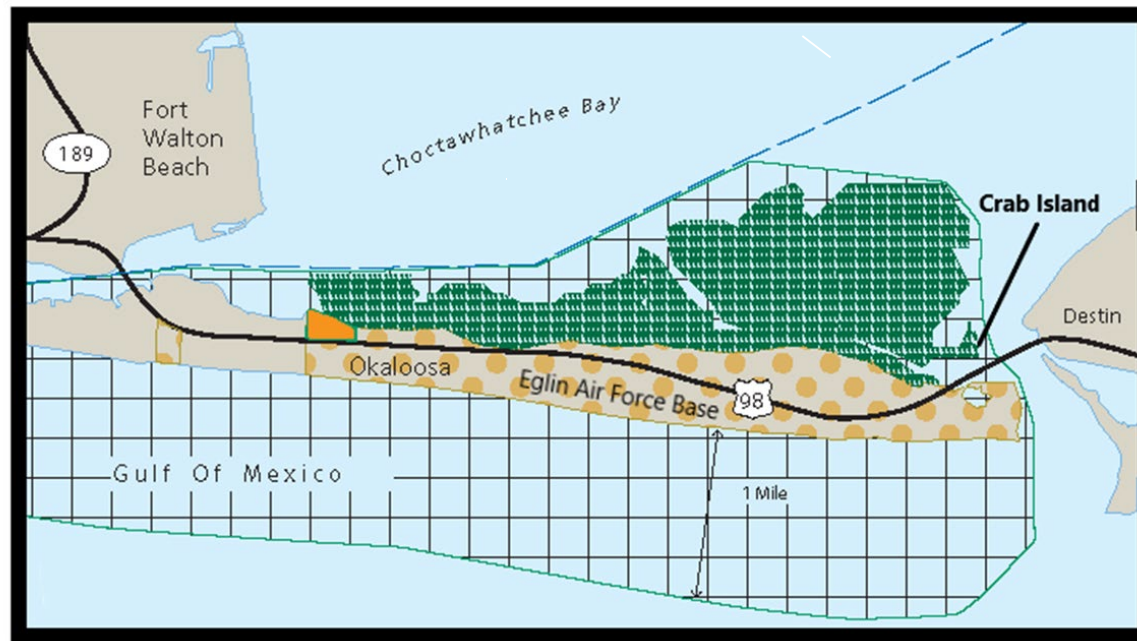
- The Crab Island area has become a highly popular recreational site, drawing hundreds of boats and numerous floating commercial services such as restaurants, water taxis, and mobile small craft vendors which traverse and anchor within the sandy and seagrass portions of the sandbar. The popularity of 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.



Crab Island Commercial Services Strategy Planning Process

- 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 General Management Plan (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, the NPS is reaching out to area stakeholders for input into the planning process.

General Management Plan Management Zones



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.

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.

The background of the slide is a light brown map of Crab Island. A dark brown silhouette of a mountain range is overlaid on the map, positioned in the lower-left and center. The map shows various geographical features like coastlines and internal land divisions.

Why is a Commercial Services Strategy needed for Crab Island?

- Visitor Safety
- Resource Protection
- Compliance with GMP Management Zones

Why is a Commercial Services Strategy needed for Crab Island?

Visitor Safety

- Public health and safety has become a major concern for the NPS and state and local governments.
- Multiple drownings occur at Crab Island each summer.
- 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.
- Between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends, hundreds of visitor incidents include marine DUI, disturbances, altercations, boating and personal watercraft accidents, boat fires, medical emergencies, swimmer assists and rescues, and fatalities.



Why is a Commercial Services Strategy needed for Crab Island?

Resource Impacts

- All Seagrass bed prop scars were mapped in the park – a total of 13 miles of prop scars. Half of those were at Crab Island.
- Local governments, agencies, and other stakeholders express concerns about seagrass damage, restaurant waste, over-water refueling of rental vessels and generators, trash collection, and diminished water quality due to lack of restroom facilities.



Why is a Commercial Services Strategy needed for Crab Island?

GMP Management Zones

Natural Settings with Dispersed Recreation Zone

- Visitors have an opportunity to get away from the sights and sounds of the urban environment and explore the natural features of the national seashore. Visitor encounters range from solitude to informal gatherings.
- Natural resources are managed to maintain or restore their natural conditions.
- Facility development is limited to resource protection, visitor access, and public safety.



Why is a Commercial Services Strategy needed for Crab Island?

GMP Management Zones

Seagrass Bed Zone

- Includes seagrass beds and/or habitat suitable for seagrass establishment.
- Managed to prevent resource damage to seagrass beds from vessel groundings, anchoring, and prop scarring.
- Visitors have the opportunity to access and enjoy healthy seagrass beds, with visitor experiences to include fishing, swimming, boating, snorkeling and wildlife viewing.
- Minimal facilities will be provided; mooring buoys or navigational aids may be provided depending on the need for seagrass bed protection.
- Some areas may be temporarily restricted to non-motorized activities to allow seagrass to recover if damage occurs.



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.
- 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
- 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?

- Alternative Concept #1: Fully Implement the 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).

What would a Commercial Services Strategy look like?

- **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
 - This alternative 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).

What would a Commercial Services Strategy look like?

- *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 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



We want to hear from you!

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

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Thank You



National Park Service
U.S. Dept. of the Interior

Dan Brown – Superintendent
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Questions?