

Assateague Island National Seashore General Management Plan

January 2012 – GMP Planning Update and Summary Report for the Preliminary Management Alternatives Public Review

Planning Update – National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service Planning Projects

Assateague Island is a 37-mile long barrier island located off the Atlantic coast of Maryland and Virginia. The island and its surrounding waters consist of three public areas; Assateague Island National Seashore (approximately 8,300 acres of lands and 32,200 acres of waters managed by the National Park Service (NPS)), Assateague State Park (600 acres managed by Maryland's Department of Natural Resources) and Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (8,900 acres in Virginia managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)).

The NPS and FWS are both undertaking long-range planning efforts for those portions of the island over which they have management authority. Although the NPS and FWS have separate planning standards and directives reflecting the different missions of the two agencies, the general planning steps are similar in many respects. Both require that management plans identify the actions needed to accomplish the purposes for which the park or refuge was established by considering a full range of alternatives. Public involvement is required throughout the planning process and decisions are made in careful consideration of comments received from all interested parties. The plans must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable requirements and as such are generally prepared in an environmental impact statement (EIS) format.

The NPS planning effort will produce a new General Management Plan (GMP) for Assateague Island National Seashore. The GMP will establish a vision for the Seashore and provide guidance for its management over the next 15 to 25 years. In July 2011, the NPS GMP planning team released a GMP alternatives newsletter outlining several preliminary alternative management concepts for the future of the Seashore and held a series of open house workshops.

The long-range planning effort by the FWS is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The FWS CCP planning team released a CCP alternatives newsletter for the Refuge in August 2011 and also held a series of public workshops.

The planning teams for both agencies have gathered and analyzed the public comments. The NPS GMP planning team found that many of the comments received from the public addressed issues and concerns outside the scope of NPS authority. Most of those comments targeted elements of the proposed CCP alternatives for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and will be forwarded to the FWS. Examples of issues and concerns that are beyond the scope of the NPS GMP include:

- Shuttle service to the beach in Virginia;
- Potential economic impacts due to proposed changes in access in Virginia;
- The Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge pony herd; and
- Beach replenishment and dune fortification in the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

The following report outlines the NPS GMP management alternatives public review process and briefly summarizes the public comments on the Assateague Island National Seashore GMP.

GMP Management Alternatives Public Review

The NPS presented four preliminary management alternative concepts for public review in the summer of 2011. The NPS mailed a GMP alternatives newsletter to over 500 addresses, emailed electronic newsletters to approximately 36 addresses, posted the newsletter on-line, and hand distributed an additional 950 newsletters at the NPS visitor centers and at public meetings. The newsletter provided a summary of the four management alternatives and associated zoning, as well as an update on the planning process, the foundation for planning, a summary of scoping comments, and the planning considerations. The newsletter also invited the public to attend public open house workshops to learn about the management alternatives, meet with the planning team, and to provide comments. A press release was sent to local newspapers advertising the meetings and updates were made to the Seashore's website and the NPS Planning Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website.

The NPS hosted public open house workshops at three locations in communities surrounding the Seashore:

- August 16th, 2011 - Wor-Wic Community College, Salisbury, Maryland (26 attended)
- August 17th, 2011 – Marine Science Consortium, Wallops Island, Virginia (38 attended)
- August 18th, 2011 – Ocean Pines Library, Ocean Pines, Maryland (48 attended)

The purpose of the workshops was to gather ideas from individuals on the preliminary management alternatives for the Seashore. Poster-size maps and text boards were used to present project background information, the management alternative concepts and their associated management zoning, and a concept comparison chart. GMP team members were present during the open house workshops to answer questions.

The public comment period for the management alternative concepts was from July 20, 2011 through October 1, 2011. The public provided comments via comment cards (10), the PEPC website (155), emails (159), and letters (19).

Summary of Public Comments on the GMP Management Alternatives

Comments on Specific Alternatives

Overall, the public indicated the greatest support for Alternative 3 – Sustainable Recreation and Climate Change Adaptation. Flexibility in managing future challenges and changes to the island, such as natural coastal processes, sea level rise, and climate change, was frequently mentioned as a positive attribute of the alternative. Many also noted that it offered the best balance between the protection of natural resources and the enjoyment of the resources and recreational opportunities of the island. The importance of maintaining over sand vehicle (OSV) use on the island was frequently cited, with many suggesting that Alternative 3 offers the best approach.

Several favored Alternative 1 – Continuation of Current Management because it would maintain the Seashore as it is currently. There were a number of comments that expressed great satisfaction with the Seashore as it is today, and some suggested that the island should be left as is. Several others indicated that Alternative 2 – Concentrated Traditional Beach Recreation would provide the best beach recreation opportunities for visitors. Finally, several preferred Alternative 4 – Natural Island Evolution and a Primitive Island Experience because it would provide a true island experience and unique interpretive and educational opportunities.

Comments on Visitor Use and Experience

There were a number of public comments regarding the visitor experience at the Seashore, addressing educational programming, recreation opportunities, and interpretive themes. Numerous comments expressed satisfaction with the quality of recreational resources and visitor use opportunities. Ideas for new educational programs at the Seashore included winter hiking trips and historical interpretation by staff or partners. A few comments expressed support for a clothing optional beach. Other suggestions included the need to enhance visitor contact areas, orientation, safety messaging, Seashore information, and posting of rules.

OSV use at the Seashore was a topic of many comments. The comments indicated strong support for continued OSV use and opposition to changes to or reductions in the OSV area. Many comments expressed satisfaction with the current OSV program. Some supported allowing alternate locations for OSV use, if and when that becomes necessary due to natural coastal processes. Other suggestions for the OSV program included re-opening the back road, changes to the fee structure, speed limitations, and the need for 'work-arounds' for piping plover closures. A few comments suggested the elimination or reduction of OSV use.

Comments on Seashore Facilities and Operations

Public comments about Seashore facilities and operations primarily addressed access, alternative transportation, and parking infrastructure. There was support both for and against expanding visitor use services and facilities in the developed zone. Most indicated support for continued bridge access and repairs to facilities and infrastructure in the event that they are destroyed in a catastrophic storm. Many indicated their support for an adaptive management approach to facility development that promotes sustainability in the context of island dynamics and climate change/sea level rise. Some suggested that any change in access to the island would deter visitation, while others indicated their support for alternative transportation approaches including ferry, shuttle services, and a network of water-based public boat launch sites.

There was interest in additional camping opportunities at the Seashore but some expressed concern that a mainland camping experience would be inferior to the current on-island camping opportunities. Others made specific suggestions regarding camping fees, length and type of stay, and generator use in the campground, and ideas for improving the entrance station.

Comments on Natural Resource Management

Natural resource management comments ranged from suggestions for broad management approaches including adaptive management planning, to more specific suggestions related to issues such as invasive plants, habitat restoration, and rare species protection. Many indicated support for a proactive approach to addressing the threats from climate change/sea level rise, such as increasing resiliency and working in concert with natural processes. Others did not support the idea of allowing natural processes to shape the island and expressed concern that a breach or new inlet could impact the ability of visitors to access all parts of the island.

A comment indicated support for various protection and enhancement mechanisms for Chincoteague Bay water quality, including establishing sanctuaries, prohibiting unauthorized commercial fishing, banning of submerged lands leasing for commercial aquaculture, and compliance with applicable wastewater disposal regulations. Some supported dredging to enhance the tidal flow to and from Chincoteague Bay. Many comments indicated support for the continuation of commercial fishing and aquaculture in Seashore waters, including the horseshoe crab fishery, and opposed any changes to the

current system. Concern for the economic impact to local watermen was frequently cited. Several indicated opposition to any changes that would impact privately-owned structures ('oyster watch houses') in the Virginia waters of the Seashore.

There were several comments that expressed support for a marine research reserve at the Seashore. Others were concerned about the potential impacts that a marine research reserve could have on the livelihood of watermen and to the use of waterways for public and commercial use.

Several suggested that hunting was an important recreational opportunity and should be allowed to continue at the Seashore.

Comments on Proposed Wilderness

Comments on the proposed wilderness area ranged from support for the existing area to the removal of wilderness in the Seashore. Some comments expressed concern about the potential that expansion of the wilderness area could affect ORV use.

Comments on Cultural Resource Management

Several comments indicated concern for the removal of hunting camps due to their value in understanding the history of the island and as historic structures. The preservation, as well as active use of the Coast Guard Station was encouraged.

Comments on Partnerships

Several comments addressed the importance of partnerships between state and federal entities in the plan and its implementation. It was suggested that the plan should highlight the existing (and capacity for additional) partnerships and how they can be used to work cooperatively on land conservation initiatives and solutions to address the effects of coastal processes and climate change/sea level rise. Several indicated support for the continued partnership with the US Army Corps of Engineers related to erosion control and protection of the Seashore.

Comments on Land Acquisition

There was support for mainland protection strategies, including expanded land conservation efforts in the Newport Bay, Chincoteague Bay, and Sinepuxent Bay watersheds targeting areas with healthy, functioning perennial streams and tidal creeks.