



Niobrara National Scenic River

River Management Plan / Environmental Assessment Scoping Newsletter

Greetings From the Planning Team.

The National Park Service is pleased to announce that the development of a River Management Plan and accompanying Environmental Assessment to guide the future of Niobrara National Scenic River is underway. The River Management Plan will serve as the detailed approach for management of the river over the next 15 to 20 years. We invite you to participate in the development of this plan in the months to come. This newsletter provides general background and contact information on this important effort and guidance on how you can participate. We look forward to hearing from you as we begin to develop the River Management Plan.

*Dan Foster
Superintendent*

The purpose of this newsletter is to initiate the process for developing the Niobrara National Scenic River Management Plan/Environmental Assessment (RMP/EA). The first step of this process is to obtain input from the public regarding concerns and issues. This will provide the basis for all subsequent phases of the plan.

Niobrara National Scenic River (NSR), a unit of the National Park Service (NPS), was established in 1991 to protect extraordinary aesthetic, archaeological, and biological values. Portions of the Niobrara River were designated for protection by the Niobrara National Scenic River Designation Act of 1991 and Niobrara NSR now covers 76 miles, from Borman Bridge to State Highway 137. The portion of Niobrara NSR located within the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), while the remainder is administered by the NPS, even though the majority of land remains in private ownership.

The purpose of Niobrara NSR is:

- To preserve the free-flowing river condition, protect water quality, and preserve the outstandingly remarkable geology, paleontology, fish and wildlife, scenery, and recreation values, and
- To protect the river and its immediate environments for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

This purpose is part of a larger goal of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) to offset the effects of dams and construction in other areas of the country by a policy that would preserve selected rivers or sections in their free-flowing condition to protect water quality and “to fulfill other vital national conservation purposes”.

NPS Role in River Management

Niobrara NSR is managed under the provisions specified in the 2007 General Management Plan (GMP). The GMP delineated the boundaries of the Niobrara NSR as directed under the WSRA. The existing boundary consists of 23,074 acres, most of which is in private ownership. The GMP provides broad scale guidance for management.



Location of Niobrara NSR.



The RMP/EA is part of the NPS implementation phase of planning. In this phase, detailed plans are prepared that “step-down” from the GMP. The NPS is currently in the very first phase of development of the RMP/EA, called “scoping”. During scoping, issues and concerns of the public are identified using input obtained at workshops and public meetings. Public input will also be obtained in the form of written comments via the park website, e-mail, or letters to the NPS.

Information gathered during scoping will then be used to develop a set of alternatives for NPS management to be analyzed in the RMP/EA. The RMP/EA will determine whether the alternatives (including the “no action” alternative) have the potential to result in significant effects on the natural or man-made environment. If significant impacts are not anticipated, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) would be prepared and the plan would be implemented. If the RMP/EA concludes there is a potential for significant adverse impacts to either the natural or man-made environment, an environmental impact statement would be prepared, and the plan would undergo further development.



Niobrara NSR provides exceptional recreational opportunities.

Outstandingly Remarkable Value Statements

The GMP identified several “Outstandingly Remarkable Values” (ORVs) that form the basis for management of each river segment. The GMP identified ORVs for protection of geology, paleontology, fish and wildlife, scenery, and recreation values. Such values are required to be protected under the missions set forth in the NPS Organic Act of 1916 and the WSRA. The RMP/EA will determine management zones and examine user capacities for each zone that would allow for the greatest level of protection and enhancement of the ORVs. The ORVs presented in the GMP have been refined as appropriate, based on input from NPS and other federal, state, and local government, and Tribes. The refined ORVs have been developed for use in the RMP/EA and are available at the park’s website:

<http://www.nps.gov/niob/parkmgmt/index.htm>.

The ORVs may be further refined based on input from the public during the preparation of the RMP/EA.



Visitors enjoy scenery along the Niobrara NSR.

Summary of Refined ORVs

Water Quality

Water quality conditions of the Niobrara River are generally considered high and reflect the relatively unaltered setting of the area. This is due to the relatively light amount of development in the watershed and that the river is predominantly groundwater fed, which tempers seasonal fluctuations in flow.

Free-Flowing Condition

Within Niobrara NSR, the Niobrara River flows relatively unimpeded over bedrock or sand-dominated substrate in the lower braided reaches. The Niobrara is predominantly groundwater fed over much of its length, but also receives contributions from tributary streams.

Geology ORV

The Niobrara River borders the northern portion of the Sandhills of Nebraska, creating a shallow canyon through geologic formations forming the northern border of the High Plains Aquifer. The Niobrara River has cut through and exposed rock strata creating cliffs rising nearly 200 feet above the river. These erosion processes have also exposed significant paleontological (fossil) resources. This dynamic geologic system creates and sustains a diverse landscape of entrenched river, braided channels, and sloughs providing a setting for rich paleontologic, fish and wildlife, scenic, and recreation resources.



Paleontology ORV

Niobrara NSR is extraordinarily rich in documented fossil sites. Known paleontological sites are internationally, nationally, and regionally significant. Numerous species of extinct vertebrates were first identified along the river, including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and fish. There are multiple locations where previously unknown species were first discovered and contributed greatly to our knowledge of the prehistoric past. The diversity of species found is astounding.



Paleontological site investigation at Niobrara NSR.

Fish and Wildlife ORV

Niobrara NSR and its tributaries have created spring-branch canyons, broad valleys with floodplains, and braided channels that support an exceptional biologic diversity of plant and animal species unique to the Great Plains. Six plant communities converge along the river forming a biological crossroad that is dependent upon the geology and hydrology of Niobrara NSR. There are eastern deciduous, western coniferous, and northern boreal forests as well as tallgrass, mixedgrass, and Sandhills Prairie grasslands. In addition, the river is the lifeblood for a wide variety of fish and wildlife species.

This rare mix of habitats supports over 160 plants and many animals that survive at or beyond their normal range. These diverse plant communities provide unique habitats for mammals, reptiles, birds, fish, and many other species not common or declining in the Great Plains. Several threatened or endangered species make their home along the Niobrara River utilizing braided river channels, sand bars, stream banks, and open water for nesting, rearing, feeding and migratory habitat. Species include the federally listed piping plover, interior least tern, and whooping crane as well as the state-listed river otter and trumpeter swan. The diverse habitats of the Niobrara NSR corridor may lead to the formation of hybrid species of several birds, butterflies, and plants.

Scenery ORV

The Niobrara NSR valley and canyon topography has conditions and microclimates unexpected in the Great Plains. Six types of plant communities live in close proximity. The geology, plant communities, and minimal development of the area provide scenic experiences of seasonal colors, flowers and natural beauty. Over 200 waterfalls, in addition to canyon streams, springs and seeps, flow directly into the river, with a backdrop of rugged cliffs and dramatic scenery unusual for the area.

Recreation ORV

The Niobrara NSR provides exceptional recreational opportunities within the Great Plains. The Niobrara's base flow provides a wide range of on-river experiences from quiet pools and riffles to rapids and chutes. Hiking trails provide stunning views of cliff top vistas and side canyons. The cliff and canyon formations, as well as abundant waterfalls, provide landscape photography and scenic driving opportunities throughout the year.



Wildlife is abundant at Niobrara NSR, such as spiny softshell turtles.

You're Invited to Participate.

During 2012 we are asking you to share your thoughts and ideas regarding the development of the Niobrara National Scenic River RMP/EA. Your input is very important in guiding the planning team. Public meetings will provide an overview of the process and include small group discussions on resources, including their monitoring and protection. Comments can also be made via mail to the address on this newsletter or our website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob>.

Documents prepared during this planning effort will be available on line at the above website and at local area public libraries. Notices about the process will be posted on the park website; the NPS's Planning, Environment & Public Comment website; and announced in local newspapers. Please take time to share your thoughts with us.



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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For More Information

The National Park Service appreciates your input and would like your feedback. Please participate in the public meetings or comment through the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob>, or write to the address on this newsletter.

Planning Schedule and Opportunities for Public Input

The plan will be prepared according to the following schedule:

- Collect Information: Fall 2011
- Public Workshops/Meetings: Spring 2012
- Draft RMP/EA: Winter 2012/Spring 2013
- Public Review of Draft RMP/EA: Summer 2013
- Public Meetings on Draft RMP/EA: Summer 2013
- Final RMP/EA: Winter 2013/Spring 2014

Public Meeting Schedule:

| Location | Date |
|---|----------------|
| Valentine - NPS Headquarters 214 W. Hwy 20 | April 16, 2012 |
| Ainsworth - Elks Lodge 111 East 3 rd | April 17, 2012 |
| Grand Island - Howard Johnson Hotel 3333 Ramada Road | April 18, 2012 |
| Omaha - NPS MWR Headquarters 601 Riverfront Dr. | April 19, 2012 |

Note: Sign in for meetings begins at 6:30 pm and the meetings begin at 7:00 pm.