

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Chaco Culture National Historical Park  
New Mexico

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## **GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT/ ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared a general management plan amendment / environmental assessment (GMP amendment) for Chaco Culture National Historical Park. The purpose of this GMP amendment is to establish management systems and thresholds whereby Chaco Culture National Historical park staff can effectively respond to changes in visitor use and preserve the park's resources and visitor experiences.

Park visitation, currently at 45,000 per year, may change, mostly due to improvements to the northern entrance road (San Juan County Road (CR) 7950), which will make access to the park easier for a larger number and different type of visitors. Limitations to staffing and the limited regulation of visitor access are affecting management's ability to monitor and protect park resources during periods of heavy visitation.

The GMP amendment describes four alternatives for strategically managing visitation. The second alternative, the NPS selected action and environmentally preferable alternative, describes management strategies that will be applied year-round and throughout the park.

This finding of no significant impact and the environmental assessment (EA) constitute the record of the environmental impact analysis and decision-making process for the GMP amendment. This document records (1) a finding of no significant impact as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and (2) a determination of no impairment as required by the NPS Organic Act of 1916.

### **SELECTED ACTION (PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE)**

The selected action, alternative 2, seeks to protect both park resources and visitor experiences. Under this alternative, visitor use management strategies will be applied year-round and throughout the park. Strategies are divided into those that will be implemented immediately following approval of this GMP amendment and those that could be implemented in the future if standards for certain indicators are exceeded. The selected action provides the best combination of immediate management approaches

for protecting cultural resources and visitor experiences while also anticipating future changes in visitation.

Specific management strategies and actions under this alternative will include the following:

### **Visitor knowledge / NPS-led orientation**

- Immediate Management Strategies
  - To ensure all visitors receive consistent and comprehensive messages regarding the sensitivity of park resources, park regulations, and appropriate visitor behaviors, all visitors will be required to participate in a structured education program before accessing the park's primary cultural sites. Details of the structured education program will be determined upon implementation.
  - To continue visitor on-site education at the park's primary cultural sites, park staff will increase roving patrols and interpretive contacts, particularly during the peak season (mid-March to mid-November) and special events.
- Potential Management Strategies
  - No potential future management strategies associated with this topic are included. Rather, strategies mentioned above will be implemented immediately. However, the effectiveness of the structured education program will be continually evaluated and changes will be made to the program and associated messages as needed.

### **Group Management**

- Immediate Management Strategies
  - To ensure all groups receive consistent and comprehensive messages regarding the sensitivity of park resources, park regulations, and appropriate visitor behaviors, all groups will receive information prior to their visit.
  - To ensure high quality group opportunities and maintain other desired conditions, groups will be required to obtain advanced reservations to the park. The number of groups will be limited to no more than two per day. Large groups will be required to split into smaller groups of no more than 20 people and will be asked to disperse their use across the various cultural sites in the park.

**Note:** This strategy may be applied, if needed, during park-sponsored and other special events, estimated at four or five days a year. During these times, other strategies (e.g., visitor education, additional staff, gate closures) may also be put in place to ensure protection of resources and visitor safety with increased use levels.

- Potential Management Strategies
  - If the standard for any indicator is exceeded and the management of groups is determined to be a significant contributing factor, the timing of group reservations may be strategically scheduled throughout the day to disperse their arrival.
  - In addition to the above standard, the number and size of groups may be further restricted. As a last resort, if additional strategies are needed to achieve the standard, groups may be completely restricted during peak use times of the day during peak season (mid-March to mid-November).

### **Individual Visitor Access**

- Immediate Management Strategies
  - For the purposes of minimizing the intensity of use in the park, i.e., crowding and resource concerns, visitors will receive information about peak use times in order to encourage voluntary redistribution of use.
  - To provide greater convenience for trip planning and to improve the efficiency of park management activities, all campers will be able to obtain a reservation for a designated campsite in advance of their stay. Some campsites will be available without reservations on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Potential Management Strategies
  - If the standard for any indicator is, or likely to be, exceeded and patterns or levels of use are determined to be a significant contributing factor, visitors may be required to obtain a reservation to visit the park. Some percentage of reservations (likely 15%-20%) may be set aside for those arriving without a reservation, on a first-come, first-served basis.

**Note:** The above strategy may be applied, if needed, during park-sponsored and other special events, estimated at four to five days a year. During these times, other strategies (e.g., visitor education, additional staff, gate closures) may also be put in place to ensure protection of resources and visitor safety with increased use levels

### **MITIGATING MEASURES**

Mitigating measures are fully integrated into the plan's alternatives and actions common to all action alternatives. Those common to all action alternatives are described on pages 31–37 and include best practices for visitor use management that will be implemented as necessary to mitigate impacts and enhance the more specific strategies described in the selected action. These include strategies for preservation, visitor access to cultural sites with and without preservation treatments, outreach and education, and indicators and standards for long-term monitoring. The selected action includes both immediate and potential future mitigating measures to respond to existing and potential impacts

associated with visitation, including strategies for visitor knowledge, group management, and individual visitor access.

## **ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

Because there are different approaches to achieving the purpose of the GMP amendment, the planning team investigated a range of possible management alternatives. Ultimately, four alternatives were developed, including the no-action alternative that describes a continuation of the park's current visitor use management approach.

Each alternative involved a different approach to achieving the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences in the park. These differences were expressed through each alternative's unique approach to three types of visitor use management strategies: (1) visitor knowledge, (2) group management, and (3) individual visitor access. The primary distinction between the four alternatives is the spatial and temporal scales at which specific actions within these three types of visitor use management strategies will be implemented.

The no-action alternative is included as a required baseline against which to compare the action alternatives. This alternative prescribes the continuation of the park's current visitor use management approach. In alternative 2 (selected action), visitor use management strategies will be applied year-round and throughout the park. In alternative 3, some visitor use management strategies would be applied on a seasonal basis throughout the park. In alternative 4, the visitor use management strategies would be applied year-round at individual sites within the park.

## **ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE**

According to the CEQ regulations implementing NEPA (43 CFR 46.30), the environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative "that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment and best protects, preserves, and enhances historical, cultural, and natural resources. The environmentally preferable alternative is identified upon consideration and weighing by the Responsible Official of long-term environmental impacts against short-term impacts in evaluating what is the best protection of these resources. In some situations, such as when different alternatives impact different resources to different degrees, there may be more than one environmentally preferable alternative."

Alternative 2 (Strategies Applied Parkwide, Year-Round) is the environmentally preferable alternative for several reasons: 1) the selected action will provide the greatest level of protection of park resources because of its effective parkwide, year-round approach to visitor use management; 2) the selected action will provide the highest level of freedom and independence once visitors enter the park, given the focus on education and regulating use at the park entrance; 3) the selected action seeks to maintain an experience at Chaco Culture National Historical Park that is unparalleled and highly valued by its visitors; and 4) the selected action will be the most effective at achieving

these criteria from an operational standpoint, given the parkwide and year-round strategies

## **WHY THE SELECTED ACTION WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT**

As defined in 40 *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR) 1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

### **Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse—a significant effect may exist even if the agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial**

No major adverse or beneficial impacts were identified that will require analysis in an environmental impact statement (EIS). No greater than moderate, adverse impacts will result to any resource from implementation of the selected action.

The strategies included in alternative 2 will help reduce adverse impacts to archeological resources caused by visitor use. Adverse impacts will be minor and permanent.

The strategies included in alternative 2 will help reduce adverse impacts to ethnographic resources caused by visitor use. Adverse impacts will be minor and permanent.

The structured education program will hinder immediate access of visitors to the park and will impact their ability to freely access the park at their convenience; this will result in a long-term, moderate, adverse impact to the ability of visitors to access the park.

Because most large groups and individuals plan their trips in advance, the possible need for a reservation should not be a major inconvenience and will result in a long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impact on their access to the park.

The camping reservation system will result in an overall long-term, moderate, beneficial impact because of increased convenience and ability to be guaranteed a campsite in the park.

Under the selected action, the freedom of choice and flexibility to visit the sites will be retained. Visitors will largely be able to determine their own pace and visit sites at their own discretion. In addition, the strategies related to individual and group access will help minimize crowding, which should increase the unfettered access of visitors to the primary sites in the park and the ability to form connections with park resources. This will result in a long-term, moderate, beneficial impact.

The impact of alternative 2 on park operations will be moderate, beneficial, and long term given the new staffing and management systems that are identified to improve the education and management of visitors. However, the alternative will have increased staffing needs, along with the development of new management systems, which will have adverse impacts on park operations.

**Degree of effect on public health or safety**

Visitor safety will remain a priority under the selected action. None of the actions proposed in the selected action will adversely affect public health or safety. Several of the actions will beneficially affect public health and safety, including providing more structured education on park resources and reducing crowding and conflicts between visitors through improved visitor use management tools.

**Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas**

As described in the GMP amendment, Chaco Culture National Historical Park contains globally significant archeological resources and nationally significant ethnographic resources. No major, adverse impacts to historic or cultural resources, park lands, or wetlands were identified for the selected action.

The park lands do not contain prime farmlands, designated wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

**Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial**

None of the impacts from the actions proposed in the selected action has the potential to be highly controversial. At the conclusion of the public review and comment period on April 9, 2012, the National Park Service had received correspondence from 16 people or agencies. Given the substance of these comments, there is no evidence that the effect to the quality of the human environment will be highly controversial. Comments received related to the impacts of the alternatives were primarily focused on which user groups will be affected by the strategies (e.g., repeat visitors needing to participate in the structured education program, commercial groups needing to split into group sizes of 20 or less, and the application of the strategies to access by tribal members). Most of these concerns have been addressed through clarifications in the comment response and associated errata sheet.

**Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks**

The anticipated effects on the human environment based on the selected action, as analyzed in the environmental assessment, are not highly uncertain or unique, nor were any unknown risks identified.

**Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration**

As described in the GMP amendment, implementation of the selected action will neither result in significant adverse effects to the human environment nor set a precedent for future actions that could have significant effects.

**Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts**

As noted in the environmental assessment, external trends and changes, such as improvements to CR 7950 and, to a lesser extent, the release of the America the Beautiful quarter, and the status of the park as a UNESCO World Heritage Site could result in increased park visitation, resulting in inadvertent damage and vandalism to archeological resources. There may also be long-term, moderate, adverse impacts to visitor experience as a result of potential changes in visitation. The actions of the selected action will mitigate many of these adverse impacts, resulting in an overall long-term, minor, beneficial, cumulative impact. Impacts of the selected action will comprise a relatively substantial portion of the overall cumulative effect.

**Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources**

As described in the GMP amendment, no significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources will be lost or destroyed as a result of implementing the selected action. After applying Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) criteria of adverse effects (36 CFR part 800.5: Assessment of Adverse Effects), the National Park Service concluded that implementation of the selected action will have no adverse effect on cultural or historic resources listed or potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The New Mexico Historic Preservation Division concurred with the NPS determination of effect by letter dated July 18, 2012.

**Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat**

No federally listed threatened or endangered species are known to exist at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. There are five species of concern identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that may be found in the park. The actions being considered for the GMP amendment are unlikely to have any measurable effect on special status species or associated critical habitats. No new park areas will be opened to the public and no new visitor activities are proposed, apart from new educational orientation; visitor access will be limited to the same frontcountry sites and backcountry trails and during the same hours as currently allowed. Motor vehicle traffic is not expected to increase appreciably and changes in park operations will be largely administrative in nature. Therefore, there will be no or only negligible effects on special status species.

## **Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local environmental protection law**

The actions under the selected action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Public involvement concerning the GMP amendment took place in three ways. Visitors were surveyed in the summer and fall of 2009, a newsletter was distributed to the public to seek input on existing and potential visitor use-related issues and management strategies, and the GMP amendment was available for public review. The planning team and park staff developed the GMP amendment alternatives based on public comment and the mission, purpose, and significance of the park.

The visitor use and experience survey was conducted in the park during the summer and fall of 2009. The survey was conducted at several locations throughout the park over the course of four weeks during the months of July and October. Approximately 500 people participated in the survey—350 in the summer and 150 in the fall. The survey project was designed to gather information that will help park managers better understand the public's values and preferences about the park and assist in the development of the GMP amendment / environmental assessment.

The newsletter was distributed to the project mailing list (about 300 contacts) and made available on the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website for public review during a 5-week period from November 27 to December 31, 2009. In addition, news releases were distributed and notices announcing the project and the public scoping effort were published in the *Farmington Daily Times* on December 4, 11, 18, and 25, 2009. During the comment period, 36 pieces of correspondence were received with 149 comments. The main themes reflected in the comments showed concern for cultural resources, increasing visitor education and interpretative opportunities, management options, and visitor use and experience. Several comments opposed any further development of facilities and/or infrastructure in the park, but almost an equal number supported more development in the park. There were also several comments showing concern as to whether tribal interests were being taken into consideration.

The GMP amendment was made available for public review during a 5-week period from March 2 to April 9, 2012. A postcard announcing the comment period and the availability of the document for review was mailed to the project mailing list. In addition, the document was posted on the PEPC website. A hardcopy of the GMP amendment was mailed to 76 contacts associated with American Indian tribes and the state historic preservation office. In addition, news releases were distributed and notices announcing the public review of the GMP amendment were published in the *Farmington Daily Times* on March 10 to 12, 2012, in the *Albuquerque Journal* on March 9 to 11, 2012, and in the *Durango Herald* on March 9 to 11, 2012. Correspondences from 16 people or agencies were received during this time period.



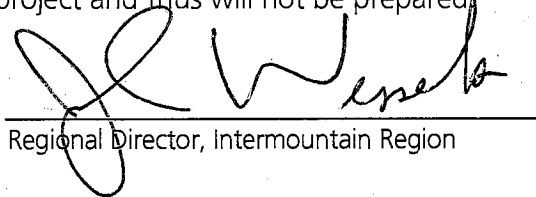
Comments on the GMP amendment included support and opposition to the campground reservation system, concern over the need for repeat visitors to participate in the structured education program, support for more roving rangers in the park, concern over the need to regulate access in any way, opposition to the group size limit for commercial groups, and concern over how the strategies will apply to tribal members. In addition, other comments related to questions on the visitor use projections that were cited in the GMP amendment and whether enough local archeological groups were solicited for input on the document. A summary of all substantive comments received and related responses can be found in *Responses to Substantive Comment*.

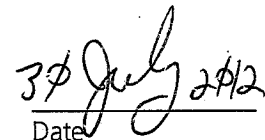
## CONCLUSION

As described above, the selected action does not constitute an action meeting the criteria that normally require preparation of an environmental impact statement. The selected action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Environmental impacts that could occur are limited in context and intensity, with both adverse and beneficial impacts that range from localized to widespread, short to long term, and negligible to moderate. There are no unmitigated adverse effects on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an environmental impact statement is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Approved:

  
Regional Director, Intermountain Region

  
Date

**ERRATA SHEETS**  
**GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT/  
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**  
**CHACO CULTURE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK**

Substantive comments to the GMP amendment / environmental assessment centered on eight topics: (1) ranger presence, (2) visitor orientation and education, (3) action alternatives, (4) reservation systems, (5) American Indian access, (6) focus of the plan, (7) public involvement, and (8) analysis included in the plan. The topics, which are addressed below, resulted in minor changes to the text of the environmental assessment.

**TEXT CHANGES**

"Overview of the Park," page 6, second column, second sentence, replace text *[t]heir descendants are the modern Southwest Indians* with *[t]heir descendants are some of the Southwest Indians*.

"Chapter 2: The Alternatives," page 40, second paragraph under "Group Management Immediate Strategies," replace paragraph with the following, *"[t]o ensure high quality group opportunities and maintain other desired conditions, groups would be required to obtain advanced reservations to the park. The number of noncommercial groups would be limited to no more than two per day. Large noncommercial groups would be required to split into smaller groups of no more than 20 people and would be asked to disperse their use across the various cultural sites in the park. This strategy may be applied, if needed, during park-sponsored and other special events, estimated at four or five days a year. During these times, other strategies (e.g., visitor education, additional staff, gate closures) may also be put in place to ensure protection of resources and visitor safety with increased use levels. In addition, this strategy would not apply to commercial groups, whose management would be directed by commercial use authorizations."*

"Chapter 2: The Alternatives," page 41, first paragraph under "Potential Management Strategies," replace paragraph with the following, *"if the standard for any indicator is, or likely to be, exceeded and patterns or levels of use are determined to be a significant contributing factor, all visitors may be required to obtain a reservation to visit the park. Some percentage of reservations (likely 15%-20%) may be set aside for those arriving without a reservation, on a first-come, first-served basis. This strategy may be applied, if needed, during park-sponsored and other special events, estimated at four to five days a year. During these times, other strategies (e.g., visitor education, additional staff, gate closures) may also be put in place to ensure protection of resources and visitor safety with increased use levels."*

"Chapter 2: The Alternatives," page 40, at the end of the first paragraph under "Visitor Knowledge/NPS-led Orientation, Immediate Management Strategies" and page 41, at the end of the first paragraph under "Visitor Knowledge/NPS-led Orientation, Immediate Management Strategies," add the following , "*Details of the structured education program will be determined upon implementation.*"

## **RESPONSES TO SUBSTANTIVE COMMENTS**

### **Increased Roving Ranger Patrols**

*Comment:* An alternative that was not considered, but should have been, is continuing the current visitor strategy enhanced with increased roving rangers—particularly in peak seasonal times and on weekends.

*Response:* As part of the plan, the National Park Service will be able to implement a variety of management strategies that help protect both the resources within and experiences of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. The use of roving rangers is one of the strategies included in the plan (page 40). The National Park Service is only able to increase staffing levels to the extent that current budgets allow.

### **Visitor Orientation and Education**

*Comment:* There should be a waiver system for those who have already gone through the orientation.

*Comment:* Would it be possible to have an enhanced access pass to those who can document sincere interest and some background in Southwestern archeology? A line should be drawn between limited access and total restriction (think of the Maxwell collections in the Hibben basement, locked in drawers).

*Comment:* Having rangers roving and talking with people seems like a better use of their time than making sure all visitors have had their structured education before coming into the park. There does not seem to be adequate space for very many visitors to have that structured education at the same time. The environmental impacts of creating a large vehicle waiting area, car emissions while waiting, and trash left to fly around the area should definitely be considered as a disadvantage.

*Comment:* If you require an educational program before accessing the park, two points: (1) it should be done as far as possible from the park itself, perhaps out by the highway, before the dirt road; and (2) there should be a waiver system for those who have already gone through the orientation.

*Response:* The structured education program for all visitors being considered in the GMP amendment is intended to help the park and its visitors protect the invaluable resources at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. This category of strategies aims to promote a high-quality visitor experience and ensure resource conditions are maintained by educating visitors on the importance and sensitivities of park resources and associated rules and regulations. The intent is to make visitors aware of the sensitive nature of park resources and the measures taken to preserve the park in its current state. Providing visitors with this information can increase visitor understanding, encourage behavior that results in less impact, and redirect visitation from heavily used areas. Education will be coupled with ongoing enforcement efforts to minimize intentional damage to park resources. The comments and suggestions received on this topic are greatly appreciated.

and will be taken into consideration when the education program is developed. The concern of repeat visitors having to go through the same orientation multiple times has been heard. The National Park Service will evaluate options that will make this process easier for repeat visitors. It is anticipated that the current park infrastructure can support the structured education program. The National Park Service will adjust implementation, if needed, to minimize environmental impacts.

### **Impacts of the Selected Action**

*Comment:* Similarly, the proposed \$140,000 automatic gate in the preferred alternative in the GMP amendment / environmental assessment will impact not only visitor access and experience, but it will alter the historic fabric of the canyon in unnecessary and unpredictable ways.

*Response:* The automatic gate will present a negligible influence on visitor experience because it will not delay access for any significant amount of time. The gate will be placed in the already developed road corridor near the visitor center. In addition, compatible materials and forms will be used in the design of the gate. It is not anticipated that the gate will impact the historic fabric (setting and historic resources) of the canyon.

### **Surveillance Additions**

*Comment:* Vandals will not be deterred by an orientation period . . . people that destroy or deface property have very little regard for laws. The best approach would be to put in surveillance equipment (possibly portable systems that can be moved from one area to another), advise people when they enter the park that there is video surveillance equipment in operation, and tell them what the penalties are for damaging federal property (possibly provide every person that enters the park with a pamphlet that defines the penalties).

*Response:* As part of the plan, the National Park Service will implement a variety of management strategies that help protect both the resources within and experiences of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Enforcement, including roving patrols and surveillance by park staff, and education are both important strategies included in the plan (page 40).

### **Shuttle System**

*Comment:* A suggestion for the GMP amendment is to learn from Wetherill Mesa, a success story at Mesa Verde. The interior park road was paved as a one-way loop for a transport system much like Wetherill Mesa's. It never happened because of budgetary reasons. Increased visitation at Chaco, if and when it happens, could fund or direct additional NPS resources toward a revival of that quiet shuttle plan, conveying visitors through what has come to be called downtown Chaco. Surely those seeking solitary spiritual experiences can be accommodated by backcountry trails.

*Response:* A shuttle system was not considered in this GMP amendment / environmental assessment primarily due to the economic infeasibility of this strategy, even with increased visitation. In addition, a shuttle will not fully meet the purpose and need of the plan because the pulsing of visitors could actually exacerbate existing resource and use conflict concerns.

### **Group Reservation**

*Comment:* Institute a reservation system limiting the number of visitors at one time.

*Response:* The plan includes the possibility of a reservation system in the future if monitoring determines it is necessary. Estimates for the reservation system are included in appendix A (pages 143–148).

*Comment:* Requiring groups to make a reservation is fine, but reservations need to be open a year in advance in order to plan group tours.

*Response:* When a reservation system is implemented, the details of that system will be developed at that time. This concern has been heard and will be considered during system development.

### **American Indian Access**

*Comment:* The draft plan should explicitly exempt tribal use from the consideration of alternatives for the management of visitor use. The draft plan states that traditionally associated tribes “have free and open access to use all the sites in the park.” As noted in the draft plan, discussion at a consultation meeting May 18, 2010, included access to sites for spiritual, ritual, or traditional purposes and allowing tribal members special use access by granting them greater flexibility than the current permitting system in place for visitors. The plan states, “[t]his special use system would be established on a case-by-case basis through consultation. . .”

*Response:* The National Park Service does not consider tribal use of Chaco Culture National Historical Park as part of recreational or educational visits. Rather, visitation by tribal members is arranged and managed through ongoing collaboration between the park and the tribes. This protocol will continue, and tribal access will be managed on a case-by-case basis.

### **Camping Reservation System**

*Comment:* Instituting reservations for camping would be great. I have tried to go there at off-peak dates only to arrive and find no camping spaces available. You could throw the reserved areas open at say 6 p.m. if those who made the reservation have not shown up.

*Comment:* “None of the management considers additional campsites. I have been turned away late in the day and it's a long drive to Angel Peak.”

*Response:* Altering existing facilities is out of the scope of this planning project. For this reason, changes to or expansion of campsites are not being considered. Park staff estimate that between 10 and 15 times a year the campground is completely full and some visitors are not able to find a campsite. A reservation system is proposed in this GMP amendment / environmental assessment in order to prevent visitors being turned away and to increase convenience for trip planning. When a reservation system is implemented, the details of that system will be developed at that time. The suggestions and considerations that were received as part of this GMP amendment / environmental assessment are appreciated and will be taken into consideration when the reservation system is developed.

### **Focus of the Plan**

*Comment:* The aesthetic/spiritual values of some NPS staff and some visitors appear to trump Chaco's real history. It was, at least periodically, a bustling place with thousands of people engaged in a wide range of economic, political, and ritual activities. Generations lived and died there. Whatever Chaco was, it emphatically was not a wilderness—a place of silence and solitude. The "spirituality" recognized as an area of significance is a 21st-century value; it does not refer to Native American heritage concerns or to what actually happened at Chaco historically.

*Response:* Information from the park's general management plan, foundation document, Getty Conservation Institute case study, public scoping, and visitor surveys was considered in the development of the goals and objectives of the plan and the alternatives. These information sources documented that visitors value conditions that promote natural quiet, low use levels, and close contact with park resources. Keeping distractions to a minimum is also important for fully appreciating the values of Chaco Culture National Historical Park (Getty Conservation Institute 2003; Freimund 2010; Lee and Stephens 1995).

### **Factual Error**

*Comment:* The "Overview of the Park, Cultural Resources" section concludes, "[t]heir descendants are the modern Southwest Indians." This statement is both incorrect and misleading. All modern Southwest Indians are not descendants of the prehistoric people of Chaco. This statement continues NPS misguided attempts to homogenize unique cultures into Native Americans and modern Southwest Indians.

*Response:* Language in the GMP amendment / environmental assessment, via the errata sheet, has been modified to address this concern. This sentence now reads, "[t]heir descendants are some of the Southwest Indians." See errata sheet for the complete document change.

## Public Involvement

*Comment:* There is concern that the park or National Park Service did not send this document out to those in the public with a primary concern in the area—Salmon Ruins Museum and Archaeology Southwest, among others. The National Park Service is encouraged to see local archeologists and groups that access Chaco regularly for group tours as important stakeholders in Chaco.

*Response:* There were several local archeology groups on the mailing list that received notice of the GMP amendment / environmental assessment. In addition, a press release was provided to local papers and was included in the *Farmington Daily Times* on March 11, 2012, in the *Albuquerque Journal* on March 9 to 11, 2012, and in the *Durango Herald* on March 9 to 11, 2012. The document and public review period were posted on the PEPC website located at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/chcu>.

*Comment:* The draft GMP amendment / environmental assessment fails to properly bring in consulting parties, cooperating agencies, tribes, the public, and archaeological professionals as there is no formal public participation/consultations with an EA process. The GMP amendment / environmental assessment NEPA approach shortchanges public participation and meaningful involvement by the wide ranges of the public, tribes, professional organizations, archeologists, archeo-astronomers, and other government agencies that have an extraordinary vested interest and knowledge critical for consideration in what happens at Chaco Culture National Historical Park in the future.

*Response:* The environmental assessment process provides ample opportunity for public participation. Consultation was conducted at both the scoping and document review phases of the project. Input from other agencies, tribes, the public, and archeological professionals was collected and used during the planning process for the GMP amendment.

## Analysis

*Comment:* By deferring the external impacts to the cumulative impacts section in chapter 4, yet relying on "improvements" to CR 7950 as the trigger for all alternatives, the entire draft GMP amendment / environmental assessment is devoid of any meaningful "hard look" analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act, particularly the section on "Environmental Consequences" and developed management prescriptions concerning visitation, limitations on group sizes, and reservation systems.

*Response:* Paving the road is not part of the NPS preferred alternative, and, therefore, is properly addressed as a cumulative action.

*Comment:* This statement confirms Chaco Culture National Historical Park as a site of global significance warranting a NEPA analysis concerning management at the park to assume the elevated level of significance. The National Park Service cannot utilize an environmental assessment to make critical decisions to Chaco Culture National Historical Park.



*Response:* The global significance of the park's resources does not constitute an automatic need for an environmental impact statement. The impacts from the actions within the plan will need to be considered to have a significant effect on the human environment, as defined by 40 CFR 1508.27, to trigger the need for an environmental impact statement.

*Comment:* The authors of the draft GMP amendment / environmental assessment go to great lengths to highlight the external pressures afflicting the park, and then absolve themselves of acknowledging the significance criteria in the connectivity of CR 7950 (as primary access to the park), energy exploration and development in proximity to the park, and the impacts to Chaco Culture National Historical Park. San Juan CR 7950 access and ongoing attempts by the Bureau of Land Management to sell oil and gas leases around Chaco Culture National Historical Park are connected actions to the park. There is no reason to implement any changes to the current Chaco Culture National Historical Park general management plan, but for impacts from the connected action of potential increases to visitation, when and if improvements to CR 7950 ever occur, (there is no current analysis in the form of a NEPA document that analyzes "Action Alternatives" for "improvements" to CR 7950).

*Response:* The purpose of this plan is to have a strategy in place should visitation change, regardless of reason. If visitation does change, the adoption of the plan will give the park the necessary tools to effectively manage changes in visitation. In addition, there are some immediate management strategies, as described above and in the plan, that are needed because of already occurring adverse effects to cultural resources, and these strategies would be implemented with adoption of this plan.

*Comment:* The GMP amendment / environmental assessment project scope, in association with external factors noted by the National Park Service, must be considered a significant major federal action because it meets the criteria defined under context and intensity.

*Response:* The National Environmental Policy Act [§102(C)] requires an EIS on "...proposals for legislation and other major Federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment..." As described in the EA, impacts from the actions within the plan were no greater than moderate, and therefore will not have significant effects on the human environment. To be considered significant, the environmental effects would need to be identified as major.

## **Action Alternatives**

*Comment:* In fact, NPS responsibilities for Chaco Culture National Historical Park certainly encompass section 4(f) requirements for CR 7950 as being a critical part of determining to what management prescriptions will come in to play within Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Action alternatives of the Chaco Culture National Historical Park GMP amendment / environmental assessment completely depend on what happens with access to the park. Action alternatives in the draft GMP amendment / environmental assessment are currently weakly formulated as there is no conclusive evidence that improvements to CR 7950 will occur or what these improvements will consist of. The National Park Service should strictly adhere to the requirements of Director's Order 12: *Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making*.

*Response:* Actual improvements to CR 7950 are not NPS actions, and therefore are outside the scope of this GMP amendment, except as cumulative actions. The purpose of this plan is to have a strategy in place should visitation change, regardless of reason. If visitation does increase, the adoption of the plan will give the park the necessary tools to effectively manage changes in visitation.

## **Managing Use Levels**

*Comment:* In the 25 years of bringing tours to Chaco Canyon, overcrowding has not been perceived to be a problem. This observation is confirmed by the official visitation figures cited in the draft plan amendment. Peak visitation has been occurring in May (school groups) averaging around 165 people per day. Total visitation has been falling to around 38,000 in 2010, despite the major improvements to the access road in recent years. There is no reason to believe visitation will increase significantly in the foreseeable future.

*Comment:* It would be desirable if the GMP amendment had analyses saying, "if/when visitation reaches X, parking and access options Y will be initiated."

*Comment:* There is absolutely no indication that visitation will increase at Chaco Culture National Historical Park that would warrant GMP changes at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. If the National Park Service insists on finalizing the GMP amendment / environmental assessment, the only credible and legally defensible finding of no significant impact (FONSI) decision would be to select the no-action alternative.

*Response:* The purpose of the plan is to have a strategy in place should visitation increase, regardless of the reason. Current visitation levels are already adversely affecting park resources and increased visitation will exacerbate those effects. Within the planning effort, many of the management strategies proposed will only be implemented if visitation markedly changes. If visitation does increase, the adoption of the plan will give the park the necessary tools to effectively manage changes in visitation. The park does currently experience times of high visitation and impacts to resources have occurred. Guidelines for a reservation system for individual access have

been included in appendix A (pages 143–148). These guidelines include estimates about the potential number of reservations that could be made available if or when the reservation system is implemented. The strategies laid out in the plan safeguard both the existing and future conditions of resources and visitor experiences within Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

*Comment:* The park proposes allowing only two groups per day in Chaco Culture National Park. This seems arbitrary and not adjustable to conditions. In addition, the park proposes limiting group size to a maximum of 20. Thus, if a group comes to the park with 22 people, the park would apparently require division into two smaller groups. The 20-person limit seems arbitrary and the National Park Service should better explain why 20 was chosen as the threshold?

*Response:* Strategies for managing larger groups within the GMP amendment / environmental assessment include limiting larger groups to 20 individuals. This number was identified through analysis of available facilities, such as restrooms, parking spaces and gathering areas, and patterns of use by larger groups who historically visit the park. Twenty individuals per group has been determined to be a manageable size that is protective of resources and helps minimize crowding conflicts at primary visitor use areas. This group size limit will only be applicable to noncommercial groups, such as school groups. When a commercial tour visits Chaco Culture National Historical Park, management of that visit will fall under a commercial use authorization, which may allow larger groups to visit the park given the expectation that these groups will be guided and managed by trained guides. Clarification that the strategy for managing group size only applies to noncommercial use has been added, via the errata sheet, to the GMP amendment / environmental assessment.

*Comment:* The National Park Service claims that the threat of increased visitation from the prospect of paving CR 7950 is the main fact that has brought about the proposed changes in the quality of the visitor experience, as well as access.

*Comment:* The National Park Service knows that the Federal Highway Administration and New Mexico Department of Transportation are tasked with NEPA compliance for CR 7950 and that access issues have a direct effect on Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Even if considered as reasonably foreseeable development, “improvements” on CR 7950 are critical to the idea that any change needs to occur for the Chaco Culture National Historical Park general management plan; otherwise, there are no data that support increased visitation to Chaco Culture National Historical Park (actual numbers currently show decreased visitation to the park). If there is no paving of CR 7950 and no legitimate increased visitation projections, the National Park Service is legally bound to simply pick the no-action alternative for the GMP amendment / environmental assessment and call it a day.

*Comment:* The easiest and least expensive way to limit the number of visitors to Chaco Canyon is to not pave the road.

*Response:* Decisions concerning CR 7950 will be made by San Juan County. The National Park Service has been collaborating with the county regarding if and how the road is improved. However, the decision on these actions resides with San Juan County and not the National Park Service. In addition to concerns related to potential changes in visitation from the paving of CR 7950, there are existing concerns about impacts from current use levels. This GMP amendment / environmental assessment is needed to minimize current impacts to the resources of Chaco Culture National Historical Park, as well as give park managers the tools they need to adapt if visitor use changes in the future.

*Comment:* "[T]here is no apparent controversy surrounding this planning effort, and the agency's preferred alternative was not expected to have major (significant) effects on the environment or park resources or values" (GMP amendment / environmental assessment, page 10) lacks any credible evidence. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts (segmentation). Actually, both resources and values are currently controversial at Chaco Culture National Historical Park and are expected to only increase with the National Park Service conceptually striving to balance protection of archeological access sites with visitation and access issues (constituted of internal and external pressures to the park).

*Response:* Concerns over controversy must relate to the **effects** from the plan, not the plan itself (40 CFR 1508.27). As described in the EA, no more than moderate effects were identified, nor did the comments received indicate any controversy regarding the assessed impacts of the plan's alternatives.

*Comment:* It is hard to understand why the National Park Service is underplaying the known controversies (including access, trespass and land ownership complexities, energy exploration, and development scenarios) surrounding the Chaco region and is relying on a segmented EA analysis to try to make significant decisions concerning management of the park related to visitation, access, and reservation systems.

*Response:* The issues of trespass, land ownership complexities, energy exploration, and development scenarios were outside the scope of the plan. The GMP amendment / environmental assessment does address access as it relates to management strategies needed to achieve the desired conditions of the park. As an amendment to the general management plan, the plan is focused on the issue of visitor use management.

*Comment:* The Chaco Alliance has long asserted that there are factual errors in the David Evans and Association visitation projections. The alliance is also aware of competing visitation projections for Chaco by URS Corporation, contractor for the Federal Highways Administration and San Juan County, for proposed improvements to CR 7950. The differences in the visitation projections seem to be based on competing desired conditions. Nevertheless, we recommend the asserted errors in the Evans visitation projections be addressed and corrected prior to the selection of an action alternative for implementation.

*Response:* Projections of changes to visitation were used in the plan to illustrate possible implications of paving the access road to the park. Questions on the accuracy of the cited reports do not diminish the need for the plan. Implementation of the plan will put processes in place that will allow park managers to respond to changes in visitation should they occur. If visitation does not change, aspects of the plan will not be implemented.

### **Requests for Further Information**

*Comment:* Per section 4.12 of Director's Order 12, the associate director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science will ensure that NPS responsibilities for commenting are clearly defined and that the National Park Service and its personnel work with federal, tribal, state, and local governments in identifying and evaluating potential impacts to resources under NPS jurisdiction or within areas of NPS expertise. San Juan Citizens Alliance and Chaco Alliance formally request receipt of the review conducted by the NPS associate director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science for the Chaco Culture National Historical Park draft GMP amendment / environmental assessment and CR 7950 NEPA proceedings.

*Response:* Section 4.12 of Director's Order 12 does not state the NPS associate director will review each project. Rather, the associate director will implement policies and guidance to ensure NPS responsibilities for public involvement are met.

*Comment:* Please provide written responses to the comments provided in this comment letter to both organizations.

*Response:* As required by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations, responses to substantive comments are included in this decision document.

### **Other**

*Comment:* When will cultural landscapes inventories for the park and the Greater Chaco Landscape including lands outside the park be initiated, developed, and implemented?

*Response:* The National Park Service will complete inventories as funding becomes available.

*Comment:* For example, the NPS desire to replace an ageing water tank on the mesa above the Chaco Culture National Historical Park visitor center has produced an eyesore that is not an in-kind replacement and stands in noncompliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. Chaco Culture National Historical Park is working with the New Mexico state preservation office to try to mitigate this problem, but nothing short of moving the location and reducing the size of the tank will solve the dilemma.

*Response:* The location of the water tank is outside the scope of this plan.

## Appendix—Nonimpairment Finding

NPS *Management Policies 2006* (section 1.4) requires analysis of potential effects to determine whether proposed actions will impair a park's resources and values. The fundamental purpose of the national park system, established by the NPS Organic Act of 1916 and reaffirmed by the General Authorities Act, as amended, begins with a mandate to conserve park resources and values. NPS managers must always seek ways to avoid, or to minimize to the greatest degree practicable, adverse impacts on park resources and values.

However, the laws do give the National Park Service the management discretion to allow impacts on park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purposes of the park. That discretion is limited by the statutory requirement that the National Park Service must leave resources and values unimpaired unless a particular law directly and specifically provides otherwise.

The prohibited impairment is an impact that, in the professional judgment of the responsible NPS manager, will harm the integrity of park resources or values, including the opportunities that otherwise would be present for the enjoyment of those resources or values (NPS *Management Policies 2006*). Whether an impact meets this definition depends on the particular resources that will be affected; the severity, duration, and timing of the impact; the direct and indirect effects of the impact; and the cumulative effects of the impact in question and other impacts.

An impact on any park resource or value may, but does not necessarily, constitute impairment. An impact will be more likely to constitute impairment to the extent that it affects a resource or value whose conservation is

- necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the park
- key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for enjoyment of the park
- identified in the park's general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents as being of significance

An impact will be less likely to constitute impairment if it is an unavoidable result of an action necessary to preserve or restore the integrity of park resources or values and it cannot be further mitigated.

Impairment may result from visitor activities; NPS administrative activities; or activities undertaken by concessioners, contractors, and others operating in the park. Impairment may also result from sources or activities outside the park.

Impairment findings are not necessary for visitor experience, socioeconomic, public health and safety, environmental justice, land use, and park operations because impairment findings relate back to park resources and values.

For the GMP amendment / environmental assessment for Chaco Culture National Historical Park, an impairment determination was made for the cultural resource categories of archeological resources and ethnographic resources. Both archeological and ethnographic resources are identified in the park's general management plan as significant and fundamental resources and values, and therefore meet the criteria for impairment outlined in *NPS Management Policies 2006*. Archeological and ethnographic resources are necessary to fulfill the specific purposes identified in establishing Chaco Culture National Historical Park and are key to the cultural integrity of the park. Although the topics of "Visitor Use and Experience" and Park Operations" were topics carried forth for impact analysis in the environmental assessment, *NPS Management Policies 2006* directs that these topics not be evaluated for impairment because they are not park resources and values.

## **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

### **Archeological Resources**

Chaco Culture National Historical Park contains more than 4,000 identified archeological resources (which include historic structures, rock art, and cultural landscape features for the purposes of the GMP amendment / environmental assessment). These resources represent 10,000 years of continuous human use within Chaco Canyon. Protecting archeological resources is necessary to fulfill the purposes for which the park was established. Archeological resources are key to the cultural integrity of the park and are cited as significant park resources in the park's general management plan.

Implementing the selected action will result a small degree of ongoing inadvertent wear and tear to archeological resources as well as some inevitable intentional visitor use impacts, such as vandalism, all of which are associated with visitation at the park. Although the context in which these impacts occur will be widespread and potentially encompass all of the park's archeological resources; they will occur most frequently in the highly visited sites in the park's frontcountry where most park visitation occurs. Because archeological resources are nonrenewable resources, any adverse impact to their physical condition will be permanent.

The strategies included in the selected action will establish a visitor orientation and educational program for all park visitors so that they may become aware of the fragility of the archeological resources of the park. This program is an effective way to encourage visitors to minimize their negative impacts to archeological resources. The selected action also includes strategies to manage individual and group visitor access to the park. All of the actions in the selected action will help reduce visitor use impacts that cause deterioration to the condition of the archeological resources of Chaco Culture National Historical Park and will help keep such impacts to the lowest level possible while continuing to keep the archeological resources of the park open to visitation.

Therefore, the identified adverse impacts resulting from the implementation of the selected action will be minor in intensity and not rise to the level of impairment to archeological resources.

### **Ethnographic Resources**

Ethnographic resources at Chaco Culture National Historical Park are those landscapes, objects, plants and animals, and sites and structures, such as Fajada Butte, that are part of the cultural systems or ways of life of the American Indian tribes associated with the park. Protecting ethnographic resources is necessary to fulfill the purposes for which the park was established. These resources are key to the cultural integrity of the park and are identified as significant resources in the park's general management plan.

Implementing the selected action will result in a small degree of ongoing inadvertent wear and tear to the resource condition of ethnographic resources due to visitor use activities, such as foot traffic. Some intentional visitor use impacts such as vandalism are associated with visitation at the park and will continue to affect the condition of ethnographic resources under the selected action. Although the context in which these impacts will occur will be widespread and potentially encompass all of the ethnographic resources of the park, they will occur most frequently in the highly visited sites in the park's frontcountry where most park visitation occurs. Because ethnographic resources are nonrenewable resources, any adverse impact to their physical condition will be permanent.

The actions included in the selected action will establish a visitor orientation and educational program for all park visitors so that they may become aware of the fragility of the cultural resources of the park, including ethnographic resources. This program is an effective way to encourage visitors to minimize their negative impacts to ethnographic resources. The selected action also includes strategies to manage individual and group visitor access to the park. All of the actions in the selected action will indirectly help reduce visitor use impacts that cause deterioration to the condition of ethnographic resources of the park and will help keep such impacts to the lowest level possible while continuing to keep the cultural resources of the park open to visitation. Therefore, the identified adverse impacts resulting from the implementation of the selected action will be minor in intensity and will not rise to the level of impairment to ethnographic resources.

In conclusion, as guided by this analysis, good science and scholarship, advice from subject matter experts and others who have relevant knowledge and experience, and the results of public involvement activities, it is the Superintendent's professional judgment that there will be no impairment of park resources and values from implementation of the preferred alternative.