

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK | FLORIDA

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK

FINAL GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN /
EAST EVERGLADES WILDERNESS STUDY /
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

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**Final General Management Plan / East Everglades Wilderness Study /
Environmental Impact Statement
Everglades National Park**

Collier, Miami-Dade, and Monroe Counties, Florida

Lead Agency: National Park Service

Cooperating Agency: South Florida Ecological Services Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Everglades National Park was dedicated in 1947 with 460,000 acres. As a result of various boundary additions, the park now encompasses 1,509,000 acres, including the largest legislated wilderness area (1,296,500 acres) east of the Rocky Mountains.

The last comprehensive effort for Everglades National Park was completed in 1979. Much has occurred since then—patterns and types of visitor use have changed, the *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan* was approved, and in 1989 the East Everglades Addition (109,600 acres) was added to restore Northeast Shark River Slough and enhance freshwater flows from the north end of the park to Florida Bay. Recent studies have expanded the knowledge and understanding of the resources, resource threats, and visitor use in the park. This general management plan will provide updated management direction for the entire national park, including the East Everglades Addition.

As part of the planning process for this general management plan, the National Park Service (NPS) has conducted extensive internal and external scoping to identify the planning issues and concerns that need to be addressed by the planning effort. The internal scoping and the issues have been reviewed and evaluated at multiple levels of management. Some of the recent issues identified through this scoping included potential impacts from climate change, storm surge, and sea level rise, and the cost and economic feasibility of new development at Everglades National Park. Alternatives were developed and revised to address these issues as well as remain focused on resource protection, visitor experience, and operational needs long considered part of this plan. The complete discussion of how the issues were identified and the resulting development and refinement of the alternatives is presented in chapters 1 and 2 and appendix B of the document.

The East Everglades Wilderness Study considerations in this plan provide a forum for evaluating lands within the East Everglades Addition for possible recommendation to Congress for inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system. The wilderness study is included because of public interest and because combining the wilderness study with the general management plan saves time and money. Wilderness, which can be designated only by Congress, provides for permanent protection of lands in their natural condition, providing outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation.

This document presents and analyzes four alternative ways of managing Everglades National Park for the next 20 or more years—alternative 1 (no action), and three action alternatives, the NPS preferred alternative, alternative 2, and alternative 4. (Alternative 3 was dismissed from detailed analysis as explained later in this document). Alternative 1 (no action) provides a baseline for evaluating changes and impacts of the three action alternatives. No wilderness is proposed for the East Everglades Addition in alternative 1. The NPS preferred alternative would support restoration of natural systems while providing improved opportunities for quality visitor experiences. It proposes about 42,200 acres for designation as wilderness and about 43,100 acres for designation as potential wilderness within the East Everglades Addition. Alternative 2 would strive to maintain and enhance visitor opportunities and protect natural systems while preserving many traditional routes and ways of visitor access. It proposes 39,500 acres for designation as wilderness within the East Everglades Addition. Alternative 4 would provide a high level of support for protecting natural systems while improving opportunities for certain types of visitor activities. Alternative 4 would eliminate commercial airboat tours within the park. It proposes 42,700 acres for designation as wilderness and 59,400 acres for designation as potential wilderness within the East Everglades Addition.

All four alternatives, including the no-action alternative, would enhance Flamingo Concession Services and facilities, but at a reduced level from what was described in the 2008 Commercial Services Plan. All of the action alternatives include construction of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas visitor facility at Gulf Coast, and each of these three alternatives would provide different new visitor opportunities. The four alternatives are described in detail in chapter 2 and summarized in table 5 of that chapter. The key impacts of implementing the four alternatives are described in the following summary, detailed in chapter 5, and summarized in table 6 (chapter 2).

For further information about this management plan please contact Fred Herling, supervisory park planner at Fred_Herling@nps.gov, 305.242.7704, or 40001 State Road 93363, Homestead, FL 33034.

SUMMARY

Everglades National Park (the park) was authorized by Congress in 1934. Through the sustained efforts of many supporters and critical funding provided by the Florida state legislature, the park was eventually established on December 6, 1947, with 460,000 acres. Boundary changes expanded the park to 1.4 million acres by 1958. In 1978, a 1,296,500-acre designated wilderness area that included land, freshwater, and submerged marine areas was established within Everglades National Park. It was renamed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness in 1997. The Everglades National Park Protection and Expansion Act of 1989 added the East Everglades Addition (109,506 acres) and brought the Northeast Shark River Slough into the park. This East Everglades Addition (the Addition) has provided the cornerstone of long-range planning to restore more natural hydrologic conditions and revitalize wildlife habitat and ecosystem health. The park now encompasses 1,509,000 acres, including the largest designated wilderness area east of the Rocky Mountains. Many governmental and nongovernmental organizations are working together toward a balanced and sustainable restored south Florida ecosystem. Restoration efforts have raised public awareness of issues within and around the park and changed the framework for discussion of many issues affecting the park.

The approved general management plan will be the basic document for managing Everglades National Park for the next 20 to 30 years. It will define desired resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved and provide a framework for decisions on how to best protect resources, how to provide quality visitor opportunities, how to manage visitor use, and what kind of facilities, if any, to develop in or near the park.

This new management plan for Everglades National Park is needed because the last

comprehensive planning effort for the park was completed in 1979. Much has occurred since then—patterns and types of visitor use have changed, the *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan* (CERP) was approved, and the national park boundary was modified in 1989 with the 109,506-acre East Everglades Addition. Also, recent studies have enhanced National Park Service (NPS) understanding of resources, resource threats, and visitor use in the park. Each of these changes has major implications for how visitors access and use the park and the facilities needed to support those uses, for how resources are managed, and for how the National Park Service manages its operations.

This document includes a wilderness study for the East Everglades Addition. The wilderness study evaluates these lands for possible recommendation to Congress for inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system. A study is needed because the Wilderness Act of 1964, Secretarial Order 2920, and NPS *Management Policies 2006* require the National Park Service to study roadless and undeveloped areas within the national park system, including new areas or expanded boundaries, to determine whether they should be designated as wilderness.

Wilderness studies assess the lands to determine if they possess wilderness characteristics and then propose all, some, or none of the eligible lands for designation as wilderness. Chapter 3 of this document discusses the wilderness study and proposal in detail and provides related background information about wilderness at Everglades National Park.

This *Final General Management Plan / East Everglades Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement* presents and analyzes four alternative ways of managing Everglades National Park—alternative 1 (the no-action

alternative), the NPS preferred alternative, alternative 2, and alternative 4. Alternative 3 was dismissed from detailed analysis (see the “Alternatives and Actions Considered but Dismissed from Detailed Evaluation” section in chapter 2 for more information).

Public and internal (NPS) scoping revealed several major issues for the general management plan to address such as effective management of motorboating in shallow marine waters, user capacity, park operations, management of the East Everglades Addition, and whether any areas within the Addition should be proposed for wilderness designation. The main areas of controversy have been management of marine boating, management of private and commercial airboating, and wilderness in East Everglades.

Continued scoping and internal review resulted in refinement of the alternatives, which reduced the proposed one-time facility construction improvements and rehabilitation costs, as well as long-term operational commitments while maintaining the park’s focus on enhancing visitor services and opportunities at these important visitor areas.

A discussion of the process and issues identified and how the alternatives were refined is included in chapter 2. Other issues identified in more recent scoping and review such as how to support the resilience of the park to expected impacts from climate change, such as sea level rise, coastal erosion, and higher storm surges, can be found in the mitigation measures section at the end of chapter 2.

Following public review of the *Draft General Management Plan / East Everglades Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement*, the preferred alternative was further refined to address public and agency concerns and comments. Key refinements to the preferred alternative based on public and agency comment on the Draft GMP/EIS include:

- Refinements to zoning of Florida Bay, including development of a new

pole/troll/idle zone, and the establishment of new on-plane access corridors/areas, idle speed corridors, and slow speed corridors, to provide reasonable access to key destinations and across the bay while still maintaining and protecting important resources.

- In the East Everglades Addition access opportunities were improved through refinements to backcountry/ frontcountry zoning as well as refinements to the wilderness proposal to recognize that ongoing ecosystem restoration in the East Everglades Addition would have adverse impacts to the areas wilderness character during the period when restoration activities are occurring.
- The “Alternative Wilderness Waterway” as it was referred to in the *Draft General Management Plan / East Everglades Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement* was re-named the “Everglades Paddling Trail” to more accurately reflect the primary use of the trail. Three segments of the Everglades Paddling Trail were modified to be treated as backcountry (nonmotorized) zones seasonally, during the peak winter and early spring seasons, and a seasonal idle speed segment would be established to provide a variety of possible experiences in this part of the park.

A detailed discussion of changes to the document resulting from substantive comments can be found in “Appendix I: Comment Analysis and Response Report.”

The following portion of this summary is intended to highlight the differences among the alternatives rather than provide a comprehensive summary of what is contained in the alternatives. To understand the full

details and actions proposed in the alternatives, please see chapter 2.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE 1 (NO ACTION) AND THE ACTION ALTERNATIVES (PREFERRED, ALTERNATIVE 2, AND ALTERNATIVE 4)

There are several programs and processes that would be implemented in the action alternatives (preferred, alternative 2, and alternative 4). These programs are described below.

An **adaptive management program** would be developed to evaluate the success of management actions in achieving desired resource and visitor use conditions and modify management strategies as needed to improve success in achieving desired conditions. Adaptive management strategies may require additional planning and compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act when implemented and would not necessitate revisions to the *Final General Management Plan / East Everglades Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement*. Specific management strategies and their efforts would be determined during later implementation-level planning efforts.

An **Everglades National Park Advisory Committee**, composed of diverse stakeholders would be established to help park managers consider various perspectives on different management issues such as resource protection, visitor use and access (particularly the management of boating in shallow marine waters), zoning refinements, education programs, monitoring, and restoration efforts during adaptive implementation of the approved management plan.

A **user capacity program** would be implemented to assist in managing the levels, types, and patterns of visitor use to preserve park resources and quality of the visitor experience. Components would include: (1)

establish desired conditions for various areas of the park through management zoning, (2) identify indicators to monitor to determine whether desired conditions are being met, (3) identify standards (limits of acceptable change) for the indicators, (4) monitor indicators to determine if there are disturbing trends or if standards are being exceeded, and (5) take management action to maintain or restore desired conditions.

A **comprehensive cultural resource management program** would be established, focusing on efforts to inventory, document, and protect all types of cultural resources; regularly monitor archeological sites and other historic properties to assess resource conditions and inform long-term treatment strategies; interpret selected cultural sites for the public; and better interpret and protect ethnographic resources in consultation with associated American Indian tribes and others traditionally associated with the park.

A **strong natural resource management program** would be developed to support implementation of desired conditions described in this general management plan, implement natural resource components of this plan, and contribute to the adaptive management and user capacity components of this plan.

A **boater education permit program** would be established to promote shared stewardship of marine resources, including shallow sea bottom areas, seagrasses, and wildlife. Operators of motorboats and nonmotorized boats (including paddled craft) would complete a mandatory education program to obtain a permit to operate vessels in the park. Program information would be tailored to the type of craft and/or type of trip and would be widely available at the park; on the Internet; in gateway communities, marinas, hotels; and from guides; etc.

ALTERNATIVE 1 (NO ACTION)

Concept

The no-action alternative (alternative 1), provides a baseline for evaluating changes and impacts of the three action alternatives. This baseline is characterized primarily by conditions at Everglades National Park as of December 2009, with continuation of current management practices into the future (i.e., business as usual). This alternative assumes implementation of some approved and funded facility improvements via the concessioner and other improvements via the National Park Service, as well as currently unfunded improvements at Flamingo such as rebuilding visitor lodging and rehabilitating the visitor center as outlined in the *Flamingo Commercial Services Plan*. It is anticipated that the most financially feasible and viable approach will be defined and implemented via the upcoming 2013 concessions contract for Flamingo.

Otherwise, the built environment would remain at its current level. Existing facilities at the park headquarters area, Royal Palm, Long Pine Key, Key Largo, Shark Valley, and Gulf Coast would be maintained and continue to serve operational needs and visitors—in some cases at less than desired levels.

Management activities would continue to conserve natural resources and processes while accommodating a range of visitor uses and experiences.

Visitors would continue to have access to a wide variety of land- and water-based opportunities and programs, including concessioner trips at Gulf Coast, Shark Valley, and Flamingo, plus self-guided opportunities and guided trips throughout the park.

Parkwide Visitor Experience and Facilities

Boat tours, canoe/kayak rentals, interpretive tours, fishing tours, and paddling tours would continue to be offered in the Gulf Coast and

Ten Thousand Islands area via commercial service providers.

Existing facilities would remain.

Florida Bay

Small areas of idle speed restriction would remain. All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks) would remain closed to public use.

East Everglades Addition

The Addition would continue to be managed under the guidance provided in the Expansion Act and the Land Protection Plan.

Commercial airboating would continue at the discretion of owners. Private airboating would also continue.

Operations. There would be no change in existing operations or the full-time equivalent (FTE) employee staffing level of 214 in 2011.

Key Impacts. The most notable impacts of the no-action alternative would be (1) continued long-term, baywide, moderate, adverse impacts on vegetation (primarily seagrass) in Florida Bay from propeller scarring and boat groundings; (2) long-term adverse effects on manatees from boat and propeller strikes and habitat disturbance constituting a *may affect, likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (3) continued long-term, moderate, adverse effects on sea turtles from human activities (primarily motor-boating and recreational fishing), resulting in a *may affect, likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (4) localized, long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impacts on natural soundscapes resulting from noise associated with human activities (especially those involving motorized vehicles); (5) long-term or permanent, minor to moderate, adverse impacts on museum collections; (6)

long-term, moderate to major, adverse impacts on the character of submerged marine wilderness in Florida Bay; (7) long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impacts as well as long-term, minor to moderate, beneficial impacts on visitor experience and opportunities; and (8) long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impacts as well as long-term, minor to moderate, beneficial impacts on NPS operations at the park.

NPS PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Concept

Using management zoning and collaborative techniques such as adaptive management, user education, and a national park advisory committee, the NPS preferred alternative would support restoration of natural systems while providing improved opportunities for quality visitor experiences. This concept is represented in management zoning by establishing pole/troll zones and pole/troll/idle zones over some shallow areas of Florida Bay (submerged marine wilderness) and by managing about 27,300 acres in the northwest portion of the East Everglades Addition as the frontcountry zone, where commercial airboat tours and private airboat use by eligible individuals would continue. Much of the East Everglades Addition (the portion where airboat use would not occur) would be proposed for wilderness and potential wilderness designation.

Parkwide Programs

In addition to the parkwide programs listed earlier in this summary for the action alternatives, a boating safety and resource protection plan would be developed. This plan would address boating in marine waters of Florida Bay, the Gulf Coast, and Ten Thousand Islands in more detail regarding visitor safety and resource protection. The plan would evaluate how to further avoid/minimize the risk of boat on boat collisions, boat on wildlife collisions, groundings, and

other impacts on the sea bottom, which is federally designated wilderness. Because this study would address how to minimize risks to wildlife (including the manatee and other marine endangered species), a separate manatee management plan would be unnecessary. The plan has been identified as a more effective way to protect threatened and endangered species and other important resources in the park, rather than addressing issues in a narrower way through the development of separate management plans for resources. The plan would study in more detail the Florida Bay channel/access routes, shown on the “NPS Preferred Alternative” map and make more detailed decisions about how/if channel/access routes would be marked and accessed. This plan would be developed with public input and would be updated regularly.

Parkwide Visitor Experience and Facilities

As funding permits, Flamingo facilities would be improved or upgraded while preserving the historic integrity of the Mission 66 District as outlined in the *Flamingo Concession Services Plan*. The concession operation at Everglades City would offer expanded opportunities to visit Ten Thousand Islands, Gulf Coast, and Wilderness Waterway through boat tours and canoe/kayak rentals. Other commercial services would be pursued to provide visitors with more opportunities such as interpretive, fishing, and paddling tours. Additional land-based interpretive programs and activities would link the park and neighboring communities. A cultural heritage interpretive water trail would be established in the Ten Thousand Islands area.

The establishment of a backcountry zone in the East Everglades Addition and pole/troll and pole/troll/idle zones and idle and slow-speed corridors in Florida Bay would change the way visitors access and use these areas.

Chekika, a former state recreation area, would be open at least seasonally as a day use area

with enhanced education and recreation programs.

Visitor experiences at Shark Valley would be improved through the addition of shelters/rest stops along the loop road in addition to on-site parking and traffic flow improvements.

Small facilities would be constructed to provide visitors with orientation information in the Homestead/Florida City area, along Tamiami Trail, and in Key Largo. These facilities would likely be operated in partnership with other agencies/organizations.

New campsites or camping platforms (chickees) would be constructed in Florida Bay, the East Everglades Addition, and along the Gulf Coast.

The collections management center, where museum items and artifacts are stored, would be relocated to a new facility in the park. This new facility would allow the public to view these items, as appropriate.

A new Everglades Paddling Trail would be established to provide enhanced opportunities for a more tranquil backcountry experience that is more consistent with wilderness values. This route would be minimally marked to preserve scenery and minimize maintenance requirements. To provide wilderness paddling experiences, a few segments would seasonally be treated as backcountry (nonmotorized) zones as well as seasonal slow speed zones to provide a variety of possible experiences in this part of the park.

Florida Bay

Approximately 102,800 acres in the shallows of the bay would be managed as a pole/troll zone and approximately 24,600 acres would be managed as pole/troll/idle zones. These zones would be designated to better protect the sea bottom, including wilderness resources, seagrass beds, and important ecological habitats.

Under this alternative, about 26% of Florida Bay waters within the park (392,580 acres) would be in the pole/troll zone and 6% would be within the pole/troll/idle zone. The zones would be traversed by designated channels/access routes. The term “channel/access routes” refers to the traditional, longstanding method that has been used in the park to identify motorboat transit corridors in Florida Bay, the Ten-Thousand Islands and other backcountry marine waters of Everglades National Park for many decades. The channel/access routes identified on the Preferred Alternative map are designed to facilitate boating transit in the park’s marine and estuarine waters, to protect important resources, and to provide safe, high-quality visitor experiences. Routes would include those already marked/maintained by the park and additional historical routes that would allow on-plane, idle speed, or slow speed transit depending on resource, visitor experience and safety considerations.

The park’s designated channel/access routes are marked with wooden 4”x4” posts and pointers or PVC pipe and pointers. The pointers are attached at the top of each marker, and the channel/access routes are often “gated” to indicate how boaters should enter and navigate through the corridor in order to avoid/minimize natural and wilderness resource impacts and ensure safe transit to the maximum extent possible.

An important GMP implementation project, the Boating Safety and Resource Protection Plan (discussed in more detail in the preferred alternative in chapter 2) would occur with additional public involvement and would analyze these and other features on a site-specific basis and recommend modifications over time. For additional details on designated channel/access routes, please see the NPS Preferred Alternative map in Chapter 2.

Portions of the waters along the north shoreline of Florida Bay would be managed as idle speed, no-wake areas. All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and

creeks), except Joe Bay and Snag Bay as discussed below, would remain closed to public use and managed as a special protection zone. Joe Bay includes the smaller area to the east known as Snag Bay; the two areas make up roughly 48% of Crocodile Sanctuary. For simplicity in this plan, the two bays will be referred to collectively as Joe Bay.

Joe Bay would be reopened for paddling use only (and managed as the backcountry zone). Additional paddling and boat access would be provided through a new launch point near Long Sound on U.S. 1 (and managed as the boat access zone with idle-speed along shorelines), in partnership with the Florida Department of Transportation and others.

East Everglades Addition

About 27,300 acres in the northwest portion of the East Everglades Addition would be managed as the frontcountry zone, 81,700 acres in the backcountry (nonmotorized) zone, and 600 acres in the developed zone.

Commercial airboating would be operated under concessions contracts, and commercial airboats would operate on designated routes. Private airboating (subject to provisions in the East Everglades Expansion Act) would be allowed on designated routes within the frontcountry zone.

About 24,350 acres were determined to be ineligible for wilderness designation including about 16,400 acres in the frontcountry zone where commercial airboating would operate. About 43,100 acres would be proposed as potential wilderness and about 42,200 acres would be proposed for wilderness designation (please note that acreages are based on small scale maps and are approximate).

Operations. A new East Everglades administration/operations center would be built near but outside the park on land acquired from willing sellers. Everglades National Park has acquired a site close to the park boundary near Chekika, which will be

used to support park administration and operational needs in the East Everglades. The National Park Service would strive to consolidate facilities in a more central location along Tamiami Trail, and the agency would coordinate with other land management agencies to share equipment and resources for improved operational efficiency.

An additional 35 FTE employees throughout the park would be needed to implement this alternative.

Key Impacts. The most notable impacts of implementing the NPS preferred alternative would be (1) long-term, baywide, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on vegetation (primarily seagrass) in Florida Bay from new programs and changes in management of recreational boating in Florida Bay; (2) reduced propeller scaring and boat grounding, decreased underwater noise from motorboats, improved habitat, and minor benefits to manatees from new programs and changes in management of recreational boating in Florida Bay, constituting a *may affect, not likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (3) reduced impacts on sea turtles and their habitats, resulting in long-term minor benefits and long-term moderate adverse impacts (primarily due to motorboating and recreational fishing) and a *may affect, likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (4) long-term, local, minor to moderate, adverse, as well as minor to moderate beneficial impacts on natural soundscapes at the park from noise associated with human activities (especially those involving motorized vehicles); (5) long-term beneficial and short-term, negligible to minor, adverse impacts on museum collections; (6) long-term moderate beneficial impacts on the character of submerged marine wilderness in Florida Bay; (7) long-term, major, beneficial impacts on the wilderness character of the East Everglades Addition; (8) long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impacts as well as long-term, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on visitor experience and opportunities; and (9) short- and long-term,

negligible to minor, adverse impacts and long-term, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on park operations.

ALTERNATIVE 2

Concept

Alternative 2 would strive to maintain and enhance visitor opportunities and protect natural systems while preserving many traditional routes and visitor access. This concept is represented in management zoning by the boat access zone in Florida Bay and a large (56,000 acres) frontcountry zone in the East Everglades Addition. This alternative would rely more on boater education and enhanced ranger patrols to provide some measure of increased protection for seagrass beds, banks, and other submerged marine wilderness values. Like the NPS preferred alternative, alternative 2 would continue visitor opportunities for commercial airboat tours. A modest portion of the East Everglades Addition (the southern portion, where airboat use would not occur) would be proposed for wilderness designation.

Parkwide Programs

In addition to the parkwide programs listed earlier in this summary for the action alternatives, a manatee management plan would be developed to identify ways to improve manatee protection within the national park while maintaining as many existing recreational boating opportunities as possible. This effort would include staff participation of partner agencies having manatee management responsibilities. Protection measures would be implemented using management tools that are as flexible as possible such as the Superintendent's Compendium.

Parkwide Visitor Experience and Facilities

As funding permits, Flamingo facilities would be improved or upgraded as outlined in the *Flamingo Concession Services Plan*.

The concession operation at Everglades City would offer expanded opportunities to visit Ten Thousand Islands, the Gulf Coast, and Everglades Paddling Trail through boat tours and canoe/kayak rentals. Other commercial services would be pursued to provide visitors with more opportunities such as interpretive, fishing, and paddling tours. Additional land-based interpretive programs and activities would link the park and neighboring communities. (This is the same as in the NPS preferred alternative, except that the cultural heritage trail would not be developed.)

The southern portion of the East Everglades Addition would be managed as the backcountry (nonmotorized) zone.

Chekika would be open, at least seasonally, as a day use area and for primitive camping.

New campsites or camping platforms (chickees) would be constructed in Florida Bay, the East Everglades Addition, and along the Gulf Coast.

The collections management center, where museum items and artifacts are stored, would be relocated to a new facility in the park. This new facility would allow the public to view these items, as appropriate.

A new Everglades Paddling Trail would be established to provide enhanced opportunities for a quieter, more tranquil experience that is more consistent with wilderness values. The Everglades Paddling Trail would be unmarked. Also, except for existing idle speed, no-wake areas, the entire Everglades Paddling Trail would be in the boat access zone.

Florida Bay

Small areas of idle speed restriction would remain. All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks) would be open to the public for limited use.

East Everglades Addition

About 56,000 acres in the northern portion of the East Everglades Addition would be managed as the frontcountry zone. The remainder would be managed as the backcountry (nonmotorized) zone less about 600 acres in the developed zone at Chekika.

Commercial airboating would be operated under concessions contracts, and commercial airboats would operate on designated routes. Private airboating (subject to provisions in the East Everglades Expansion Act) would be allowed in the frontcountry zone on designated routes.

About 39,500 acres would be proposed as wilderness; there would be no proposed potential wilderness.

Operations. A new East Everglades administration/operations center would be built near but outside the park on land acquired from willing sellers. Everglades National Park has acquired a site close to the park boundary near Chekika, which will be used to support park administration and operational needs in the East Everglades. The National Park Service would strive to consolidate facilities in a more central location along Tamiami Trail. The agency would coordinate with other land management agencies to share equipment and resources for improved operational efficiency.

An additional 26 FTE employees throughout the park would be needed to implement this alternative.

Key Impacts. The most notable impacts of implementing alternative 2 would be: (1) long-

term, baywide, moderate, adverse impacts on vegetation (primarily seagrass) in Florida Bay from propeller scarring and boat groundings; (2) continued long-term, moderate, adverse effects on the manatee from boat and propeller strikes and habitat disturbance, but also minor benefits from new programs, constituting a *may affect, likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (3) benefits to sea turtles from habitat protection and new programs and some continued, long-term, moderate, adverse effects from human activities (primarily motorboating and recreational fishing), which would result in a *may affect, likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (4) long-term, local, minor to moderate, adverse as well as negligible to minor, beneficial impacts on natural soundscapes at the park from noise associated with human activities (especially those involving motorized vehicles); (5) long-term beneficial and short-term, negligible to minor, adverse impacts on museum collections; (6) long-term minor to moderate beneficial impacts on the character of submerged marine wilderness in Florida Bay; (7) long-term, major, beneficial impacts on the wilderness character of the East Everglades Addition; (8) long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impacts as well as long-term, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on visitor experience and opportunities; (9) short- and long-term, negligible to minor, adverse impacts and long-term, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on park operations.

ALTERNATIVE 3

Alternative 3 was created during an early phase of alternatives development, but was dropped from detailed consideration in this plan. See the “Alternatives and Actions Considered but Dismissed from Detailed Evaluation” section in chapter 2 for more information.

ALTERNATIVE 4

Concept

Alternative 4 would provide a high level of support for protecting natural systems while improving opportunities for certain types of visitor activities. This concept is represented in management zoning by establishing pole/troll zones over shallow areas of Florida Bay and managing 21,600 acres in the northwest portion of the East Everglades Addition as the frontcountry zone (where private airboating by eligible individuals would continue). Commercial airboat tours in the national park would be discontinued in this alternative. Nearly all of the East Everglades Addition would be proposed for eventual wilderness designation.

Parkwide Programs

In addition to the parkwide programs listed earlier in this summary for the action alternatives, a manatee management plan would be developed to identify ways to improve manatee protection within the national park while maintaining as many existing recreational boating opportunities as possible (as in alternative 2).

Parkwide Visitor Experience and Facilities

As funding permits, Flamingo facilities would be improved or upgraded as outlined in the *Flamingo Concession Services Plan*.

As in the NPS preferred alternative, the concession operation at Everglades City would offer expanded opportunities to visit Ten Thousand Islands, the Gulf Coast, and Wilderness Waterway through boat tours and canoe/kayak rentals. Other commercial services would be pursued to provide visitors with more opportunities such as interpretive, fishing, and paddling tours. Additional land-based interpretive programs and activities

would link the park and neighboring communities. A cultural heritage interpretive water trail would be established in the Ten Thousand Islands area.

Management of backcountry zones in the East Everglades Addition and pole/troll zones and idle speed, no-wake zones in Florida Bay would change the way visitor's access and use these areas.

Chekika would be open, at least seasonally, as a day use area and as an environmental education venue.

Small facilities would be constructed to provide visitors with orientation information in the Homestead/Florida City area, in Key Largo, and along Tamiami Trail. These facilities would likely be operated in partnership with other agencies/organizations.

New campsites or camping platforms (chickees) would be constructed in Florida Bay, the East Everglades Addition, and along the Gulf Coast.

The collections management center would be relocated to a new facility outside the park, possibly in partnership with another entity. This new facility would allow the public to view these items, as appropriate.

A new Everglades Paddling Trail would be established to provide enhanced opportunities for a quieter, more tranquil experience that is more consistent with wilderness values. This route would be minimally marked to preserve scenery and minimize maintenance requirements. To provide wilderness paddling experiences, some segments would be designated idle speed, no-wake areas or backcountry (nonmotorized) zones. Some segments of the Everglades Paddling Trail would be in the boat access zone.

Florida Bay

Approximately 159,564 acres in shallow areas of the bay would be managed as pole/troll zones to better protect the sea bottom. These zones would cover about 41% of Florida Bay waters within the park. The zones would be traversed by marked channel/access routes. The waters from Middle Cape to East Cape would be managed as an idle speed, no-wake area. All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks) would remain closed to public use and managed as the special protection zone.

East Everglades Addition

About 21,600 acres in the northwest portion of the Addition would be managed as the frontcountry zone. The remainder would be managed as the backcountry (nonmotorized) zone less about 600 acres in the developed zone at Chekika.

Commercial airboating would be discontinued. Private airboating (subject to provisions in the East Everglades Expansion Act) would continue in the frontcountry zone on designated routes.

About 42,700 acres would be proposed for wilderness designation and about 59,400 acres would be proposed as potential wilderness.

Operations. A new East Everglades administration/operations center would be built near but outside the park on land acquired from willing sellers. Everglades National Park has acquired a site close to the park boundary near Chekika, which will be used to support park administration and operational needs in the East Everglades. The National Park Service would coordinate with other land management agencies along Tamiami Trail to pursue cooperative projects for improved operational efficiency.

An additional 37 FTE employees throughout the park would be needed to implement this alternative.

Key Impacts. The most notable impacts of implementing alternative 4 would be (1) long-term, baywide, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on vegetation (primarily seagrass) in Florida Bay from new programs and changes in management of recreational boating in Florida Bay; (2) reduced boat strikes, decreased underwater noise from motorboats, improved habitat, and moderate benefits to manatees from new programs and changes in management of recreational boating in Florida Bay and along the Everglades Paddling Trail, a *may affect, not likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (3) reduced impacts on sea turtles and their habitats, resulting in localized, long-term, minor benefits and long-term moderate adverse impacts (primarily due to motorboating and recreational fishing) and a *may affect, likely to adversely affect* finding under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act; (4) long-term, local, minor to moderate, adverse as well as minor to moderate, beneficial impacts on the natural soundscape at the park resulting from noise associated with human activities (especially those involving motorized vehicles); (5) long-term beneficial and short-term, negligible to minor, adverse impacts on museum collections; (6) long-term, major, beneficial impacts on the character of the East Everglades Addition; (7) long-term, moderate to major, adverse as well as long-term, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on visitor experience and opportunities; and (8) short- and long-term, minor to moderate, adverse impacts as well as long-term, moderate to major, beneficial impacts on park operations.

The following table summarizes major differences among the alternatives.

TABLE OF MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ALTERNATIVES

	Alternative 1 (No Action)	Preferred Alternative	Alternative 2	Alternative 4
Florida Bay Management	Small areas of idle speed restriction would remain.	About 127,400 acres in the shallows of the bay would be managed as pole/troll and pole/troll/idle zones to better protect the sea bottom. These zones would be traversed by designated channels/access routes.	Small areas of idle speed restriction would remain.	About 159,564 acres in shallow areas of the bay would be managed as pole/troll zones to better protect the sea bottom. These zones would be traversed by marked channel/access routes.
	N/A	Portions of the waters along the north shoreline would be managed as idle and slow-speed corridors.	N/A	The waters from Middle Cape to East Cape would be managed as an idle speed, no-wake area.
	All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks) would remain closed to the public.	All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks), except Joe Bay and Snag Bay, would remain closed to the public (managed as the special protection zone). Joe Bay would be reopened for paddling use only (managed as the backcountry zone).	All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks) would be open to the public for certain types of use.	All areas of Crocodile Sanctuary (Little Madeira Bay and numerous other connected ponds and creeks) would remain closed to the public (managed as the special protection zone).
East Everglades Addition Management Zones and Airboating	There would be no new management zones.	A moderate amount of the East Everglades Addition would be managed as the frontcountry zone—about 27,300 acres in the northwest portion. The remainder would be managed as the backcountry (nonmotorized) zone.	A large amount of the East Everglades Addition would be managed as the frontcountry zone—about 56,000 acres in the northern portion. The remainder would be managed as the backcountry (nonmotorized) zone.	A moderate amount of the East Everglades Addition would be managed as the frontcountry zone—about 21,600 acres in the northwest portion.

TABLE OF MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ALTERNATIVES

	Alternative 1 (No Action)	Preferred Alternative	Alternative 2	Alternative 4
East Everglades Addition Management Zones and Airboating (cont.)	Commercial airboating would continue at the discretion of owners.	Commercial airboating would be operated under concessions contracts, and commercial airboats would operate on designated routes.	Commercial airboating would be operated under concessions contracts, and commercial airboats would operate on designated routes.	Commercial airboating would be discontinued.
	Private airboating would continue.	Private airboating (subject to provisions in the East Everglades Expansion Act) would be allowed in the frontcountry zone on designated routes.	Private airboating (subject to provisions in the East Everglades Expansion Act) would be allowed in the frontcountry zone on designated routes.	Private airboating (subject to provisions in the East Everglades Expansion Act) would be allowed in the frontcountry zone on designated routes.
East Everglades Addition Wilderness Proposal	None.	About 42,200 acres would be proposed as designated wilderness. About 43,100 acres would be proposed as potential wilderness.	About 39,500 acres would be proposed as designated wilderness. No potential wilderness would be proposed.	About 42,700 acres would be proposed as designated wilderness. About 59,400 acres would be proposed as potential wilderness.
Everglades Paddling Trail	None.	This route would be minimally marked. To provide wilderness paddling experiences, a few segments would seasonally be treated as backcountry (nonmotorized) zones as well as seasonal slow speed zones to provide a variety of possible experiences in this part of the park.	The route would be unmarked. Except for existing idle speed, no-wake areas, the entire Everglades Paddling Trail would be in the boat access zone.	This route would be minimally marked. To provide wilderness paddling experiences, some segments would be designated idle speed, no-wake areas or backcountry (nonmotorized) zones. Some segments of the waterway would be in the boat access zone.

NEXT STEPS

Following distribution of the *Final General Management Plan / East Everglades Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement* and a 30-day no-action period, a “Record of Decision” approving a final plan will be

prepared for signature by the NPS regional director. The “Record of Decision” will document the NPS selection of an alternative for implementation. With the signing of the “Record of Decision,” the plan can be implemented.

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