

# Great Sand Dunes

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Colorado

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of Interior



## Draft General Management Plan Wilderness Study Environmental Impact Statement

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## Background

- GMP Startup (Fall 2002)
- includes Wilderness Study
- Advisory Council
- Other Agencies
- Public
- Tribes

**GMP**  
**Wilderness Study**

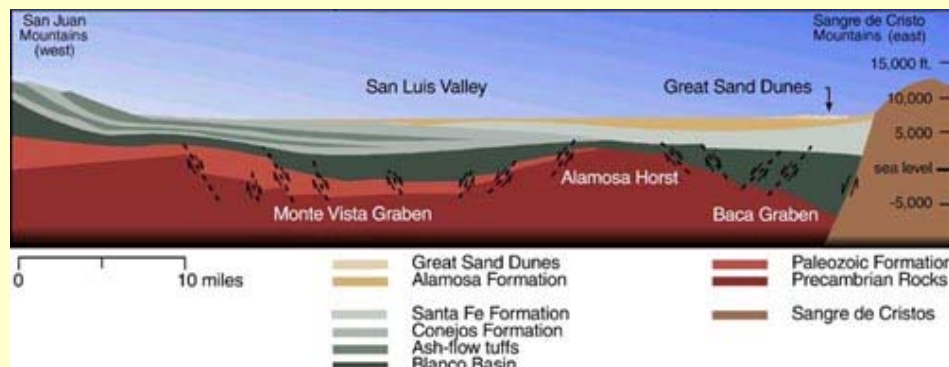




## Park Purpose

- Perpetuate the entire dunes system
- Long-term protection of resources and systems
- Opportunities for visitors to understand, enjoy, and gain a sense of stewardship
- Facilitate research and promote scientific knowledge

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## Park Significance

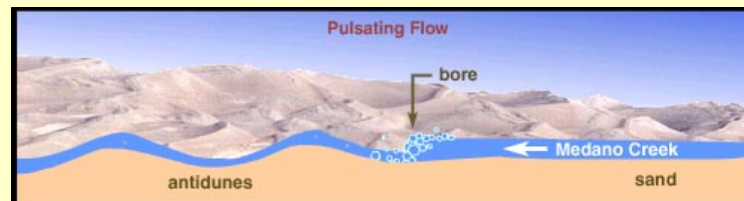
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- Tallest dunes in North America, fragile and complex system

- Globally significant water- and wind-driven system

- Outstanding, unexpected scenic beauty





## Park Significance (continued)

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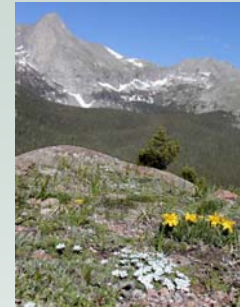


- Diversity of plants and animals, some found nowhere else in the world
- Some of the oldest known archaeological sites in America
- Special recreation opportunities – high dunes are resilient





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## Fundamental Resources and Values

- **Dunes System**
  - dunefield
  - sand sheet
  - sabkha
  - Sand Creek
  - Medano Creek - surge flow
  - groundwater aquifers
- **Natural Diversity**
  - endemic insects
  - Medano Creek- closed system
  - genetically pure cottonwoods
  - sustainable native plant/animal populations
  - tundra
- **Human Connections**
  - early arch. sites
  - dunes / contemporary Native Americans
  - scarred ponderosa pines
  - community ties
- **Visitor Opportunities**
  - climb/descend high dunes
  - water play in Medano Creek
  - night sky
  - viewing dunes
  - seeing wildlife
  - learning about ecosystem
  - experiencing solitude
  - 4 x 4 driving though sand on Medano Pass road



## Four alternatives are presented in the general management plan (and assessed in the environmental impact statement):

- no action
- NPS preferred
- dunefield focus – maximize wildness
- three public nodes

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## No Action Alternative

- Provides a baseline for comparison
- Continues existing management
- Most visitor use focused in or near dunefield
- No additional wilderness recommended
  - New park lands managed conservatively to preserve future options
  - Medano Ranch structures maintained by The Nature Conservancy
  - Bison grazing continued on lands within the park owned or leased by The Nature Conservancy
  - Leashed dogs allowed in the park and preserve

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## No Action Alternative



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## “Action Alternatives”

All three action alternatives are fairly conservative in terms of managing new lands because:

- the 2000 legislation that expanded the park was largely about protecting the dunes system
- public comments have generally favored keeping the park natural and relatively wild
- today’s fiscal realities provided sideboards



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## NPS Preferred Alternative -- Management Zoning

- Much of the park zoned **natural/wild** (no trails)
- Large portion zoned **backcountry adventure**, allowing for additional trails if there's a future need
- **Guided learning zone** protects key fundamental resources, while allowing guided visitor use and interpretation
- **Frontcountry** and **dunes play** zones are the focus for most visitors
- **Backcountry access zone** (for vehicle access): Medano Pass Primitive Road and trailhead in north end of park
- **Administrative zone** for operational uses and Medano Ranch (scheduled public use allowed)

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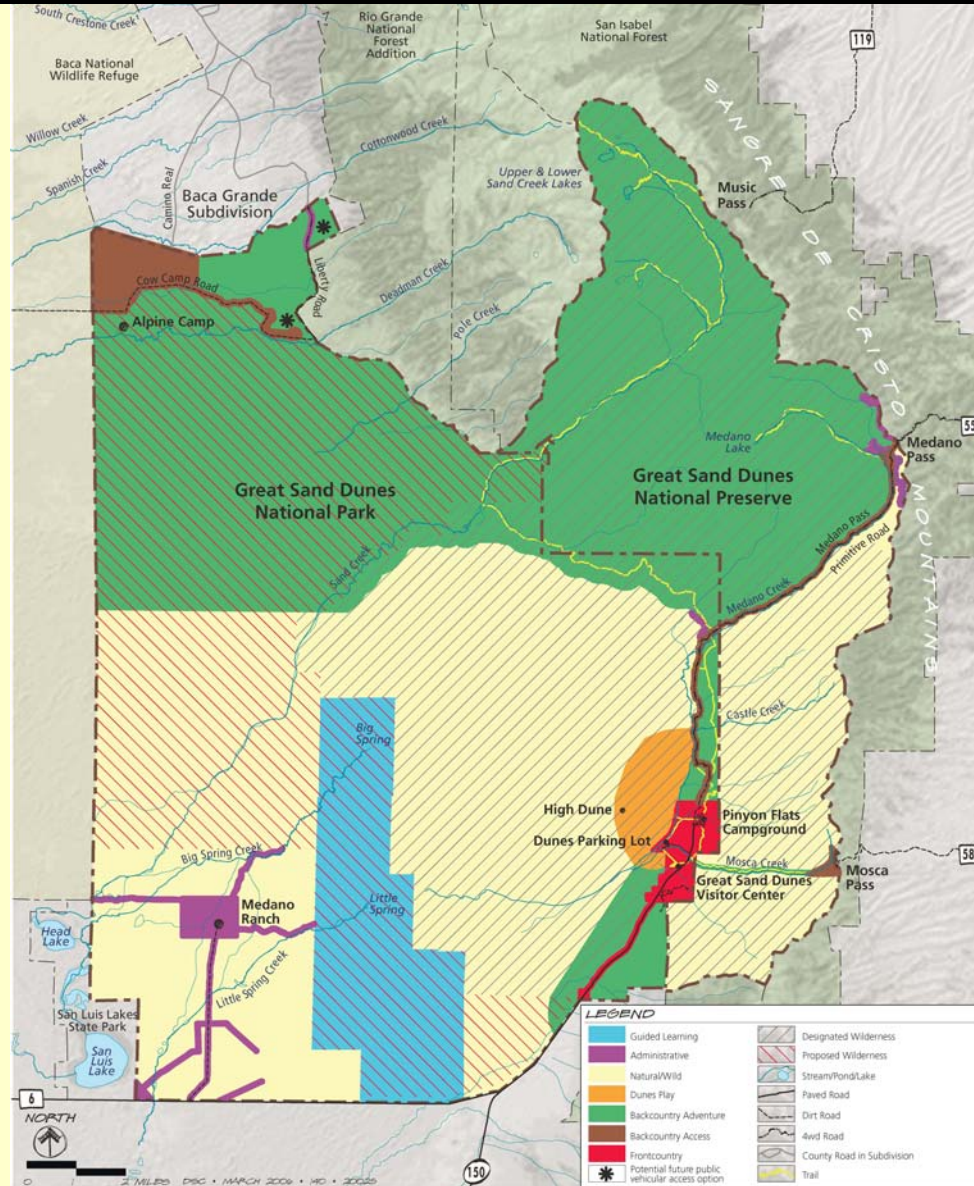
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## NPS Preferred Alternative



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## NPS Preferred Alternative -- Elements

### Northern portion of the park:

- small, primitive trailhead (vehicular access route to trailhead to be determined)
- trail to the mountain front
- possible future USFS/NPS study (separate environmental analysis process) to determine if vehicular access should continue to mountain front

### Main dunes area:

- entrance station relocated to near Oasis
- bike lanes on main road from Oasis to dunes lot
- bike/hike path from campground to dunes lot, VC
- modest shuttle to dunes lot for peak use times



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## NPS Preferred Alternative -- Elements

### Bison:

- The Nature Conservancy may keep managed herd on their private and leased lands
- probably no free-ranging herd during the life of this plan, unless conditions change

### Medano Ranch:

- base for administrative, research, and scheduled public activities
- nearby guided learning zone provides new visitor opportunities while protecting sensitive areas



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## NPS Preferred Alternative -- Elements

### Wilderness:

- 73,000 acres designated wilderness in park and preserve
- 51,000 additional acres recommended by this plan
- only Congress can designate wilderness
- NPS would manage land as wilderness until Congress acts
- most of the suitable lands recommended for wilderness
- If recommendation added, 85% of park and preserve would be wilderness
- provides for valued wilderness experiences; helps protect fundamental natural and cultural values
- the wilderness recommendation fits with the preferred alternative in the GMP



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## NPS Preferred Alternative -- Elements

### Dogs:

- in the park: leashed dogs allowed within the frontcountry and dunes play zones only
- in the preserve: leashed and hunting dogs allowed, as they are now







## **Dunefield Focus - Maximize Wildness**

- Visitor activities focused on eastern edge of dunes, with possible expansion of parking there
- Most of the rest remains wild and undeveloped, minimal human influence
- Most suitable lands recommended for wilderness
- Outstanding opportunities for solitude and adventure
- Medano Ranch structures documented but not actively maintained
- Leashed dogs only in parking lots & campgrounds

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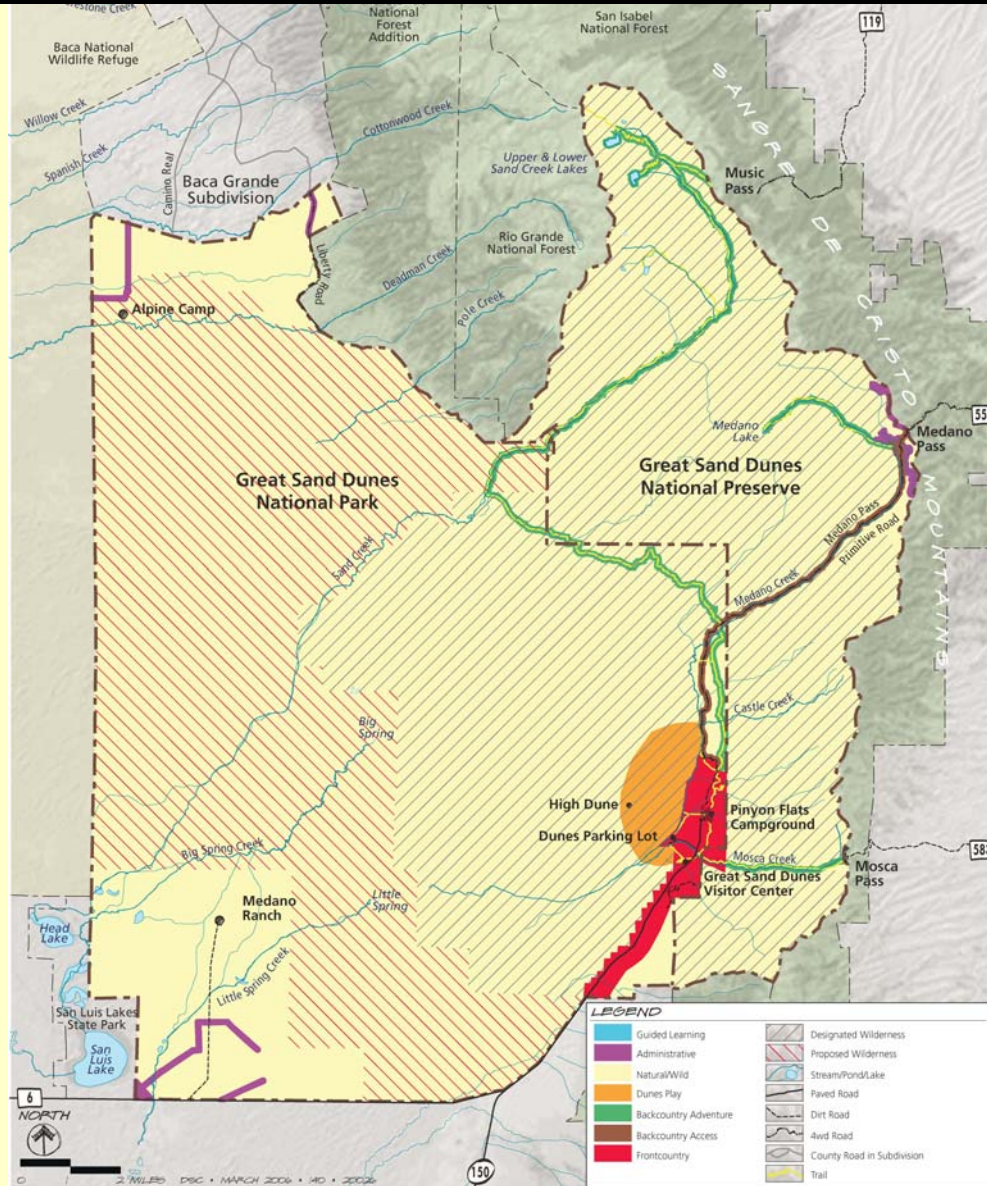
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## Dunefield Focus – Maximize Wildness Alternative



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## Three Public Nodes

- Three “visitor access nodes”: main entrance near dunes, northwest access point, and Medano Ranch
- Diverse options to experience different portions of the dunes system
  - Public uses at Medano Ranch (e.g., education, stable), guided hiking and horseback tours
  - In northern portion of park: vehicle access to new trailhead and primitive campground
- No new wilderness recommended
- Dogs not permitted where potential for resource or visitor conflict is high



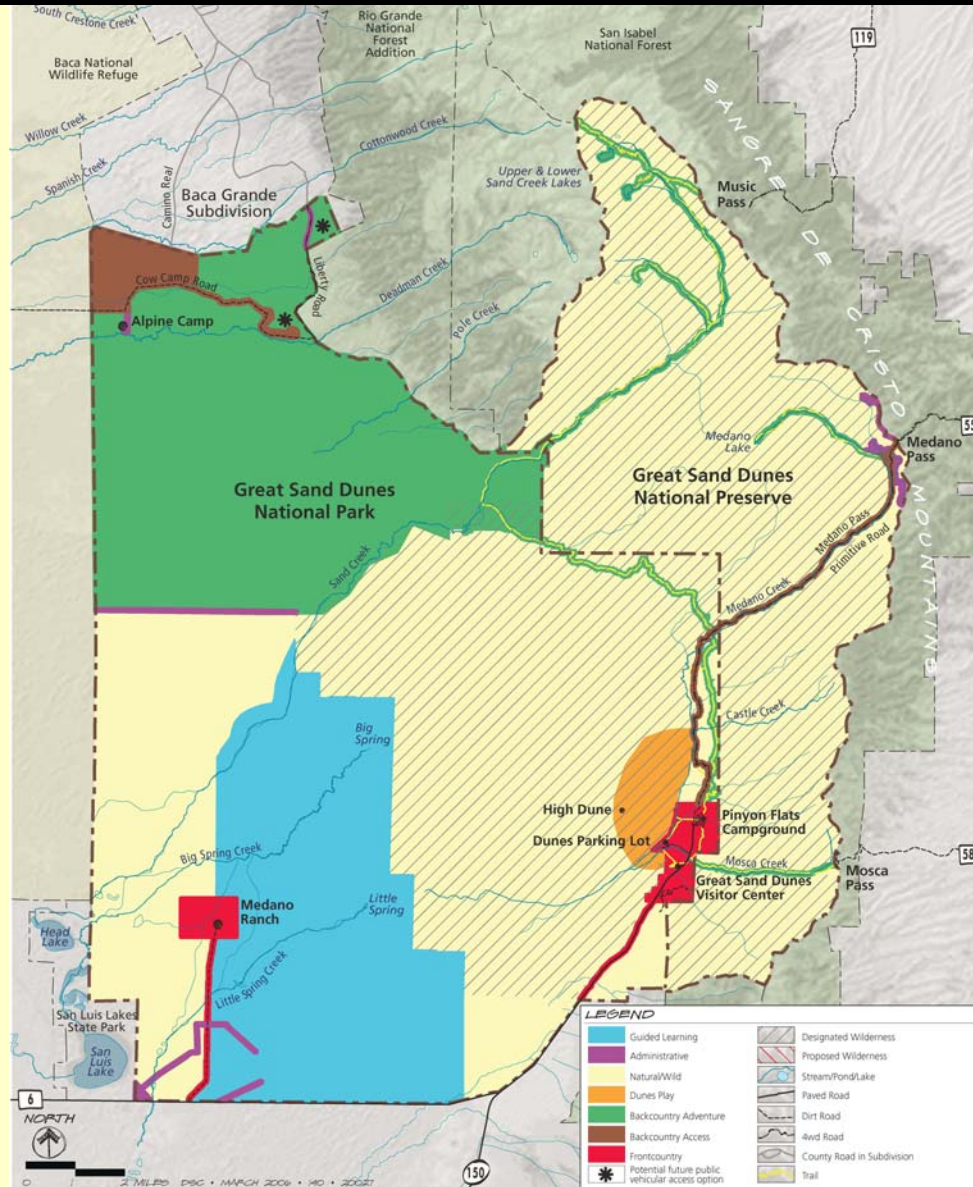
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## Three Public Nodes Alternative



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## Preferred Alternative -- Why Selected

- Protects visitor opportunities, especially fundamental ones: dunes experiences, natural quiet, dark night skies, wildlife viewing, plus a variety of hiking and guided learning opportunities near Medano Ranch
- Protects historic cultural resources through adaptive use of Medano Ranch structures; protects archeological sites through guided learning zone and wilderness



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## Preferred Alternative -- Why Selected

- Offers good protection of natural systems, ecologically critical areas, water quality, wetlands, and wildlife
- Attempts to balance interests of neighboring agencies, communities, and public comments



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## Summary

The NPS preferred alternative is a conservative approach for the expanded park.

It protects fundamental resources and values, and provides modest new access for visitor enjoyment.





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## What's Next

- Public comments are currently being taken.
- Comments will be considered during preparation of the final plan which will be released in March 2007.

