



Message from the Superintendent

Dear Partners,

I am pleased to share with you this summary of the Draft General Management Plan (Draft GMP) for Assateague Island National Seashore. This planning process has been underway for several years and many of you may have received previous newsletters charting the progress of this effort.

Like many parks in the national park system, Assateague Island National Seashore is working to address complex issues that reflect our changing environment and society. One of the most challenging is the dynamic coastal processes that are natural to a barrier island like Assateague in combination with changes that are the result of climate change and sea level rise. Over the years, the National Park Service has explored ways to make visitor facilities and other seashore infrastructure at Assateague Island more sustainable and resilient—such as the seasonal, removable facilities associated with the NPS-operated beach near Toms Cove. The GMP sets the stage for managers to respond to the changes to

the island that are likely to occur due to natural processes, climate change, and sea level rise.

This Draft GMP presents four alternatives, one of which we have selected as our preferred alternative. We believe that the preferred alternative best meets the need to protect the seashore and provide great experiences for visitors. It allows for visitor facilities and activities to move over time as the island moves westward, while reducing the risk of a long-term park closure in the event of a catastrophic storm.

Your involvement has been vital to this process. Since the start of the planning process, we have absorbed ideas and advice from many sources. I hope you will share your thoughts and suggestions regarding the future management of Assateague Island National Seashore.

Sincerely,

Deborah Darden, Superintendent
Assateague Island National Seashore



WHAT IS A GMP?

A GMP defines a park's purpose and sets a management direction for decades to come. The Draft GMP for Assateague Island National Seashore is a policy-level document that provides overarching guidance to seashore managers. When approved, the GMP will serve as the foundation for all subsequent planning and management decisions. Detailed technical plans necessary to implement the GMP will be undertaken as funds become available. This future planning will also be subject to federal and state consultation and compliance requirements.

The Draft GMP is available for public review for 60 days. We welcome your comments on this summary document or on the full-text version of the Draft GMP. To read the full Draft GMP, to request a hard copy, or to submit comments, please visit www.parkplanning.nps.gov/asis. You can also comment via mail or fax (410) 629-1023.

GMP PROCESS

The Draft GMP has been created over several years by an interdisciplinary team. During this process, the team has identified issues, described goals, gathered background information, consulted with partners and resource experts, involved the public at various stages, and developed four alternatives for management. We present here a brief summary of alternative directions for Assateague Island National Seashore.

The seashore is composed of the 37-mile barrier island following the eastern shores of Maryland and Virginia from the Ocean City Inlet to Toms Cove Hook encompassing approximately 41,320 acres of land and water and includes the 850-acre Assateague State Park (owned and managed by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR)) and Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (CNWR)—approximately 10,000 acres, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Concurrent with our general management planning process, FWS completed a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the refuge which provides the framework for future refuge management. In August 2015, FWS released the Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (CCP/EIS). Some aspects of the CCP are adopted in the Draft GMP.





PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Purpose and significance statements were developed based on the seashore's legislative history and input from partners, the public and NPS professionals.

PURPOSE

The purpose of Assateague Island National Seashore is to preserve the outstanding Mid-Atlantic coastal resources of Assateague Island and its adjacent waters and the natural processes upon which they depend, and to provide high quality resource-compatible recreational opportunities.

SIGNIFICANCE

- The seashore is one of the largest and last surviving Mid-Atlantic barrier islands possessing a continuum of intact coastal habitats where the full range of natural processes occur with little or no human interference.

- The marine and estuarine waters within the seashore are a protected vestige of the high quality aquatic ecosystems that once occurred throughout the Mid-Atlantic coastal region of the United States.
- The seashore's habitats support a broad array of aquatic and terrestrial species, many of which are rare, uniquely adapted to life at the edge of the sea, and dependent upon natural ecosystem processes undisturbed by humans.
- Amidst the highly developed Mid-Atlantic region, the seashore's coastal resources provide unique opportunities for nature-based recreation, education, solitude, and inspiration.





PLANNING ISSUES

The NPS completed the first GMP for Assateague Island National Seashore in 1982. Today—over thirty years later—many new issues and ideas have emerged. None of the recent NPS policies related to management and planning for all national park units are reflected in the 1982 GMP, most notably those implementing NPS's climate change response strategy, which are critical to management of a national seashore.

The seashore's planning issues revolve around several key areas including natural coastal processes and the effects of climate change and sea level rise, visitor use and visitor experience, partnerships, wilderness and cultural resources. They are expressed in the following eight questions to be addressed by the Draft GMP:

- How will the NPS respond to global climate change/sea level rise impacts on the seashore?
- To what extent will the NPS continue to provide permanent visitor facilities on the island given the dynamic nature of the island and the continuous need for public investment to maintain those facilities?
- What should the NPS do if major storms create breaches in the island that limit access?
- What safe and sustainable alternative strategies should be used to enhance visitor access to the island?
- What outdoor recreation opportunities should be available to visitors as natural coastal processes and/or the effects of climate change/sea level rise reshape Assateague Island and alter access to seashore facilities?
- How should the NPS work cooperatively with its neighbors and public agencies at all levels of government to protect Assateague Island's resources from the adverse effects of land uses and activities both outside and within the seashore's boundaries?
- How should the Assateague backcountry be managed to protect wilderness character while allowing for compatible recreation and NPS operational needs?
- How should the seashore's cultural resources be managed?



PLANNING ALTERNATIVES

In crafting the management alternatives for the seashore, the GMP planning team considered climate change and sea level rise as important factors influencing the future of the seashore. While there is uncertainty about the future pace of climate change and sea level rise, there is near consensus among those who live here and the scientific community that change is underway. Barrier islands such as Assateague Island are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change and sea level rise, and NPS must be able to respond effectively. Any plan for the seashore's future must consider the management challenges associated with an increasingly dynamic island landform. The Draft GMP alternatives explore options to provide and protect visitor use and recreational opportunities on Assateague Island and seek new approaches to providing sustainable access and infrastructure. In this newsletter, the preferred alternative is presented first followed by a summary of the other alternatives under consideration, as well as the elements common to all action alternatives.





The NPS Preferred Alternative: Alternative 3 Sustainable Recreation and Climate Change Adaptation

Climate change adaptation would play an increasingly important role in seashore management. Over time, natural coastal processes and/or the effects of climate change/sea level rise are expected to become the dominant force shaping the character of the island. To minimize or avoid the damaging effects of natural coastal processes and/or climate change/sea level rise, visitor use infrastructure would evolve to more sustainable designs and likely shift to new, more stable locations.

Some manipulations of the natural environment would be necessary to sustain recreation opportunities but would be kept to the minimum needed. This would include limited maintenance of the existing artificial dune system as facilities and infrastructure transition to more sustainable designs. Breach management protocols would seek a reasonable balance that would generally let the island evolve naturally subject to the effects of natural coastal processes and/or climate change/sea level rise while taking into consideration needs for human safety and protection of property. Impacts

to natural sand transport processes from the jetty-stabilized Ocean City Inlet would continue to be mitigated.

Planning and development of alternative transportation systems including shuttles, ferries, and new bayside access along Chincoteague Bay would prepare the seashore for possible loss of traditional vehicular access. Overall, visitors would enjoy expanded opportunities for sustainable recreation throughout the seashore due to additional access points throughout the seashore.

In Virginia, the NPS would continue to support beach-oriented recreational uses in the island developed area within Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (see actions common to alternatives 2, 3 and 4-Visitor Use and Visitor Experience in Virginia). The climate change strategies discussed here for NPS-owned lands in Maryland would not apply to Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and Assateague State Park.



Highlights

- The seashore's two visitor centers would increasingly become centers of learning emphasizing resource stewardship, sustainability, climate change adaptation, and seashore resource management issues.
- Facilities and infrastructure supporting visitor use in the Maryland district would be made more sustainable—relocating them as necessary on the island. As conditions require, some facilities and visitor activities could be eventually relocated to the mainland.
- As the island changes more visitors would access the island by water, using a network of new public access sites on the mainland and along the length of the seashore's bay side.
- If vehicular access to the seashore were lost, access to the island would shift to a fully water-based system composed of a new passenger ferry and the network of new public access sites.
- OSV use would continue within the existing OSV use area until conditions change. OSV use would be managed for maximum flexibility in response to changing conditions, protecting sensitive resources and minimizing conflicts with other seashore users.
- Most administrative and maintenance functions would be relocated to another mainland location to allow development of a shuttle/ferry parking facility at the current headquarters site. A combined ranger station/campground office would remain on the island, although it would be replaced with a moveable facility once the existing permanent structure is no longer sustainable.

Relocation and expansion of seashore headquarters

anticipated to support seashore operations, including potential relocation of some island infrastructure - specific location to be determined; potentially in collaboration with MD DNR

From one to three new bayside access points, future sites to be determined

Assateague State Park

Bayside Campground
Oceanside Campground

Tingles Campsite

Little Levels Campsite

Pine Tree Campsite

Green Run Lodge

Pope Bay Campsite
State Line Campsite

Oversand Vehicle (OSV) Use

- OSV use would occur within the Active Beach Recreation Subzone, as illustrated on this map.
- In Alternative 3, the area open to OSV use would remain until conditions make such use impossible.
- In the future, coastal storms or other natural processes could create breaches/inlets that would cut-off access to all or part of the Active Beach Recreation Subzone. Protocols in the seashore's new breach management plan would determine whether to allow breaches to remain open or to allow breach to be closed.

ALTERNATIVE 3 (NPS PREFERRED) MANAGEMENT ZONES

Development Zone and Subzones

- Development Zone
- Virginia Assigned Area Subzone

Natural Resource Zone and Subzones

- Natural Resource Zone
- Active Beach Recreation Subzone (including OSV Use Area)
- Resource Preservation Subzone

Cultural Resource Zone

- Cultural Resource Zone

Bay Zones

- Sinepuxent Bay and Southern Chincoteague Bay Zone
- Central Chincoteague Bay Zone

Ocean Zone

- Atlantic Ocean Zone

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

- Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

- Assateague Island National Seashore Boundary

- Assateague State Park Boundary

- Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge Boundary

0 2 4 6 Miles





Alternative 1

Continuation of Current Management Practices ("no-action" alternative)

The "no-action" alternative allows the continuation of projects that currently are funded or have environmental clearance, but does not allow for new programs or major changes in management.

Alternative 2

Concentrated Traditional Beach Recreation

Most visitors to the seashore would enjoy traditional beach recreation concentrated within a high density island developed area in Maryland accessible by private vehicle.

Artificial dune fortification, habitat manipulations, and possibly beach nourishment would protect the island developed area from the natural coastal processes and/or the effects of climate change/sea level rise as long as a suitable land base exists and funding is available. Breach management protocols would generally seek to repair storm overwash and breaches in the island developed area in Maryland, and to let the island's backcountry areas evolve naturally—without interference—subject to the full effects of natural coastal processes and/or climate change/sea level rise.

Over time, the island developed area would likely be consolidated in response to the increasing challenge of protecting facilities from sea level rise and greater storm intensity. Increased crowding could lead to visitor use limits. Increased fees could be needed to offset the higher cost of providing visitor facilities.

In Virginia, the NPS would continue to support beach-oriented recreational uses in the island developed area within Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (see actions common to alternatives 2, 3 and 4 -Visitor Use and Visitor Experience in Virginia).

Alternative 4

Natural Island Evolution and a Primitive Island Experience

Natural evolution of the island would occur without interference and subject to the full effects of natural coastal processes and climate change/sea level rise. Breach management protocols would generally seek to let the island evolve naturally. Impacts to natural sand transport processes from the jetty-stabilized Ocean City Inlet would continue to be mitigated.

Existing visitor use facilities and infrastructure would remain in the island developed area in Maryland until such time as they are lost and/or damaged by natural

coastal processes or become obsolete. In response to the threat from climate change/sea level rise, minimal future investments would be made on the Maryland portion of the island, limited to development and maintenance of sustainable, low impact day-use facilities and primitive camping infrastructure.

Planning and development of an alternative transportation system including a passenger ferry from the mainland would prepare the seashore for possible loss of traditional land access.

Over time visitor use would shift to primarily day-use activities in a more primitive island setting. More emphasis would be placed on the role of the seashore as a protected natural environment and living laboratory for scientific research and study.

In Virginia, the NPS would continue to support beach-oriented recreational uses in the island developed area within Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (see actions common to alternatives 2, 3 and 4 -Visitor Use and Visitor Experience in Virginia).



COMMON TO ALL ACTION ALTERNATIVES

The following section identifies management actions common to the three action alternatives. These common actions are in addition to the actions described above for each alternative.

Community Resilience

The NPS would work in cooperation with other federal agencies, the states, counties and communities to explore how best to model the impacts of sea level rise and storm surge. These efforts would evaluate potential effects of breach management, modifications to infrastructure and other related actions on local communities and infrastructure. Together, stakeholders would explore ways to mitigate hazards and increase the resiliency of surrounding communities and infrastructure.

The NPS would develop a breach management plan to guide its response to future breaches on the island. The plan would specify the conditions under which the NPS would allow breaches to remain open or would allow breach closures. It would be based on the best science available and conform to the mission of the NPS and laws governing the seashore. It would also consider other important elements such as human safety and protection of property.

Marine Resource Management

Commercial aquaculture has been a part of the unique working marine landscape in the waters around Assateague Island since well before the seashore's inception. In all action alternatives, NPS would collaborate with the states of Maryland and Virginia and local communities to protect this way of life and seashore resources. In all action alternatives, NPS would work collaboratively to undertake natural and cultural resource studies, and would issue a special use permit under 36 CFR 2.60(3)b to the Virginia Marine Resource Commission (VMRC) within the commonwealth of Virginia to allow for the continued practice of commercial aquaculture and maintenance of the historic setting. NPS would also collaborate to develop interpretive programming and other visitor information that would illuminate the cultural heritage of the Eastern Shore and Assateague Island.

These recommendations would be consistent with current NPS policy, expand opportunities to research and understand conditions and cultural heritage associated with the marine environment, and open up avenues for constructive conversation about these management activities going forward.

NPS would prohibit the harvest of horseshoe crabs, as also proposed by the FWS in the recently completed *Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (CCP/EIS)* (US FWS 2015).

Wilderness

The NPS would undertake an assessment of eligibility and prepare a new wilderness study. Potential and recommended wilderness would be generally managed to preserve, restore, and enhance natural ecological conditions and wilderness qualities while providing limited opportunities for low density, low impact primitive recreational experiences. NPS would implement a long-term monitoring program to assess the conditions and trends of wilderness character over time based on the "keeping it wild" framework, adapted for the individual characteristics of the Assateague Island Wilderness.

Visitor Use and Visitor Experience in Virginia

The NPS would continue to support beach-oriented recreational uses in the island developed area within Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia. NPS would continue to manage the recreational beach in accordance with the memorandum of understanding between the NPS and the FWS.

The FWS's Final CCP/EIS's preferred alternative supports continuation of the recreational beach and associated parking to be managed by the NPS. It further recommends that, "In recognition of the vulnerability of the current parking, the refuge would develop and implement a site design plan for parking and access to a new beach location, approximately 1.5 miles north of the existing beach... The new recreational beach would offer accessible parking in close proximity to the beach" (Final CCP page 2-69). NPS would work with the FWS, the town of Chincoteague, Accomack County and others to design the new recreational beach sensitively, to respond to both the natural environment and the needs of the area's visitors.

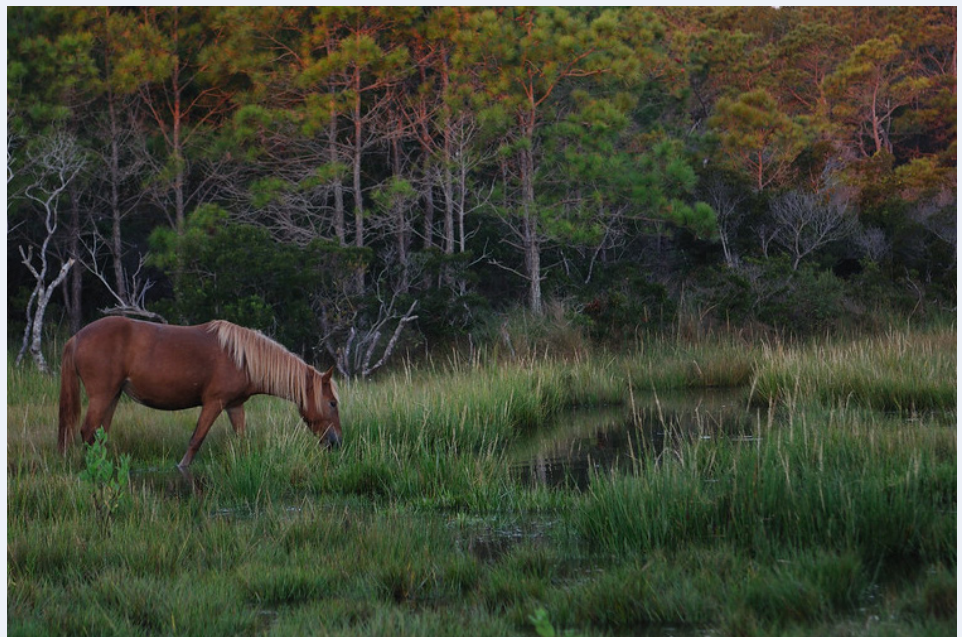
The Final CCP's preferred alternative proposes that the transition would occur over time and in the meantime, NPS would maintain beach recreation and parking at the current location, so long as the land base is available to support this use. Until the beach moves, NPS would maintain the Toms Cove Visitor Center. If possible, after the beach relocation, the Toms Cove Visitor Center will be used as a base for environmental education programs until it is no longer serviceable. Environmental Education programs would continue at the Toms Cove location even after the building is gone; seasonal OSV and hiking access will continue in this area. NPS is committed to working with FWS and other partners to evaluate cost-effective and sustainable strategies to improve resiliency at the overwash location while at the same time improving wildlife habitat.

OSV use in Virginia would continue to be determined by the FWS; NPS would continue to cooperate with FWS to provide OSV access.

Seashore Facilities and Operations in Maryland

The NPS and MD DNR would explore the potential for a consolidated, jointly operated entrance station to Assateague Island located on the mainland. This would provide efficiencies, better manage the number of vehicles accessing the island, achieve shared resource and visitor use management objectives, and facilitate operation of a shuttle system.

Existing automobile-based access to the seashore would continue as long as it remains sustainable in the context of natural coastal processes and/or the effects of climate change/sea level rise. On peak days—once parking capacity is reached—the seashore would close to additional vehicles. Visitors still wanting to get to the seashore in Maryland would park near the visitor center on the mainland and ride a commercial shuttle to the beach and other attractions on the island. Over time as parking capacity on the island is reduced as a result of natural coastal processes and/or climate change/sea level rise, shuttle facilities on the mainland would expand to support a larger shuttle operation providing additional parking to meet growing demand and offering more frequent service with more shuttle vehicles.





Why Alternative 3 is Preferred

The NPS preferred alternative is the alternative which it believes would best accomplish the purpose and the need of the proposed action while fulfilling its statutory mission and responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical and other factors.

The NPS has identified alternative 3 as the NPS preferred alternative to guide long-term management of Assateague Island National Seashore. NPS decision makers considered the information collected during scoping, the results of the impact analysis, and the seashore's purpose and significance. Findings supported selection of alternative 3 as the NPS preferred alternative because it would provide the highest degree of enhanced public use and enjoyment of the seashore, would provide the highest degree of protection to the seashore's fundamental and other important resources and values, would offer the greatest potential for enhanced coastal resiliency, and would support the most effective organizational management for the seashore.

A Note about Funding

The implementation of the approved GMP, under any of the alternatives, will depend on future NPS funding and service-wide priorities, as well as partnership funds, time and effort. Please note that the approval of the GMP does not guarantee that funding and staffing needed to implement the GMP will be forthcoming. Full implementation of the approved GMP could be many years in the future, and would depend on the rate of change to the island's access and resources as a result of major storms and/or sea level rise.





National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Assateague Island National Seashore
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This newsletter is a publication of the National Park Service, Assateague Island National Seashore. For additional information, please contact Superintendent, Assateague Island National Seashore, 7206 National Seashore Lane, Berlin, MD 21811 or call (410) 629-6061.

Visit us on the web at www.nps.gov/asis

HOW TO COMMENT ON THIS PLAN

To download a full version of the Assateague Island National Seashore Draft GMP/EIS, please visit the NPS Park Planning website at www.parkplanning.nps.gov/asis and click on the “Open for Comment” tab on the left. A printed copy of the document can be made available upon request. Comments on the draft GMP/EIS are welcome and may be submitted during the 60-day review and comment period, using one of the methods noted below.

ONLINE

www.parkplanning.nps.gov/asis

We encourage readers to submit comments online through the park planning website which incorporates the comments into the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) system. An electronic public comment form is provided through this website.

MAIL

Assateague Island National Seashore
7206 National Seashore Lane
Berlin, MD 21811

Attn: Assateague GMP Comments

FAX

410-629-1023

Attn: Assateague GMP Comments

HAND DELIVERY

Comments can be dropped off at seashore headquarters (7206 National Seashore Lane, Berlin, MD 21811) or at public information sessions, which will be announced in the local media following the release of this plan.

PLEASE NOTE

Please note that the names and addresses of people who comment become part of the public record. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.