



MESSAGE FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Boxley Valley, located near Ponca, Arkansas, is one of the region's primary visitor destinations. Buffalo River and the surrounding Ozark Mountains are popular destinations for local, regional, and international visitors seeking outdoor opportunities such as hiking, canoeing, camping, backpacking, caving, photography, and wildlife viewing. The last planning effort for the area, the *Boxley Valley Land Use Plan/Cultural Landscape Report*, was completed in 1985. Much has changed in the valley since then including the introduction of elk, which have become a very popular visitor attraction. An increase in overall visitation, along with repeated flooding, has stressed and damaged infrastructure. These and other contributing factors point to the need for updated comprehensive planning for this area to help address health and safety issues; quality of visitor experiences; quality of life for valley residents; and associated impacts on soils, vegetation, water, wildlife habitat, soundscapes, and cultural resources.

The National Park Service (NPS) is developing a comprehensive area plan to address visitor and resource management needs in Boxley Valley while balancing visitor use and protection of the spectacular cultural and natural resources. With a mission focused on timeless stewardship and providing for visitor access since 1972 when the park was established, the NPS is exploring proactive measures that will enhance visitor enjoyment and maintain this extraordinary part of the park now and into the future.

The NPS has developed a preliminary proposed action, described in this newsletter, which is based on input from public listening sessions held in the

summer of 2016, NPS staff expertise, knowledge, and understanding of similar issues at parks throughout the national park system. Under the preliminary proposed action, Buffalo National River would seek to improve visitor experience, safety, and resource protection through increased interpretation and education in Boxley Valley, expanded visitor services and amenities, and strategies to secure additional partner support and funding.

I encourage you to review the preliminary proposed action and provide suggestions and comments through any one of the multiple ways described later in this newsletter. As we examine proactive ways to manage Boxley Valley for the future, I encourage you to stay connected and be an active participant in this important planning process. With your continued help, we will develop a plan that provides excellent visitor experiences in Boxley Valley while protecting its extraordinary resources and values for future generations.

Thank you for your interest and participation in the development of the Boxley Valley comprehensive area plan. We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin G. Cheri".

Kevin G. Cheri
Superintendent



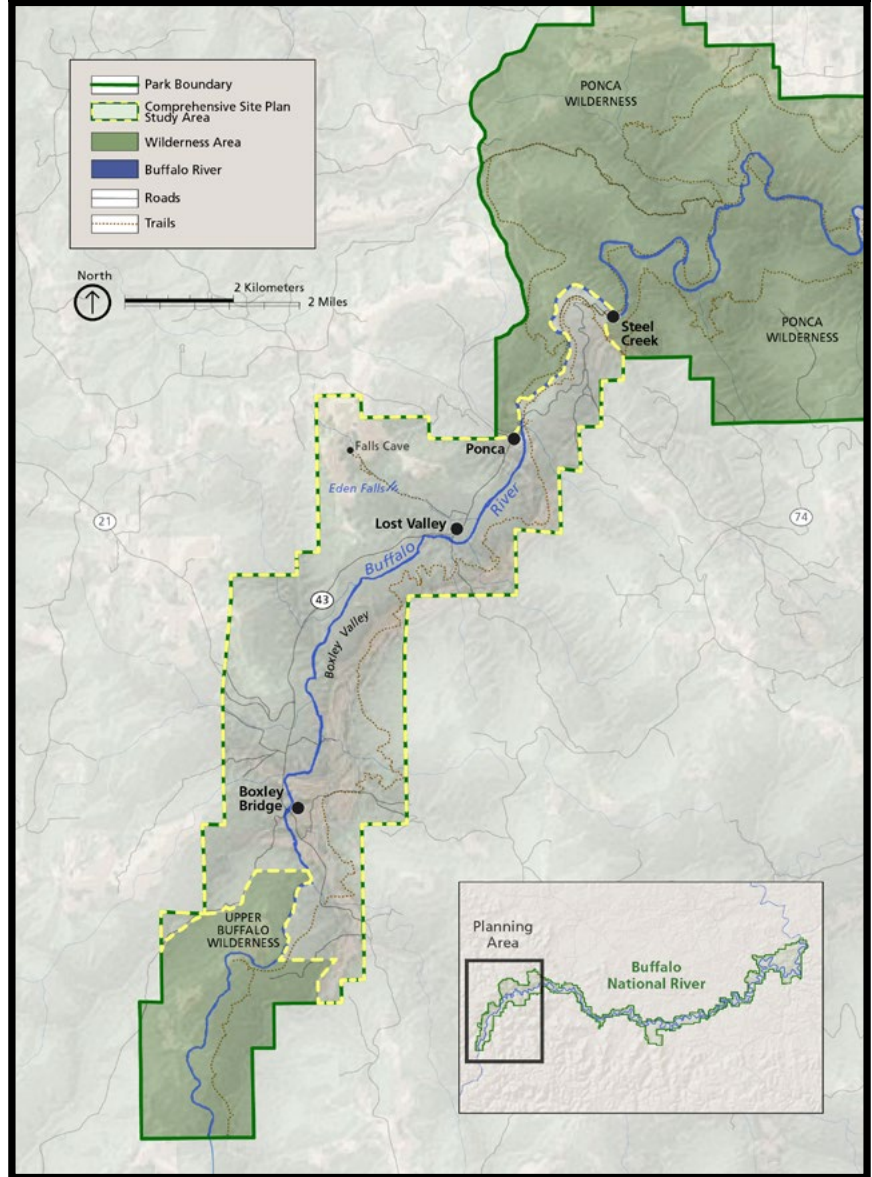
To submit comments online, please visit http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap



Plan Purpose and Need

The Boxley Valley comprehensive area plan (the plan) will provide an overall vision for the future of the Boxley Valley area that aims to decrease crowding and user conflicts, responds to changing visitation preferences, protects cultural and natural resources, and addresses visitor safety concerns. The plan will guide management decision-making by establishing desired conditions for natural and cultural resources, defining appropriate types and kinds of visitor use at various locations, and proposing infrastructure to support those uses. This plan also aims to improve the visitor experience through expanded interpretation and educational programs and facilities.

BUFF Boxley Valley Comprehensive Area Plan Study Area





Key Issues to be Addressed in the Plan



Congestion and Crowding River Access Points. River Access Points are popular staging areas for park visitors hoping to access the river and nearby trails, but they are often congested during peak visitation times (which coincide with periods of high water flows). Because this crowding diminishes the visitor experience and adversely affects park wildlife, there is a need to revisit the types and amount of use at these locations. In addition, the plan would help the park identify potential adjustments to future commercial and private operations.



Elk Viewing Traffic Jams on State Highways. Elk viewing has become increasingly popular, especially on busy fall weekends. The attraction can frequently cause dangerous traffic jams on State Highways 21 and 43 as visitors spill over from designated pull-offs and park on roadsides. This congestion exposes neighboring private landowners to additional safety hazards and complicates access to their properties.



Limited Visitor Services and Opportunities for Interpretation and Education. The lack of an NPS presence and wayfinding in Boxley Valley and Lost Valley limits the ability of park staff to connect with visitors. Without that contact, visitors have limited information about recreational resources available to them and frequently ask neighboring private landowners for directions or information. The general lack of visitor services and educational outreach in the area also affects visitor safety during times of high visitation. Although some current information on river conditions, safety, and “leave no trace” guidelines is available online, information should also be provided on-site. These are some of the factors that could be better addressed with new visitor services and facilities in Boxley Valley.



Repeated Flooding and Damage to Park Infrastructure. Although improvements to park facilities and infrastructure have been made since the 2011 flood, further improvements and site rehabilitation are needed at Lost Valley. Existing facilities and infrastructure, including the Ponca Low Water Bridge, roads, and trails, require site-specific evaluations and updates to improve visitor access, reduce erosion, minimize corrective maintenance costs, and improve visitor safety. New or updated facilities and infrastructure prone to flood events, such as Ponca Access, need to be evaluated as well.



Photo credit: Expeditions by Tricia on Flickr

Enhancing the Boxley Valley Grist Mill and Pond Area. Centrally located within Boxley Valley, the Boxley Mill has long been recognized as one of the primary historical attractions of Upper Buffalo River Valley. The partially restored structure contributes to interpretation of the traditional cultural landscape of the area. Today, the mill is generally closed to the public, except during special events or guided tours. Across from the historic mill are the Spring House and overgrown Mill Pond, which is regularly used by waterfowl. Commercial opportunities at Boxley Mill and Mill Pond could be expanded, including full restoration, wildlife viewing platforms and boardwalks, and other management strategies to increase interpretation and education.



Key Issues to be Addressed in the Plan



Balancing Historical Agricultural Practices while Maintaining Natural River Processes. Agricultural practices in Boxley Valley can affect the water quality of the Buffalo River and its tributaries through stream bank erosion and runoff of nutrients and pesticides. Park staff will continue to work with landowners to minimize erosion and runoff, potentially through vegetation plantings, while preserving the free-flowing nature of the Buffalo River.

All of these key issues helped inform development of the purpose and need statement and were considerations in the development of supporting management strategies included in the preliminary proposed action.

Preliminary Proposed Action

The National Park Service has developed a preliminary proposed action to address the issues described above. The proposed action was developed based on input from previous public listening sessions, NPS staff expertise, and knowledge and understanding of similar issues occurring at parks throughout the national park system.

The National Park Service will develop an environmental assessment with several alternatives for public review and comment. Elements of the proposed action may be integrated into one or more alternatives that will be considered during the planning process along with a “no action” alternative.

Under the proposed action, Buffalo National River would seek to improve the visitor experience, safety, and resource protection through increased interpretation and education in the area, expanded visitor services and amenities, and strategies to secure additional partner support and funding.

Specifically, the preliminary proposed action would:

- Expand, improve, and develop, as necessary, infrastructure at key park locations in Boxley Valley, including Lost Valley, Ponca, Steel Creek, and Buffalo River Trail trailheads.
- Formalize traffic flow and parking at key river access locations to reduce user group conflicts.
- Improve and expand camping opportunities at key locations.
- Expand opportunities for interpretation and education by searching for opportunities to restore and use historic structures.
- Increase waysides and exhibits to disseminate park information.
- Develop infrastructure and messaging about safe elk viewing, including working with the Arkansas Department of Transportation on additional pull-off parking.
- Establish a visitor facility in Boxley Valley.
- Identify safety concerns and potential strategies associated with the Ponca Low Water Bridge.
- Address parking congestion and crowding at popular river access locations.
- Continue to work closely with concessioners to decrease crowding and conflicts between visitors and commercial services at key river access locations in Boxley Valley.





Supporting Management Actions

To ensure desired conditions are achieved, the National Park Service would identify visitor capacities for key locations in the project area. Visitor capacity is the maximum amount and types of use that an area can accommodate while achieving and maintaining the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences. The process of identifying visitor capacities will also assist the park in determining the need for permits or guided tours in particular areas to help manage use. In recognition of the importance of maintaining the cultural landscapes within Boxley Valley, as well as future transitioning of land ownership among valley residents, the plan would identify broad strategies to help landowners minimize erosion and agricultural runoff. It would also provide suggestions for new, compatible visitor services (e.g., commercial offerings) that could be provided by local residents in the future.

Some specific management actions that are being considered as part of the preliminary proposed action are noted below.

Boxley Valley Corridor

- Increase signage about elk viewing and pull-off locations in Boxley Valley.
- Develop more clearly defined visitor infrastructure at the Buffalo River Trail trailheads.
- Increase NPS staff presence to educate visitors, ensure a high quality visitor experience, and protect park resources.

River Zone

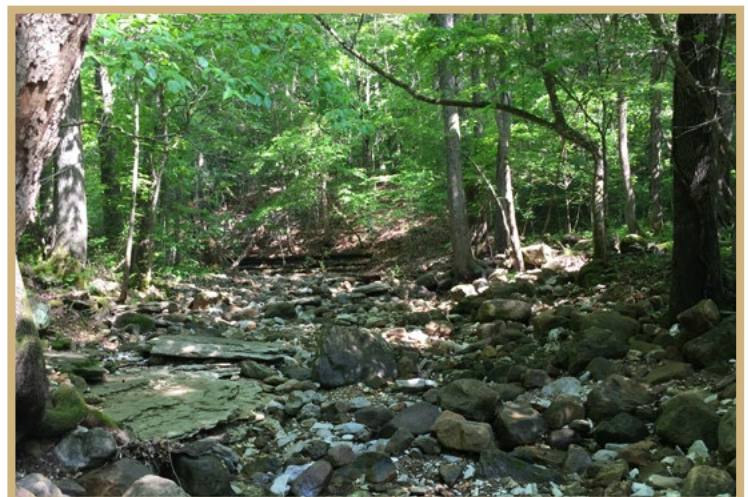
- Identify potential impediments to the free-flowing condition of the river that have been established by entities and issues outside of the park (e.g., land use practices, natural processes, highway construction and maintenance).

Steel Creek

- Establish a group campsite and a campground host site at the developed campground.
- Formalize traffic flow and clearly delineate parking.
- Maintain the developed campground and launch area, including the horse campground.
- Work with partners to address parking congestion.
- Identify appropriate amounts and types of commercial and private use launching from Steel Creek Access.
- Restore and use historic structures in the area as a research learning and environmental education center (e.g., classroom space, temporary quarters for researchers and students).

Ponca Access

- Establish an information kiosk at the elk viewing pull-off.
- Formalize traffic flow and clearly delineate parking. The current layout was never planned, and parking is tight and not delineated. Formalizing traffic and pedestrian flow would help reduce user group conflicts at the access. Formalized parking also should seek to create distinctions between horse trailers (and other big vehicles) and smaller vehicles.
- Work with partners to address parking congestion.
- Designate alternate areas for horse trailer parking.
- Identify appropriate amounts and types of use including differentiating between commercial and private use launching from the Ponca Access.
- Expand restroom facilities.





Supporting Management Actions

Lost Valley

- Improve trail conditions and construct a new pedestrian bridge over Clark Creek.
- Establish a new visitor center in the Lost Valley area to enhance opportunities for interpretation and education in the greater Boxley Valley area. The National Park Service could seek partnership opportunities to co-manage a visitor center with other state or federal land or wildlife management agencies.
- Develop additional infrastructure including restrooms, parking, campsites, and a day use picnic area. Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards should be addressed insofar as possible with each additional infrastructure improvement.

Boxley Mill

- Work with the Gorgas Foundation to increase opportunities for visitor access to the Boxley Mill and Mill Pond and provide an overall vision for the area that is consistent with the historic “pastoral” setting.
- Provide accessible structures to increase education/interpretation. This would expand the areas that visitors can access and provide a greater diversity of experiences in Boxley Valley.
- Consider additional commercial use activities that may be appropriate such as additional commercial and agricultural activity on private land. Provide consistent and understandable guidance about the types of use that are permissible.

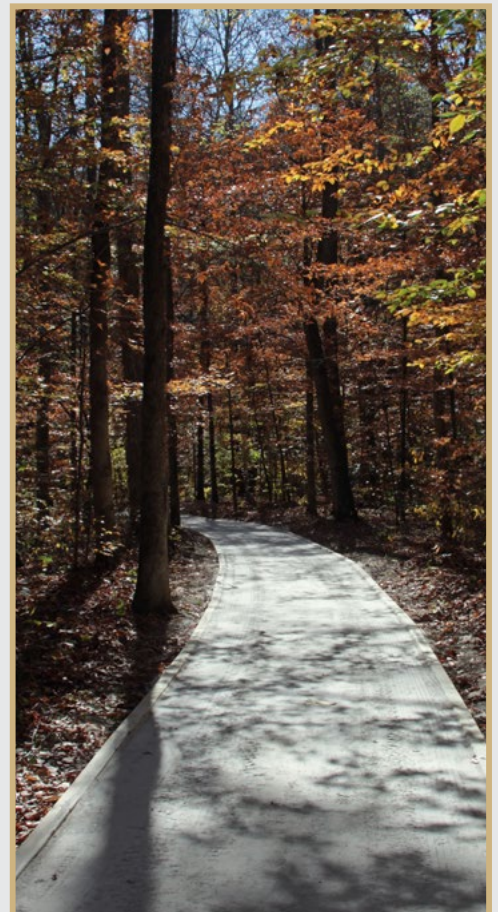
How to Comment

The National Park Service is asking for public feedback on the preliminary proposed action from May 8th through June 5th, 2017. During this period, the public is encouraged to comment on the proposed action and supporting management strategies that are being considered, and to identify issues or concerns. When commenting, please keep in mind that your rationale or reasoning is the most valuable information we can receive, so please be specific. You may submit your comments on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website (http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap). Once on the website, select “Open for Comment” to provide your thoughts on the possible management strategies. Comments may also be submitted in writing to the address provided at the end of the newsletter.

Give Us Your Feedback

We would like your observations and responses on the preliminary proposed action and possible management strategies presented on the previous pages. Consider these questions when developing your comments:

- Which potential management strategies or actions do you feel would be most helpful in meeting the plan purpose and need and why?
- Are there other management strategies or actions that would meet the plan purpose and need that should be considered as alternatives for the plan are developed?





You're Invited!

The National Park Service will host two open house events for the public to learn more about this proposal. The purpose of these meetings is to present the preliminary proposed action and draft management strategies on the comprehensive area plan, gather comments, and respond to questions. After a brief presentation, you can visit stations with more information and NPS staff will be available to respond to your questions. Please join us and share your ideas by attending one of the two scheduled open house meetings below.

Session 1 – Tuesday, May 9

5:30 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.

Ponca Elk Education Center, AR-43,
Ponca, AR 72670

Session 2 – Wednesday, May 10

3:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.

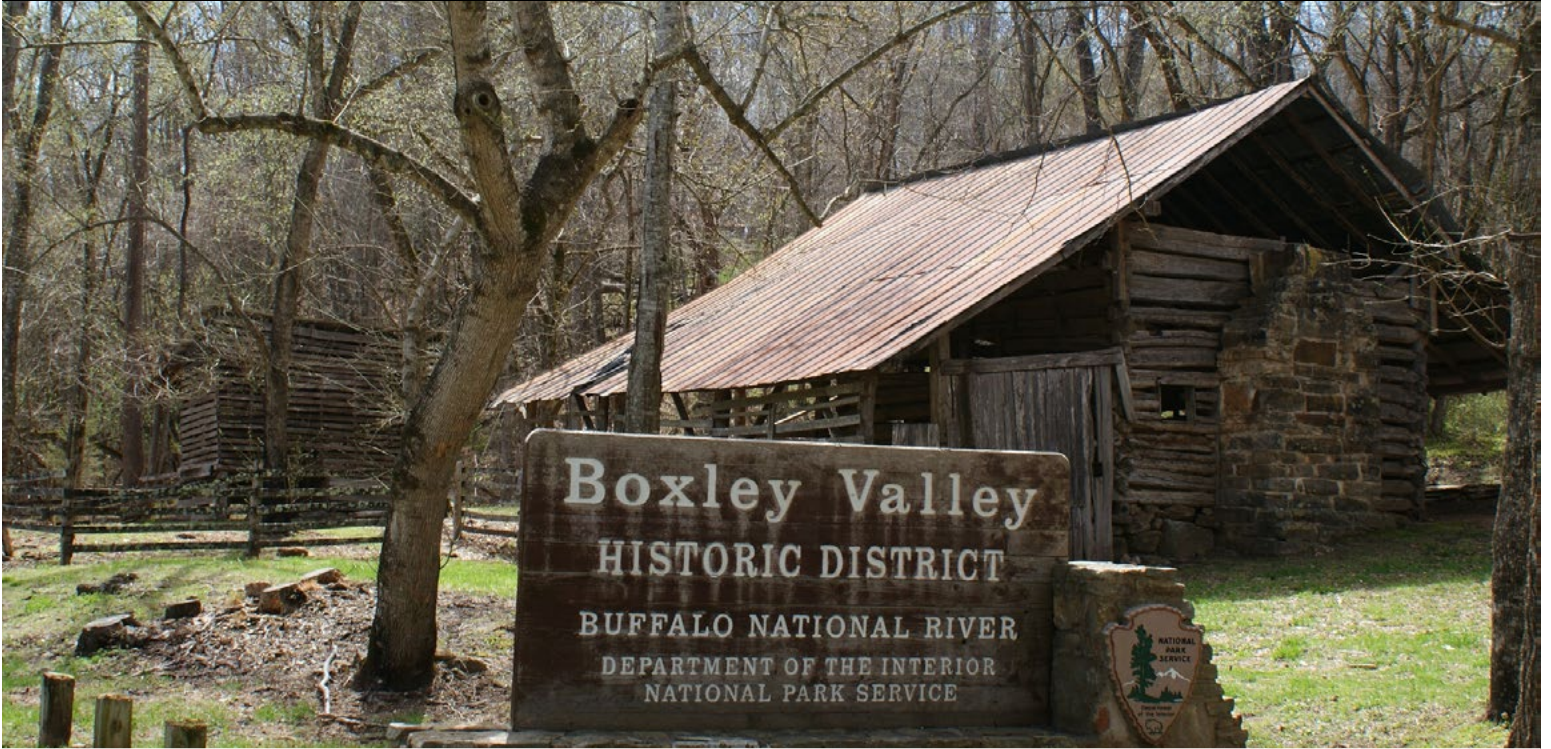
Ponca Elk Education Center, AR-43,
Ponca, AR 72670

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the park at buff_superintendent@nps.gov or 870.365.2732.

Buffalo National River Comprehensive Area Plan Planning Schedule

The table below shows the major steps in the planning process and when those events will take place.

Milestone	Targeted Schedule	Opportunities for Public Input
Public scoping	May 8, 2017 – June 5, 2017	Review the preliminary proposed action, attend public meetings, and provide your comments at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap
Analyze public comments and develop a range of preliminary alternatives	Summer 2017 – Winter 2017	Stay up-to-date on the planning process by visiting http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap
Prepare draft comprehensive area plan/ environmental assessment	Spring 2018 – Winter 2018	Stay up-to-date on the planning process by visiting http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap
Public review of draft comprehensive area plan/ environmental assessment	Spring 2019 – Summer 2019	Review the plan and provide your comments at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap
Analyze public comments and prepare & decision document	Summer/Fall 2019	Stay up-to-date on the planning process by visiting http://parkplanning.nps.gov/buff_boxleycap



Boxley Valley Comprehensive Area Plan Newsletter



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PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE \$300