



## **BOXLEY VALLEY COMPRHENSIVE AREA PLAN**

### **PUBLIC SCOPING COMMENT SUMMARY REPORT JULY 11, 2017**



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## SUMMARY

Buffalo National River initiated development of the Boxley Valley Comprehensive Area Plan (CAP) in the summer of 2016. In August 2016, the park held two public listening sessions to begin a conversation about goals and objectives associated with the Boxley Valley CAP, and to gather feedback to help inform the planning process and development of the “preliminary proposed action”, which was presented during public scoping.

Public scoping for the Boxley Valey CAP extended from May 8 – June 10, 2017. On May 9-10, the NPS held two meetings at the Ponca Elk Education Center in Ponca, Arkansas to gather public feedback on the preliminary proposed action. The public was asked to identify management strategies and actions that were noted in the preliminary proposed action that would be most helpful in supporting the plan purpose and need, and whether there were additional management strategies and actions that should be considered as alternatives for the plan.

A total of 18 people attended the public scoping meetings. In addition to comments provided during these meetings, members of the public were invited to enter comments into the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website, or submit them via email or mail. Thirteen (13) correspondences were provided via PEPC, email, and mailed letters, resulting in a total of 37 comments that were received during the scoping process.

To inform the public of the planning process and public scoping meetings, the planning team distributed a newsletter containing the purpose and need for the plan, key planning objectives, a preliminary proposed action, contact information for how to comment, the location of public open houses, and a general project schedule. The newsletter and information about public scoping were shared with the public in a variety of ways. Electronic versions of the newsletter were sent out to all contacts on the park's mailing list. Press releases, website posts, and social media notifications were also used to inform the public and stakeholders about the planning process and the opportunity to comment.



**Figure 1. Public Open House Meeting at the Ponca Elk Education Center**

The planning team collected public comments in order to understand the public’s perspectives on the preliminary proposed action and draft management strategies. In implementing the NEPA<sup>1</sup> process, thoughts and ideas from individuals, organizations, and agencies are analyzed and considered equally. The unique content of comments, rather than the number of times a comment was received, will be used to guide the development of a range of reasonable management alternatives for the plan. This report summarizes all of the substantive public comments received during the public scoping period.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Park Service is required by the NPS Organic Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to plan and make informed decisions that help preserve park resources and values. The NPS carries out this responsibility by preparing studies and involving the public before making decisions that will affect the environment.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Correspondence.** A correspondence is the entire document received from a commenter. It can be in the form of a letter, written comment form, note card, or open house transcript.

**Comment.** A comment is a portion of the text within a correspondence that addresses a single subject or issue. It could include such information as an expression of support or opposition to the use of a potential management tool, additional data regarding the existing condition, or an opinion debating the adequacy of an analysis.

**Comment Summary.** A grouping that is centered on a common subject. Comment summaries combine similar comments. Example quotes from the comments used to create a comment summary may also be presented to highlight the type of sentiments that went into the comment summary.

## PUBLIC SCOPING COMMENTS

The following topic questions were posed to the public to frame and begin the conversation surrounding is you preliminary proposed action and draft management strategies for Boxley Valley.

1. Which potential management strategies or actions (associated with the proposed action) do you feel would be most helpful in meeting the plan purpose and need and why?
2. 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?

Comments received under one topic question were at times repeated or applicable to other topic questions. To reduce redundancy, comments have been summarized and placed under the most applicable topic question below.

### **Topic Question 1: Which potential management strategies or actions (associated with the proposed action) do you feel would be most helpful in meeting the plan purpose and need and why?**

#### ***Expand interpretation and visitor contact***

A couple of commenters expressed support for a new visitor center in the Boxley Valley corridor. One commenter noted the Grist Mill and pond area as a potential location and another proposing an expanded or new visitor center in partnership with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. Another commenter recommended expanding interpretation of cultural and natural history throughout the region, specifically supporting new exhibits at the Boxley Valley and Steel Creek, Ponca, and Buffalo River Trail trailheads.

#### ***Balance historical agricultural processes while maintaining natural river processes***

One commenter encouraged the park to research alternative agricultural management practices to improve pasture quality, improve water quality, and offer economic advantages to farmers. The commenter suggests that this would be consistent with historical management practices.

### ***Improve traffic management strategies***

Two commenters identified the challenges the park regularly faces with people parking on narrow roads to view elk. They recommend the park formalize the traffic flow and develop parking strategies to reduce user conflict and provide a streamlined route for visitor access. One commenter encouraged additional signage along the roads sharing visitor information and identifying proper locations to park.

## **Topic Question 2: 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?**

### ***Expand recreational opportunities in Boxley Valley***

Commenters expressed support for additional dispersed recreational activities along the Buffalo River, most notably suggesting the inclusion of rock climbing in the plan. Several commenters specifically called out the exemplary rock climbing available on the Buffalo River, and proposed the park and partners seek input from local and international rock climbing organizations (the Access Fund and the Arkansas Climbers Coalition) should the activity be included in the comprehensive plan. One commenter listed specific areas in Boxley Valley that could provide world-class climbing options, advocating for climbing's inclusion in the plan and offering their assistance in developing a climbing management strategy. One commenter endorsed the development of a climbing management plan to identify rock climbing locations along the river, promote safety, and increased year-round tourism.

Multiple commenters proposed expanding the shoulders of Highway 43 and Highway 21 and striping bike lanes to support road biking, improve safety, and act as temporary parking during periods of heavy elk viewing. A couple of commenters advocated for increased camping opportunities and river access points, one proposing camping options at the origin and conclusion points along the Buffalo River Trail and another advocating for the consideration of recreational vehicle campsites in Lost Valley. A commenter proposed paving roads in the Steel Creek area. Another commenter proposed designating parking for private and commercial use at river access points. One commenter expressed support for a new equestrian trail between Ponca and Boxley Bridge. Another commenter expressed interest in an elk viewing area north of Clark Creek.

### ***Expand interpretation and improved orientation***

Most commenters expressed support for new orientation signs, and a few noted the need for improved interpretation in the Boxley Valley area. A few commenters expressed support for new wayfinding signs throughout the area, particularly at Ponca, near Beaver Jim's Cabin, and at existing elk pullouts. A commenter identified the 10-minute loading sign at Kyles Landing as one needing replacement. Signs should identify the visitor location ("you are here" marker), utilize universal symbols for visitor activity opportunities hosted at the areas, and showcase the NPS designation and management. One commenter recommended regularly-scheduled interpretive walks and talks along all sections of Buffalo River. Another commenter encouraged the park set up an artist-in-residence program. Another expressed support for continuing the partnership with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission at the visitor center, and recommended that the visitor center be expanded.

### ***New and renovated infrastructure***

Several commenters expressed support for new and/or renovated facilities in the Boxley Valley area. A few commenters recommended that the park expand parking lots and improve sanitation facilities at trailheads in the region (e.g., Boxley to Ponca trailhead, BRT trailhead). New parking should consider small vehicles versus larger vehicles. One commenter proposed a new pavilion at Steel Creek.

### ***Opportunities and improved management of Boxley Valley agricultural lands***

One commenter encouraged the adoption of Holistic Resource Management (HRM) practices for agricultural grazing fields within Boxley Valley. Another commenter recommended the park partner with landowners and reach out to outside parties to learn more about and promote sustainable agricultural practices on leased land. A commenter was interested in separating areas for private use and concessions at river access areas.

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