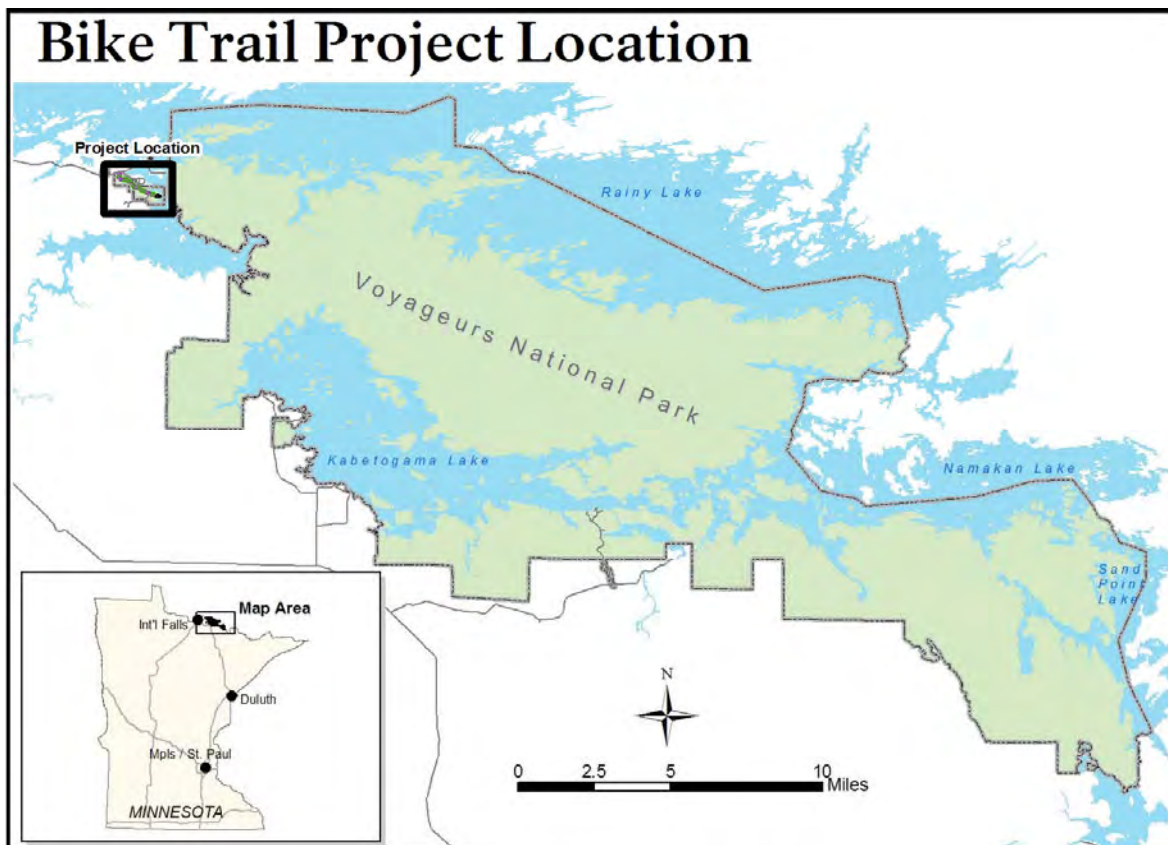


Rainy Lake Visitor Center Bicycle Trail Environmental Assessment

January 31, 2007



Cover Sheet

Proposed Action: Voyageurs National Park proposes to construct a bicycle trail connecting the existing bike path along Highway 11 with the park's Rainy Lake Visitor Center.

Type of Statement: Environmental Assessment (EA)

Lead Agency: Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Cooperating Agencies: Federal:
United States Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS)
Army Corps of Engineers
State of Minnesota:
Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
Koochiching County:
Water & Soil Conservation District
Environmental Services
Highway
Lands & Forestry

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Abstract: *Voyageurs National Park proposes to construct a bicycle path linking the community of International Falls, MN to the park's northern entrance by extending an existing bike path that parallels Highway 11 to the park's Rainy Lake Visitor Center. Additionally, the park proposes to pursue legislative change that would facilitate a land exchange between the National Park Service and the State of Minnesota in order to consolidate land ownership along the park's northern entrance to the Rainy Lake Visitor Center to avoid conflicting land use adjacent to the proposed bike path. This document was written to assist the park decision maker by assessing three different alternative approaches to meeting the goal stated above, and to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic Preservation Act.*

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1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Background

Voyageurs National Park contains 218,000 acres of land and waters managed by the National Park Service (NPS) to protect the outstanding scenery, geological conditions, and a portion of the historic route of the voyageurs during the North American Fur Trade period over two- hundred years ago.

The northern entrance to Voyageurs National Park is located on Rainy Lake, which is commonly accessed by people arriving by automobile from Highway 11, traveling east from the community of International Falls. A road links Highway 11 with the park's Rainy Lake Visitor Center and adjacent public boat launch ramp.

At this time, bicyclists, pedestrians and automobile drivers access the visitor center and launch ramp by sharing a narrow and winding road that includes several areas with poor visibility. The current situation poses a safety risk for people traveling on the current road because bicyclists and pedestrians are often difficult to see until the approaching motor vehicle is very close. Drivers also frequently cross into the oncoming traffic lane to pass bicyclists and pedestrians. This is especially dangerous in areas where vehicles approaching from the opposite direction are difficult or impossible to see.

Land ownership in the road corridor leading to the park's Rainy Lake Visitor Center currently includes both federal lands managed by the NPS and state lands managed by Koochiching County. State lands have been considered for logging and would typically be open to hunting and trapping. Neither of these activities is consistent with management of the surrounding park lands and would be likely to detract from the visitor experience of people entering the park here.

1.1.2 Proposal

Voyageurs National Park proposes to construct a bicycle route that would provide improved access for bicyclists and pedestrians entering the park's Rainy Lake Visitor Center from Highway 11. The park proposes to pursue legislative change that would allow for a land exchange between the NPS and the State of Minnesota to consolidate land use in the entrance road corridor to avoid conflicting land uses adjacent to the proposed bike path.

1.1.3 Purpose & Need

The purpose in taking the proposed actions is to alleviate visitor safety concerns related to automobiles sharing the same narrow road as bicyclists and pedestrians, and to provide for a positive visitor experience for people accessing Voyageurs National Park via the park's northern entrance corridor on Rainy Lake.

1.1.4 Project Objectives

The park proposes to address this situation while meeting the following goals:

- Provide safe access to the Rainy Lake Visitor Center from Highway 11 for pedestrians, bicyclists and automobile drivers.
- Provide a bicycle route that is designed for recreational users (including families traveling with young children).
- Connect the community of International Falls to Voyageurs National Park by extending the existing bicycle path along Highway 11 to the park's Rainy Lake Visitor Center.
- Avoid land use conflicts adjacent to the proposed bike path by acquiring state lands in the corridor between Highway 11 and the park's northern entrance and Rainy Lake Visitor Center.
- Protect park resources by minimizing impacts related to trail construction.
 - a. Avoid or reduce impacts to wetlands in the project area
 - b. Prevent the establishment or spread of exotic plant species due to proposed construction activity
 - c. Ensure an aesthetically pleasing access route for visitors entering the park via the Rainy Lake Visitor Center road
 - d. Avoid or reduce impacts to the park's biological, cultural, physical and experiential resources by minimizing the extent of new disturbed ground, protecting native vegetation, adhering to identified Best Management Practices for wetlands protection and exotic species prevention, by retaining a visually pleasing road corridor; and minimizing the alteration of previously undisturbed wetlands, geological features and plant communities.

1.2 Related Documents

The proposal to construct a bicycle route to enhance visitor access to the Rainy Lake Visitor Center was identified in the park's General Management Plan (2002), which states:

Bicycle and Pedestrian Access.

Bike lanes or separate paths will be developed along entrance roads to the park's visitor centers. Park staff will pursue the development of trail connections or linkages to existing lanes/paths outside the park. An additional shoulder will be needed in some areas to provide for safe routes.

1.3 Scoping

1.3.1 Internal Scoping

Voyageurs National Park staff established an interdisciplinary team to review the proposed bicycle trail project, to identify alternatives and potential impacts and mitigation activities. Information about the proposed trail was shared with park staff and was open for comments.

1.3.2 Public Scoping

A 30 day public scoping period was announced on August 5, 2006. Information about the proposed bike path was published in the local newspaper and on the National Park Service Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website.

The park informed Indian tribes by letter on February 14, 2005 of anticipated planning for bike trail access along the Rainy Lake Visitor Center entrance road.

The park informed the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) of anticipated planning for the bike trail at annual meetings on April 27- 28, 2005 and March 30, 2006.

No public comments were received during the initial public scoping period.

This environmental assessment will be made available for a 30 day public review and comment period. Substantive comments will be considered in our decision making process.

1.4 Issues Considered in this Analysis

The park has identified the following issues related to construction of a bicycle path to the RLVC.

- **Geologic Resources** – the park’s enabling legislation identified the unique geological conditions present in the park as one of the reasons for establishing Voyageurs National Park. Construction of a bike trail would necessitate removal or alteration of Precambrian bedrock outcrops along the proposed path.
- **Wetlands** – construction of a bike path connecting the trail on Highway 11 with the Rainy Lake Visitor Center would require alteration and filling of wetlands.
- **Exotic species** – construction of a bike route would require the importation of fill materials. Local sources of gravel and soil are contaminated with several species of noxious weeds. It is possible that construction of a bike path would introduce weeds into the park or enlarge the extent of current infestations.
- **Wildlife** - Voyageurs National Park is home to a diverse assemblage of animal species. Wildlife commonly seen in the project area includes whitetail deer, red fox, squirrels, snowshoe hare, and many species of resident and migratory birds.

- **Threatened & Endangered Species** – Voyageurs National Park is habitat for the federally listed Gray Wolf, Bald Eagle and Canada lynx. The park has prepared a Biological Assessment (appendix A) of the potential for negative impacts to these species and has found that the proposed project may affect, but is unlikely to adversely affect these species. The United States Fish & Wildlife Service has concurred with these findings.
- **Visitor Experience** – the alteration of the park entrance to the Rainy Lake Visitor Center would change the current visual landscape along the park road by altering road contours, sight- lines and adjacent rock outcrops and vegetation.
- **Recreation Resources** – the construction of a new bike path would provide an improved recreation resource for pedestrians and those accessing the park by bicycle.
- **Visitor Safety** –the construction of a new bike path would improve visitor safety by providing a better means for pedestrians, bicyclists and automobile drivers to access the Rainy Lake Visitor Center.
- **Land Ownership** –consolidation of land ownership in the project area is needed to avoid incompatible land uses along the northern entrance road to the park and the Rainy Lake Visitor Center adjacent to the proposed bike path. A land exchange is proposed that would allow the park to acquire state lands near the proposed trail, but would also remove a small disconnected parcel of land along Highway 11 from park ownership, opening this land to potential development. An archeological survey and other resource inventories of the land to be transferred out of federal ownership would occur prior to any land exchange between the park and the state of Minnesota.

I.4.1 Issues Identified but Removed from Further Consideration

The following issues were identified, but removed from further consideration in the Environmental Assessment.

- **Air Quality** – blasting and grading activities would require the use of heavy equipment and explosives. This would result in the temporary introduction of dust and other particulate matter during trail construction, however these changes in air quality would be minimal, localized and of short duration.
- **Natural Sound** – the use of heavy equipment and explosives would result in loud noises during trail construction, temporarily affecting the natural soundscape in the park and surrounding area. Although changes to natural sound would be noticeable during project activity, the potential for impact would be minimal and of short duration.
- **Rare plants** – Voyageurs National Park has conducted a rare plant survey (appendix B) of the alternate routes being considered for construction of a

new bicycle path. No rare plant species were found in the project area, although suitable habitat for Torrey's manna- grass and clustered bur-reed is present. Both are species of concern.

- **Cultural Resources-** No historic sites, structures or cultural landscapes are located within the project area, and no known archeological or ethnographic resources. An archeological investigation was conducted in 2006 (Appendix D).

1.5 Required Permits and Consultation

- Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires that federal agencies take into account the effects of their actions on properties listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Section 110 of the NHPA directs federal agencies to identify, evaluate, protect and nominate eligible properties to the National Register. The NHPA also requires that American Indian tribes participate in review when an undertaking or project may have an effect on historic properties of religious or cultural significance to Indian tribes.
- The National Park Service entered into a park- specific Programmatic Agreement (PA) with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Officer in 2005 for activities related to Section 106 in Voyageurs National Park. The PA requires that the park inform Indian tribes and the State Historic Preservation Officer annually of upcoming projects and ask if they have an interest in consulting.
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Section 7 consultation for Threatened & Endangered Species
- Army Corp of Engineers, Section 404 Permit for alteration of wetlands
- Minnesota Wetlands Conservation Act