



National Seashore Background

Gulf Islands National Seashore was authorized on January, 8, 1971, to preserve for public use and enjoyment areas possessing outstanding natural, historic, and recreational values. The authorized acreage for Gulf Islands National Seashore is 137,991 acres (federal 99,617, nonfederal 38,374). More than 80% is submerged lands/open water and 4% is designated wilderness. The acquisition of the remainder of Cat Island in Mississippi would add another 1,000 acres under federal ownership.

The national seashore encompasses barrier islands and coastal mainland in Mississippi and Florida and consists of 12 separate units (6 in the Florida District and 6 in the Mississippi District) stretching 160 miles from the western end at Cat Island in Mississippi to the eastern end of Santa Rosa Island in Florida.

The resources range from remote wilderness islands with limited visitation to readily accessible snow-white beaches and historic sites visited by several million people each year. It also includes bayous, salt marshes, and maritime forests.

Even though more than 80% of Gulf Islands National Seashore is under water, the barrier island beaches are the most outstanding features to those who visit. Five of the six Mississippi units are barrier islands — Cat Island, West Ship Island, East Ship Island, Horn Island, and Petit Bois Island. Both Horn

and Petit Bois islands are federally designated wilderness areas. The sixth Mississippi unit, Davis Bayou, is on the mainland.

Perdido Key and Santa Rosa Island, in the western portion of the Florida panhandle, include four 19th century forts built to defend Pensacola Bay. Construction of Fort Pickens, the largest, was initiated in 1829 and completed in 1834. The other forts include Fort Barrancas and Advanced Redoubt on the mainland, and the site of Fort McRee. A fifth fort, Fort Massachusetts, is on West Ship Island in the Mississippi District. These forts were built as part of a fortification effort to protect all major American harbors after the War of 1812. In addition to the coastal defense forts, numerous artillery batteries illustrate the evolution of coastal forts from post-Civil War to World War II. Gulf Islands National Seashore also preserves numerous prehistoric and historic archeological sites along the northern Gulf Coast of Florida and Mississippi, and in the Florida District a unit on the mainland was at one time reserved by the federal government for the purposes of establishing a live oak plantation for supplying oak to the U. S. Navy for shipbuilding.

The hurricanes of the 2004-2005 storm seasons severely damaged most of the facilities in the national seashore, and long-term recovery efforts are underway in both districts.

General Management Planning Framework

The planning framework guides the development of general management alternatives. It includes the national seashore's purpose and significance statements, primary interpretive themes, and planning issues. Based on your input from the first newsletter and additional review and study by the planning team, the current planning framework for the general management plan is shaped by the following statements:

PURPOSE

The national seashore purpose is the reason for which the national seashore was established. This statement is based on the national seashore's enabling legislation and legislative history. Purpose statements are important to planning because they are basic to all other assumptions about the national seashore and the ways it should be used and managed.

The purpose of Gulf Islands National Seashore is to preserve and interpret its Gulf Coast barrier island and bayou ecosystem and its system of coastal defense fortifications, while providing for the public use and enjoyment of these resources.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of Gulf Islands National Seashore is summarized in statements that capture the essence of its importance to our natural and cultural heritage. Significance statements describe the distinctive values of the national seashore's resources, why these values are important within a national context, and why they contribute to its purpose.

- *The national seashore contains one of the most complete collections of publicly accessible structures relating to the evolution of seacoast defense in the United States, representing a continuum of development from early Spanish exploration and colonization through World War II.*
- *The national seashore contains publicly accessible natural and scenic island, beach, dune, and water resource areas near major population centers.*
- *Protected and undeveloped natural resource areas provide habitat for several endangered species in diverse ecosystems, stop-over habitat for migratory birds, and critical nursery habitat for marine flora and fauna; these areas also serve as an enclave for complex terrestrial and aquatic plant and animal communities that characterize the northern Gulf Coast and fully illustrate the natural processes that shape these unique areas.*
- *The land and marine archeological resources throughout the national seashore represent a continuum of human occupation in a coastal environment and are important in enhancing the knowledge of the past, including interactions between the earliest settlers and the original inhabitants of this area of the Gulf Coast.*
- *The national seashore provides a benchmark to compare conditions in developed areas of the Gulf Coast to natural areas.*
- *The national seashore has a rare combination of recreational opportunities on publicly accessible undeveloped barrier islands, two of which are designated as wilderness.*

SUMMARY OF PLANNING ISSUES

Planning issues can be defined as an opportunity, conflict, or problem regarding the use or management of the national seashore's lands and marine environment. In our May 2004 newsletter, we outlined a number of issues, and based on your input and feedback from national seashore staff and public agencies, we have added the following additional planning issues:

Urban Encroachment

Increased development along the boundaries of the national seashore continues to reduce surrounding resource habitat while also increasing demand for access to national seashore resources.

Public Access

The loss of primary dune formations along Santa Rosa Island and Perdido Key have exposed existing transportation corridors to an increased risk of overwash and damage from future storms; at the same time, demand for access by land and water is increasing. This requires an analysis of existing and alternative transportation infrastructure.

Preserving Coastal Ecosystems

The national seashore has become a refuge for federal threatened and endangered (T&E) species and state species of special concern. Critical habitat for several T&E species has been designated in the national seashore by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service since the 1978 management plan was completed. T&E species include four types of sea turtles, gopher tortoise, snowy plover, piping plover, bald eagle, Perdido Key beach mouse, and manatee. Sea grass beds, migratory bird habitat, and turtle nesting sites are also at risk due to the pressures of outside development, increased visitation, and more storms in the Gulf.

Major Storms

Eight major hurricanes (Opal and Erin 1995; Georges 1998; Ivan 2004; Cindy, Dennis, Katrina, and Rita 2005) and a number of tropical storms in the last 10 years have damaged areas in the national seashore. This period of increased storm activity has accelerated the natural phenomenon of island movement endemic to barrier island dynamics. Development activities and recovery actions/strategies for the future need to be considered in the planning effort.

PRIMARY INTERPRETIVE THEMES

Based on the national seashore’s purpose, significance, and fundamental resources and values, the following primary interpretive themes have been developed. Primary interpretive themes are the key stories, concepts, and ideas of the national seashore. They are the groundwork that NPS staff will use for educating visitors about the national seashore and for inspiring visitors to care for and about its resources. With these themes, visitors can form intellectual and emotional connections with the resources and experiences. Subsequent interpretive planning may elaborate on these primary themes.



Sea, Sand, Salt Marshes, and Woodlands

Barrier islands, salt marshes, and marine areas make up the coastal environment of the northern Gulf Coast. Sea and sand combine offshore to shape coastal barrier islands — some of the most dynamic landforms in the world. Ocean currents and weather alter the national seashore — gradually over long periods of time, but sometimes suddenly during fierce storms.



Location and Legacy

In this coastal environment, land-based and submerged archeological resources within the national seashore represent a continuum of human occupation — from approximately 5,000 years ago to the present.



Forts and Firepower

Colonists in North America seldom strayed far from harbors and rivers because seaports were the gateways to the outside world and gateways for potential invaders. Coastal forts were the “locks” on those gates, and they were updated when new threats arose from improved technologies.



Recreation and Remembrances

The scenic beaches and bayous create opportunities for recreation, relaxation, solitude, reflection, and memorable experiences.



Preservation and Protection

Gulf Islands National Seashore is part of a larger system of seashores that were set aside by Americans to preserve, protect, and restore our nation’s natural and cultural treasures for future generations through stewardship.