



Environmental Assessment Public Review Newsletter | December 2021

Hello, as acting superintendent of the Flagstaff Area National Monuments, I am excited to share this update on the backcountry management plan for Wupatki National Monument. As you may know, Wupatki protects one of the most unique landscapes in the Southwest, encompassing more than 35,000 acres of open, rugged lands characterized by dramatic geologic features, climatic extremes, scarce water, and a diverse range of plant and animal species as well as its exceptionally well-preserved archeological record. Most of the monument, including eligible wilderness, remains undeveloped and is closed to unguided visitor entry under management zoning outlined in the monument's general management plan (GMP) from 2004.

Conserving monument resources and providing for their enjoyment is a challenging balance to maintain, and over time, there has been increased interest in reevaluating the monument's GMP to provide enhanced visitor opportunities. So, in late 2019 and early 2020, we engaged the public, interested parties, and tribal nations. Most of the feedback we received strongly supported continuing NPS-guided access to the backcountry. Due to the sensitivity of resources and concerns about commercial use, many commenters wanted us to thoroughly evaluate our management options and adopt a cautious approach towards authorizing any new access and/or uses.

We heard you and took your concerns to heart throughout this planning process. Now, we are excited to share the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the draft Wupatki National Monument Backcountry Management Plan (draft plan). The EA analyzes the potential impacts of two alternatives for the draft plan: the no-action alternative, which represents a continuation of current management as established in the park's GMP and other existing planning documents/decisions; and the preferred alternative, which is the draft plan.

The preferred alternative presents an approach to expanding visitor opportunities in the monument's backcountry that also emphasizes natural and cultural resource protection. The preferred alternative is based on recommendations of an interdisciplinary planning team, environmental impact analysis, feedback received during outreach, and additional consultation with tribal nations, stakeholders, and interested parties.

Public input is vital to this process; we want to hear from you. This newsletter provides a high-level overview of the scope of the EA, including the purpose and need for the plan, and highlights of the preferred alternative and other key sections of the draft alternatives. Please visit the National Park Service project website at (<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/WUPABackcountry>) to review the summary of previous public outreach and comments received, download a copy of the complete EA, and submit your thoughts on the National Park Service preferred alternative. Thank you for caring about Wupatki National Monument, the resources it protects, and the stories it tells. We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,
Kristofer Butcher
Acting Superintendent



Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Wupatki National Monument Backcountry Management Plan is to provide for the protection and preservation of irreplaceable resources and wilderness character while establishing long-term direction for public access and experience of eligible wilderness and other backcountry lands and monument operations in those areas.

The backcountry management plan is needed to resolve management issues and to meet legal and policy requirements. As a result of the 2013 wilderness eligibility assessment findings, the National Park Service needs to revisit decisions from the 2004 GMP related to visitor use; and establish new strategies for managing use so that visitor opportunities in the backcountry are balanced with preservation of wilderness character and other resources and values. In addition, the National Park Service needs to identify resource indicators and thresholds to monitor changes in condition as well as visitor capacities in fulfillment of legal requirements (1978 National Parks and Recreation Act).

Highlights of the Preferred Alternative

The National Park Service preferred alternative includes implementation of a backcountry management plan that provides additional opportunities for visitors to experience the backcountry and eligible wilderness at Wupatki National Monument. The draft plan outlines expanding the guided day hike program to increase visitor opportunities in the monument's backcountry. Also under consideration are new opportunities for permitted unguided day-use hiking, as well as potential for a new guided overnight experience (see Figure 1).

Under the preferred alternative, the National Park Service revised 2004 GMP management zone descriptions to better reflect the desired conditions of the backcountry and updated zone boundaries to accommodate the expanded guided hikes and new possibilities for permitted, unguided hiking (updated maps can be found in Chapter 2: Alternatives of the draft plan/EA). Because of the critical need to protect and preserve the monument's backcountry and Wupatki eligible wilderness, the National Park Service conducted a detailed analysis to identify the appropriate level of use for all areas of the backcountry; the resulting visitor capacities would be implemented as part of the NPS preferred alternative.

Resource protection measures are also an important part of the NPS preferred alternative. The plan outlines three (3) monitoring indicators and associated management strategies to update the monument's existing monitoring program. As part of the alternatives development process, the monument completed cultural resource vulnerability assessments and will incorporate them into the monument's backcountry monitoring protocol.

To ensure that implementation of the backcountry management plan protects natural and cultural resources, the National Park Service identified mitigation measures and best management practices that align with federal regulations and NPS *Management Policies 2006* that would be applied to all management actions. In addition, the National Park Service would pursue making the current backcountry closure permanent to provide the highest level of resource protection for in situ cultural resources and natural resources.



Desired Conditions

Desired conditions are statements of aspiration that describe resource conditions, visitor experiences and opportunities, and facilities and services that an agency strives to achieve and maintain in an area. This draft plan would formally update desired conditions from the 2004 GMP for natural and cultural resources that apply to all backcountry areas of the monument, including eligible wilderness. Desired conditions updated during this planning process guided development of the draft backcountry management plan. Updated desired conditions for backcountry portions of the monument can be found in Chapter 1: Purpose and Need of the draft plan/EA.

Proposed Visitor Opportunities

- Guided day-use Discovery Hike routes to Kaibab House (expanded area), East Mesa, and Antelope House
- Guided overnight hikes to Crack-In-Rock (expanded area)
- New guided day-use OR guided overnight Discovery Hike route to Pronghorn Plateau
- New potential for permitted, unguided day-use in Pronghorn Plateau and Kaibab Crossing

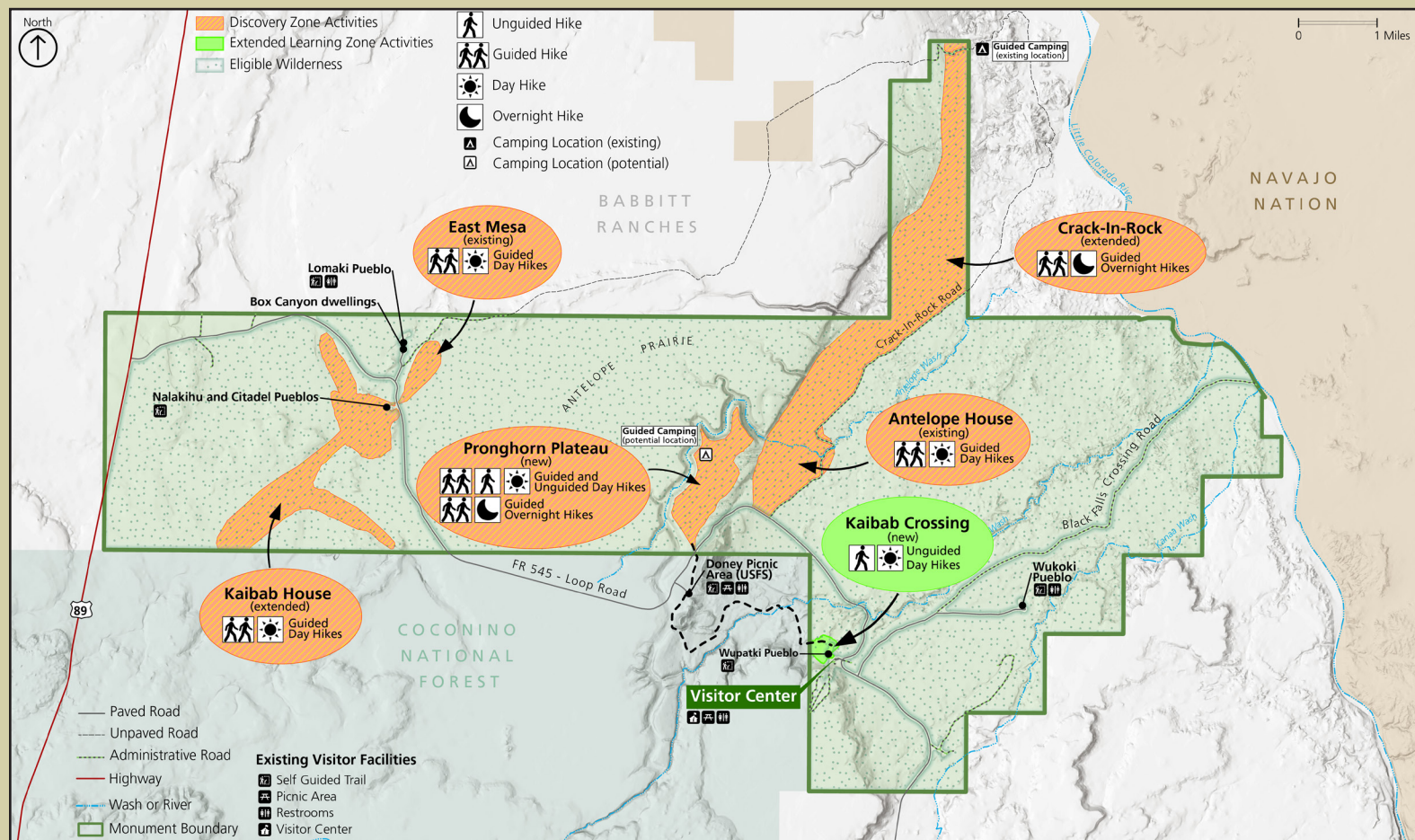


Issues Analyzed in the EA

The analysis in the EA focuses on impacts to visitor access and experience, wilderness character (specifically solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation) and cultural resources (see Chapter 3: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences).

The National Park Service also considered potential impacts to additional monument resources throughout the planning and EA process. Appendix F: Issues and Impact Topics Considered but Dismissed from Analysis outlines why topics were not carried forward in Chapter 3.

Figure 1. Map of NPS Preferred Alternative



Give Us Your Feedback

Wupatki National Monument is asking for your feedback on the Draft Backcountry Management Plan/ Environmental Assessment from **December 13, 2021 to January 12, 2022**.

To be most helpful, the National Park Service is seeking substantive comments that provide new and detailed information relevant to:

- environmental issues / impact topics analyzed;
- alternatives, including mitigation measures which could reduce potentially harmful effects; and
- the information used to describe the affected environment and environmental consequences.

Comments which are not helpful include those which:

- vote for or against a potential management practice, tool, or alternative without giving reasons why;
- agree or disagree with laws, regulation, or NPS policy;
- discuss other projects or other areas; and/or
- contain vague, open-ended statements or questions.

How to Comment

Please submit your comments at the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website (<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/WUPABackcountry>). Once on the website, select “Open for Comment” to provide your thoughts.

Comments will not be accepted by fax, e-mail, or any other way than those specified above. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not be accepted.

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 at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

