

**CUMBERLAND ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE
VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FAQS**

DECEMBER 7, 2022

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CUMBERLAND ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FAQs

1. FERRY SERVICE AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES

Why does this plan propose allowing more visitors by ferry?

Among other things, the purpose of the visitor use management plan is to provide “visitors improved accessibility to a variety of opportunities to be inspired through personal connections with those resources.” The plan also aims to “reduce barriers for new and diverse groups visiting the island while protecting resources and providing high-quality visitor experiences.” The plan takes a thoughtful look at how best to provide more access and a greater diversity of recreational opportunities while preserving the resources and experiences that make the island special, especially among East Coast barrier islands. Based on the best available data and information, the plan concludes that up to 600 visitors per day could be delivered to the island while protecting park resources and opportunities for solitude that make the park “different.” See appendix C for more information about how this figure was calculated.

How often is the ferry currently full?

Data collected by the park and in partnership with the concessioner has identified that the ferry is typically full in March, April, May, and during some holiday weekends (i.e., Memorial Day weekend and Labor Day weekend). This plan proactively manages for visitor use on Cumberland Island and considers additional means of access and recreational opportunities for visitors. For more information on current visitation trends, please see chapter 4 and appendix B of the plan.

How does this plan impact the ferry service?

The plan proactively manages for changes in visitation patterns or increases in visitor use by identifying opportunities to enhance visitor experiences while protecting resources and preserving wilderness character. The current ferry concession contract is set to expire in 2027. In anticipation of that expiration, the park will work with the National Park Service (NPS) Commercial Services Program to develop a new concession contract. Once a concessioner operator is established, an annual operating plan would be developed with authorized and required services, and the details of ferry service, such as schedules, would be identified at that time. No change in ferry service operations is anticipated before developing the new concessions contract. For more information, please visit the National Park Service [concessions webpage](#).

How will the National Park Service increase access and address the economic barrier of cost associated with visiting Cumberland Island?

As described in the plan, outreach to local underserved populations would be expanded, and opportunities to provide more affordable access to the island for these groups would be explored. Expanded outreach could include local school and youth groups and/or a

partnership with the ferry concessioner or local philanthropic groups to aid individuals and families unable to afford the normal ferry fare. While the plan acknowledges existing socioeconomic barriers to visiting the island, any changes to ticket prices will be determined through the contract between the concessioner and the National Park Service.

The National Park Service can reduce or waive entrance fees for educational groups and plans to continue doing so. Annual [fee-free days for all park visitors](#) are also an option for those looking for a lower-cost option to visit the park.

Why does the plan evaluate other commercial services that are not currently offered?

This plan evaluates whether certain aspects of commercial services are necessary and appropriate per the 1998 Concessions Management Improvement Act (PL 105-391). While services may be deemed necessary and appropriate in this plan, they are not guaranteed to be provided. The evaluation and analysis of services is a proactive management strategy that prepares the park for the future should it receive requests from business operators to provide certain services. Specific locations of these services would be determined during the development of any commercial use authorizations. Details on required and authorized services provided by the ferry concessioner will be determined during an update to the operating plan, which is likely to occur in 2027–2028.

2. VISITOR CAPACITY

How will the park manage within the identified visitor capacities?

Visitor capacity is defined as the maximum amounts and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate while achieving and maintaining desired conditions. Managing within capacity can be achieved through many different tools such as education, engineering, and enforcement. Managing ferry delivery, as described above, will be a primary means of managing within visitor capacities. Monitoring, as described in appendix A, acts as a feedback loop that helps managers evaluate an action's effectiveness and whether different actions should be taken to achieve desired conditions. Potential management strategies listed in appendix A may be used to manage within capacities.

What research informed the proposed visitor capacities?

The visitor capacities for the park were developed following best practices and established guidance contained in the [Interagency Visitor Use Management Council's Visitor Use Management Framework](#). The visitor capacities relied on three primary studies that looked at visitor patterns and preferences, including:

- Hallo, Manning, Brownlee, and Smith, 2012 *Cumberland Island National Seashore Visitor Use Study 2010–2011*
- Peterson, Brownlee, and Sharp, 2016 *Understanding Visitor Use at Cumberland Island National Seashore*

- Brownlee, Sharp, Blacketer, Nettles, and Perry, 2019 *Evaluation of the Relationship Between Current Conditions, Travel Patterns, Visitor Thresholds, and Ferry Services at Cumberland Island National Seashore*

To request these studies, please email cuis_superintendent@nps.gov.

3. MONITORING AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Is there a plan to conduct baseline assessments of ecological indicators before implementing management changes? Is there a plan to continue monitoring and evaluating ecological impacts of management changes?

Monitoring efforts have taken place at the park for years and would continue. The park has baseline assessments for numerous species. Through a joint effort with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the University of Georgia, the park assesses the numbers and the distribution of numerous federally and state-listed shorebird nests along with vehicle and pedestrian impacts. Begun in 1999, this assessment represents the first substantial effort by the National Park Service to monitor nesting activity and human impacts on these rare beach-nesting birds. Species monitored include the state-listed gull-billed tern, the piping plover and the Wilson's plover, the least tern, the American oystercatcher, the black skimmer, and the red knot. Least terns, Wilson's plovers, American oystercatchers, and gull-billed terns are all known to nest on the island. Monitoring shorebirds on the island annually would continue under the preferred alternative, providing a data set for comparison to further inform adaptive management. Monitoring of human disturbance on nesting shorebirds can coincide with ongoing shorebird surveys.

The park's sea turtle monitoring program, which uses interns who patrol the beach from May through October each year, documents nesting sea turtles on the island and works to improve their nesting success. Federally and state-listed sea turtles on the island represent some of the best studied, and of these, marine turtle nesting has been the most extensively documented. The turtle monitoring efforts to screen nests, selectively relocate them, implement predator reduction efforts, and educate visitors have proven effective in increasing the success of loggerhead sea turtles hatching on the island. Nest protection and monitoring efforts for the entire 17-mile shoreline has been in place since 1992.

In addition, baseline conditions for numerous species and natural resources are on record from scientific studies or research projects that have been conducted on the island by outside researchers.

Some monitoring efforts may include trail counters or camera data or observations by park staff or volunteers who are also fulfilling other duties. Additional monitoring strategies will rely on volunteers and/or partners. These strategies are discussed further in appendix A of the plan.

How was the proposed visitor use monitoring determined, and how will monitoring results be used?

The plan uses best practice guidance from the [Interagency Visitor Use Management Council](#). The plan identifies indicators, or measurable attributes that can be tracked over time, to evaluate changes in resources and thresholds, defined as the minimally acceptable conditions associated with each indicator. This will allow the National Park Service to identify parts of the plan for implementation or cessation over the coming decades.

Social science studies conducted by Kansas State University, Clemson University, and Vermont University on Cumberland Island between 2010 and 2019 helped the interdisciplinary team identify the most important indicators to monitor and associated thresholds. The scope of additional monitoring was intentionally kept small to ensure the operational sustainability of the plan. The potential management strategies associated with each indicator allow park staff to implement an action and continue monitoring to see if the action improves conditions. If not, other strategies may be implemented, thus allowing the park to try various approaches, as some actions may have more success in certain locations than others.

4. POTENTIAL IMPACTS

How might docking at Plum Orchard impact manatees?

This impact was evaluated on page 64 of the plan and in the biological evaluation in appendix G. The increased risks for vessel collisions and disturbance to manatees would be mitigated by additional educational signage around the docks and the installation of signage in areas, such as Beach Creek, where manatees are known to congregate. Vessel speed would be posted and further enforced around the ferry landing docks, and no-wake zones would be posted in areas, including Beach Creek and smaller unnamed creeks south of Beach Creek, resulting in beneficial impacts on manatees. In addition, park staff would encourage slower motorized boat speeds and actively educate visitors about regulations around sensitive species and areas. Ferry service operators currently follow boater best management guidelines when operating the ferries, which include keeping their vessels in deeper water whenever possible, operating at a no-wake speed when approaching the docks, watching for manatees around known congregation areas, wearing polarized glasses to reduce glare, and avoiding passing directly over visible manatees. These same guidelines would apply to expanded ferry services and routes. To date, there has not been a recorded manatee collision by the ferries traveling to the national seashore.

How was the upcoming mixed-use development at the old sugar mill site taken into consideration in this plan? With a large new marina nearby, do you expect this to increase the number of private boats visiting the island?

The upcoming mixed-use development was considered in the impact analysis (chapter 4), when evaluating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable planned actions that occur both inside and outside of the park. The National Park Service acknowledges that the development of local docks may increase visitation to the island, as the town of St. Marys

could potentially grow as a tourist destination. This plan establishes visitor capacities for key locations throughout the park and monitoring strategies that will be used to assess visitation and ensure that desired conditions for resources and visitor use and experience are being maintained and achieved. Please refer to Appendix A: Indicators and Thresholds in the plan for a description of the monitoring protocol and associated management strategies that the park may implement.

5. SOUTH END BEACH

How does the plan protect critical habitat and threatened and endangered species near the proposed South End Beach boat area and Beach Creek campsite?

The eastern shoreline of Cumberland Island, including South End Beach (approximately 1,500 feet inland and 1,100 feet out to sea), is designated as critical habitat for the piping plover. Piping plover nesting habitat is not present on the island, but the species is known to be present for up to 10 months of the year from June through April. Several other sensitive shorebird species are known to nest within the designated foraging critical habitat on the island and at South End Beach. At South End Beach, the high volume of visitors along the whole beach and the frequent presence of dogs disturbs nesting and foraging birds and can compromise nesting success. These risks vary widely depending on the time of year, the number of nesting birds, and the behavior of visitors and their pets. Under current management, watercraft can land in an unconfined area, and there is no active visitor use management along the portion of the beach managed by the National Park Service.

Under the proposed action, the park would designate an approximately 1,900-foot-wide visitor access, boat landing, and anchoring area along South End Beach that could shift from year to year depending on coastline conditions. This confined area would guide visitor use away from sensitive natural resources. South End Beach would be designated as a dog-free area, which would eliminate the current disturbances from off-leash dogs. The installation of signage at South End Beach and in other areas of the national seashore would provide information on shorebirds and other sensitive species and how to protect them and their habitat. Together, these efforts would reduce disturbances to piping plover and result in beneficial impacts when compared to current conditions. In addition, indicators and thresholds would be implemented. Staff would monitor for people entering posted closures (temporary or permanent) of sensitive shorebird areas and would implement adaptive management strategies to reduce disturbances if thresholds are met. Implementing adaptive management strategies to maintain these objectives would result in slight beneficial impacts to the piping plover. Across the island, impacts to piping plover would be minimized by adding enforcement and educational signage about species sensitivity that would help to reduce disturbances and benefit shorebirds and other wildlife, including piping plovers. In addition, shorebird monitoring takes place annually on the island and would continue under the preferred alternative, providing staff with a data set for comparison at the national seashore and further informing adaptive management.

The Beach Creek campsite location has no critical habitat designated; however, under the proposed action, this area would be designated as a no-wake zone, as would the small, unnamed tidal creeks that occupy the marsh area just north of South End Beach. Establishing

the Beach Creek campsite could slightly increase the number of small motorized and nonmotorized boat use on Beach Creek around the campsite. Beach Creek is currently used by motorized boats, and its designation as a no-wake zone would result in beneficial impacts to piping plovers and other shorebird species in this area.

Are dogs currently allowed on the beach? How would the proposal change dog access?

Yes, dogs are currently permitted on the island while on leash. At South End Beach, the high volume of visitors along the beach and the frequent presence of dogs disturb nesting and foraging birds and can compromise nesting success. Dogs can affect the energy balance of shorebirds by causing frequent flushing and have also been known to consume/harm shorebird and sea turtle eggs. These risks vary widely depending on the time of year, the number of nesting birds, and the behavior of visitors and their pets. Under the plan, dogs would not be permitted on South End Beach.

6. BICYCLE USE

Are you opening the designated wilderness to bicycle use? The alternative maps include trails within the wilderness that say, "open to hiking and biking."

The NPS preferred alternative includes expanding bicycle use on the beach to provide access to Sea Camp and Stafford Beach Crossings; it does not propose expanding bicycle use into designated wilderness. The NPS planning team will review the maps to ensure they accurately illustrate current and proposed bicycle use. Comments of this nature help ensure that the final plan is as clear and accurate as possible.

7. WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT

Why is there no dispersed camping in the wilderness?

Under the current management of Cumberland Island Wilderness, designated camping is required rather than dispersed camping to protect resources. The draft 2000 Cumberland Island wilderness management plan states that camping in wilderness areas will occur in designated camp areas. The draft plan was never finalized but was the product of extensive internal deliberation and public input; accordingly, the park uses it for guidance. The Wilderness Act (section 2[c]) defines five qualities of wilderness character: natural, undeveloped, untrammeled, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and other features of value. While designated campsites may degrade opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, they can lead to beneficial impacts on other wilderness character qualities. This plan proposes removing one wilderness campsite at Yankee Paradise and adding two new locations at Toonahowie and Sweetwater Lakes. These new locations allow the wilderness campsites to be more dispersed while maintaining the current number of users who can be accommodated, thus increasing opportunities for solitude throughout Cumberland Island Wilderness.

Has a wilderness character baseline been completed for Cumberland Island's Wilderness area? What guided management decisions are within the wilderness?

Cumberland Island National Seashore is currently finalizing a wilderness character baseline assessment. The National Park Service has used *Keeping It Wild 2, An Updated Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System*, produced by the Department of Agriculture, as a framework to assess impacts on wilderness within the environmental assessment.

Are motorboats allowed to access wilderness campsites?

The Brickhill Bluff and Toonahowie sites, which are in wilderness, could be accessed via land or nonmotorized and/or small motorized watercraft, as the waterways (i.e., Brickhill River) are not included within the wilderness boundary. The proposed Beach Creek campsite, which is accessible by motorboat, is located within the backcountry of the park but does not fall within wilderness.

8. PUBLIC REVIEW OF PLAN

Will the National Park Service respond to all questions and comments submitted during the public review period? Are they open to making significant changes?

The planning team reads and considers all comments received during the public review period. National Park Service standard practice is to respond to *substantive* comments. Substantive comments raise, debate, or question a point of fact or analysis. Comments that merely support or oppose an alternative or simply agree or disagree with NPS policy are not considered substantive. Responding to substantive comments may mean making corrections in the environmental analysis, supplementing the environmental analysis, modifying the alternatives, developing and evaluating new alternatives, or providing additional explanation.

How can I learn more?

The [visitor use management plan](#) is available for download from the project website. In addition, you may also watch a recording of the [public meeting](#) with closed captioning.

9. DECISION MAKING

What's the time line for this planning effort?

Following the public comment period, NPS staff will analyze and respond to substantive comments. Staff will make amendments to the plan and environmental assessment as needed and, if appropriate, will prepare a finding of no significant impact in summer 2023 to finalize and document the plan and its decisions.

Does the park get additional funding to implement this plan?

Completing a planning effort or environmental assessment does not guarantee funding for implementing this plan or change the level of funding an individual park unit receives from the National Park Service; budget requests are created annually and are fulfilled with funding

provided to the agency by Congress. The park may compete for funding for individual projects on a case-by-case basis. The National Park Service and the park superintendent have the management discretion to allocate available resources to address high-priority needs, including staffing needs, as issues arise. Additionally, the plan will be implemented over a period of many years.

Does the visitor use management plan completely replace the previous general management plan?

No, much of the general management plan is still valid and in effect, including the general measures for protecting resources and indicators for the general development goals. This plan builds upon and, in some cases, amends the guidance from the general management plan related to zoning, desired conditions, and visitor use management.

10. WHAT THE PLAN DOESN'T ADDRESS

What fire management approach will the park take to manage the longleaf pine and upland ecosystems?

Fire management activities are outside the scope of the visitor use management plan. The National Park Service updated the Cumberland Island National Park Fire Management Plan in 2022; impacts of NPS actions described in the fire management plan are included within the environmental assessment's description of cumulative impacts for vegetation and the biological evaluation included as appendix G.

Why doesn't the visitor use management plan cover the future management of the island's feral horses?

Cumberland Island's nonnative feral horses are not actively managed by the National Park Service, which means the population does not receive food, water, veterinary care, or population control. Actions included in the plan are not expected to impact the movement or behavior of the horses, and therefore, feral horses were included in Appendix K: Impact Topics Considered but Dismissed from Further Analysis. Actions focusing on the management of the feral horse population are outside the scope of this visitor use management plan.