

Chaco Culture National Historical Park

General Management Plan Amendment

Scoping Newsletter 1

December 2009

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Friends:

I would like to introduce you to a new planning effort at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. The intent of this effort is to amend the park's 1984 general management plan, in order to help the park prepare for possible changes in future visitation patterns. These changes are expected because of the following external influences:

- regional population growth and diversification
- the installation of a permanent exhibit located at the Smithsonian Institution that will increase the national profile of the park's resources
- the improvement of County Road 7950 by San Juan County, which will provide easier access to the park

These external influences are on the near-time horizon, so now is the time to act to safeguard the unique values and characteristics of the park. Chaco is one of only 20 World Heritage sites in the United States. The park offers unparalleled experiences for visitors to wander freely through monumental architecture in a relatively remote and undeveloped setting. We believe maintaining the scale and feel of Chaco and the ability of visitors to forge individual connections with park resources is critical to the area's significance as a world heritage and national park site.

The current general management plan provides adequate guidance for the park's overall operation, with one exception: visitor use management. This amendment will challenge several assumptions in the current general management plan regarding visitor use, including that the park's primary archeological resources can withstand virtually unlimited use without negative consequences. Among the outcomes of our efforts will be opportunities to reevaluate past research, incorporate new research, and provide more detailed guidance for strategic, values-based management of visitor use at Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

The purpose of this newsletter is not only to provide you with information about this planning effort, but also to ask for your help. By sharing your opinions about what you value most about the park and how to best manage visitor use, you can make a difference in the future of the park.

Thank you for your interest in Chaco Culture National Historical Park. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Barbara J. West

Superintendent, Chaco Culture National Historical Park

Project Purpose and Need



The purpose of this general management plan amendment is to revise and update the park's general management plan (GMP) to include additional information and direction for how visitor use of the park will be managed. Potential changes in visitation make it necessary to investigate alternative visitor-use management strategies in order to continue to protect the important resources and values of the park, and to maintain visitor opportunities and experiences similar to those available today.

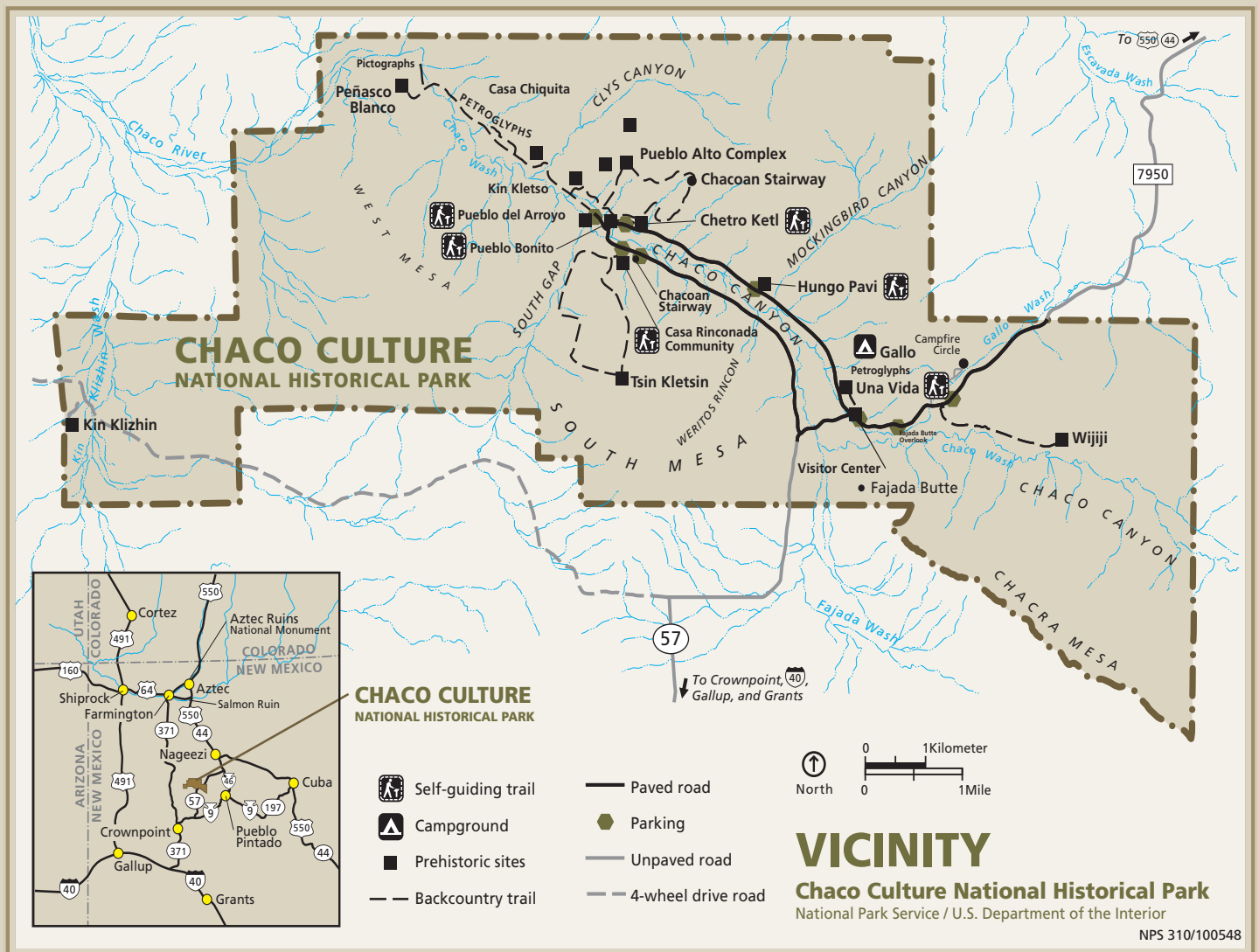
Foundation for Planning and Management

As Chaco Culture National Historical Park begins planning for its future, it is imperative that park management, staff, and stakeholders have a shared understanding of what is most important about the park, as identified in the park's purpose and significance. The park recently completed a foundation statement, which helps ensure that planning and management activities stay focused on the park's mission.

Park Purpose

A park purpose is the specific reason for establishing a particular park. Statements of the park's purpose are grounded in a thorough analysis of the park's legislation (or executive order) and legislative history.

The purpose of Chaco Culture National Historical Park is... to recognize, preserve and interpret the archeological resources associated with the prehistoric Chacoan culture in the San Juan Basin and surrounding area, so as to preserve these resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of present and future generations.



Park Significance

Park significance statements express why the park's resources and values are important enough to warrant national park designation.

Statements of Chaco's significance include the following:

- More than 10,000 years of human activity are preserved in Chaco Canyon. Use of the canyon culminated in the Chaco civilization that flourished between the 9th and 13th centuries and was characterized by remarkable achievements in architecture, designed landscape, art, agriculture, social complexity, economic organization, engineering, and astronomy.
- Chaco Canyon was once the cultural center for a system of communities linked by an extensive road and trading network within a 40,000-square-mile region. Congress recognized the extent of Chacoan influence when it established the Chaco Culture Archeological Protection site program that identifies and protects outlying sites. The National Park Service, tribal governments, and other agencies collaboratively protect and preserve these sites. The global significance of Chaco Canyon was recognized when it was designated as a World Heritage site in 1987.
- The monumental structures known as Chacoan "great houses" are among the best preserved, largest, and most complex buildings constructed in North America until the late 19th century. Several sites found within the park are formally recognized as archeological "type sites" by the scientific community.
- Since the 1880s, scientific research in the park has yielded a systematic record of the environment and lifeways of the region's former inhabitants.



This research has resulted in a valuable collection of millions of objects, records, and samples that are curated to further scientific inquiry, public education, and preservation of shared heritage. Research through time continues to reveal connections between Chacoan civilization and present day cultures.

- Contemporary Indian tribes, some of whom are descended from the "Chacoans," refer to Chaco Canyon and its features in their traditional histories and migration stories. Some tribes regard the canyon as sacred ancestral land. The descendants of Chacoan people remain connected and committed to Chaco Canyon through ongoing traditions. Members of at least 25 Indian tribes continue to advise and take an active stewardship role in the park today.
 - The solitude, natural quiet, remote high desert environment, and minimal park development allow the visitor an unparalleled intimate opportunity to stand amongst the ruins and imagine the activity that occurred during the height of the Chacoan occupation. The area is highly valued for its intrinsic spirituality.
 - The dark night sky provides visitors with an opportunity to make astronomical observations and understand the same sky the Chacoans observed and incorporated into their landscape, buildings, and culture.
- Chaco Canyon is the cradle of Southwest archeology. Pioneering exploration and study conducted in Chaco Canyon helped shape the discipline and the legal foundations for historic preservation in the United States.
- As one of the rare protected natural areas in the San Juan Basin, the park serves as a reference site for ecological and geomorphic processes and offers opportunities to conserve the region's biodiversity and monitor its environmental quality.

Project Approach

This project will examine different ways to address potential influences from the expected changes in visitation patterns. To develop strategic, long-term guidance for managing use in the park, the planning team will undertake the following major steps:

1. Further investigate, reevaluate, and document the values and characteristics of the park's extraordinary visitor experiences, along with the sensitivities of the park's natural and cultural resources.
2. Assess potential influences to visitor experiences and park resources as a result of expected changes in visitation.
3. Identify and evaluate effective visitor use management strategies to ensure desired resource conditions and visitor experiences are maintained.
4. Develop a process for measuring long-term success.



Visitor Use and Experience Survey Project

To directly support the GMP amendment, data on visitor use and experience characteristics have been collected by the University of Montana (under contract to the NPS) this past summer and fall. This visitor survey project builds on previous research, conducted in the early 1990s, and helps us further examine visitor use demographics and patterns, visitors' perceptions of their experiences, and visitor support for various management strategies. The results of this study will help park managers make informed decisions on how to best protect the delicate resources and provide for the unique experiences that visitors have come to expect at Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

Preliminary Management Options



The outcome of the planning process will include a long-term, comprehensive approach for visitor use management in Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Management strategies will be evaluated based on their likely efficacy and appropriateness to the park. Some potential management strategies that will be evaluated as part of this planning process include the following (**in no particular order**):

- Provide visitor education regarding some or all of the following:
 - pre-trip planning information to encourage use on off-peak days and times
 - information on resource sensitivities, park regulations, and leave no trace ethics
 - roving patrols to educate and enforce regulations
- Regulate visitor access to the park, which could include some or all of the following:
 - require visitors to wait at the visitor center before entering the park during times of high visitation
 - require visitors to join guided tours of some sites in the park
 - limit the number of permits available to some sites
 - require a reservation to visit the park
 - close the gate when the park is full
- Manage organized groups to the park, which could include some or all of the following:
 - pre-trip planning information to encourage use on off-peak days and times
 - contact by staff on-site to provide information, and to direct and distribute use
 - require a reservation to visit the park
 - limit group sizes when accessing different areas of the park
 - limit the number of groups per day and/or the times available for large group visits
- Implement site management of resources and facilities, which could include some or all of the following:
 - strategic placement of signs to direct visitor activities
 - designation of new trail opportunities to concentrate and direct visitor activities
 - use of physical barriers
 - strengthening and stabilization of sites (using appropriate techniques), particularly within high-use areas
 - closure of areas or sites either temporarily or permanently

Other News at Chaco Culture National Historical Park

In addition to this planning project, we will be starting a necessary improvement to the park in April, 2010—the renovation and rehabilitation of the park visitor center. The visitor center will not become bigger, but the interior will become better organized, and there will be needed improvements to the structure. The park will remain open during the construction and somewhat scaled back alternative facilities will be available to visitors. We look forward to welcoming you to the improved visitor center on your next park visit!

Project Schedule

Planning Activity	Approximate Time Frame	Public Involvement Opportunities
Public Scoping – identify concerns, expectations, and values related to the park involving the public, park staff, and other stakeholders	December 2009	Review the newsletter and send us your ideas and concerns using the response form or via the website
Develop alternatives and prepare draft general management plan amendment / environmental assessment	Early 2010 – Early 2011	
Release general management plan amendment / environmental assessment to the public	Mid 2011	Review document and voice your ideas and concerns
Review and analyze public comments, and prepare decision document	Late 2011	
Implementation of the approved plan	2012 and beyond	Work with park staff to implement the approved plan



Ways to Comment and Provide Input

At this time, the superintendent of Chaco Culture National Historical Park is announcing a 30-day public scoping period to solicit public comments on this project. During this period, the public is invited to identify any issues or concerns they might have with the project so that the National Park Service can appropriately consider them in the planning process.

You may submit your comments electronically only at the NPS planning website (<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/chcu>). Once on the website, click on “Open for Comment” in the header line, and then select “General Management Plan Amendment.” To submit a comment, select "Comment on document" from the left menu.

If you are unable to access this website, please submit written comments by December 31, 2009 to:

National Park Service
Attention: Chaco Culture NHP Planning Team
Denver Service Center, Planning Division
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, CO 80225-0287

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail 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. Although 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.



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Inside this Issue...

This newsletter includes information about a project to amend the park's general management plan that will enable the park to proactively plan for changes in visitor use management. The newsletter includes information on the park's purpose and significance, the issues and opportunities to be addressed in the project, some preliminary management options, the project timeline, and ways to provide input and comment. Inside the newsletter is a comment form that we ask you to fill out and mail to us so that we can better understand your concerns and ideas.

Thank you for your interest and support in Chaco Culture National Historical Park!