

Natural Resource Program Center Watershed Condition Assessment Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Program Purpose: To provide an assessment of current condition status for NPS managed watershed resources, resulting in science-based information that is readily usable in park planning and decision making processes and for park reporting to government accountability measures.

Introduction

Over 270 national park units (parks) include significant natural resources. These parks serve a common National Park Service (NPS) mission goal...to protect, restore, and maintain natural resources and associated values in good condition, and to manage those resources within their broader ecosystem context (paraphrase of NPS Strategic Plan, Mission Goal 1a).

Guided by law and NPS management policies and planning guidance, each of these parks must work toward a clear understanding of their desired conditions: *what are the park's most important natural resource features, processes, and values to protect; what are their target condition states; how will they be measured and tracked over time; and, are target conditions the same across the entire park, or do they vary by park management zone?*

Given the diversity among parks in terms of their primary management purposes, ecosystem context, and resource management issues, these questions must be addressed on a park-by-park basis.

Natural resource condition assessments play a supporting role here. They give park managers an interdisciplinary (and holistic) synthesis of existing scientific data from varied sources: taken together, what does the best-available science say about overall conditions for important park natural resources?

The assessments seek to translate scientific data and knowledge into a more accessible form for use in park planning, decision making, and accountability reporting purposes.

WCA Program Plan

During the 2006 to 2014 timeframe, the Watershed Condition Assessment (WCA) Program will fund a comparable natural resource condition assessment for each of the 270-plus parks.

Each assessment will:

- Rely on existing scientific data and knowledge from the NPS Inventory, Monitoring, and Evaluation Program and other sources;
- Use appropriate assessment frameworks and methods to guide and organize the work effort;
- Provide a spatially based report-out on park resource conditions.

Input from park managers, and NPS planners and science programs at project startup helps ensure that each assessment is focused on the natural resource features, processes, and values that are of central long-term importance to the receiving park.



Assessment Products

Each assessment will result in a written report and maps that:

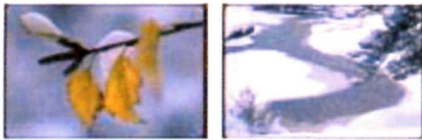
- Characterize park natural resources in their larger ecosystem context;
- Convey resource condition status for a set of individual measures as well as overall conditions by park areas (e.g., by watersheds, habitat types, or park management zones);
- Highlight data and knowledge gaps, and resource condition threats;
- Describe park resources and areas considered most at-risk;
- Recommend effective resource protection strategies.



Expected Uses

Park managers are expected to use assessment products as inputs to:

- Develop near-term strategies and priorities for the park's resource management program;
- Engage in watershed or landscape scale partnership/education efforts;
- Complete mid to long-term park planning efforts (e.g., General Management Plan, Resource Stewardship Strategy);
- Report on park resource condition status (i.e., Department of Interior "land health" goals, Office of Management and Budget "natural resource condition" scorecard).



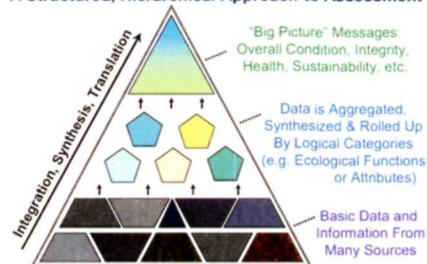
Current Projects

The type of natural resource condition assessment described in this fact sheet is new to NPS. In 2006, pilot assessments were initiated at 17 parks to demonstrate a variety of good approaches and products. Building on lessons learned from the (still ongoing) pilot projects, assessments were initiated at an additional 22 parks in 2007. A list of these parks can be found at the WCA Program web site. Final products from these demonstration projects will also be posted at the web site as they become available.

Project Standards and Guidelines

Initial standards and guidelines have been established for the assessments. They will be revisited and refined as appropriate, based on experience gained across the 2006-2007 projects. The WCA Program seeks a proper balance between use of standardized data and methods (useful for reporting purposes) and the flexibility to be responsive to park level differences in available data, most important resources, and highest priority management issues (useful for planning and decision making).

A Structured, Hierarchical Approach to Assessment



Assessment Frameworks

Use of appropriate frameworks and methods are critical to guide and organize the project work. They contribute to a defensible basis for evaluating and combining data for a set of individual measures into an overall (holistic) picture of resource conditions by park areas.

Project Funding

Assessments are funded through the Natural Resource Challenge, by a base-funding increase to the Natural Resource Program Center's Water Resources Division. Project funding is being increased progressively during 2006-2008 so that practical experience on how to conduct these assessments can be incorporated into the program standards. By 2009, project funding will be at full level (35 assessments per year) so that all 270-plus parks can receive project funding by 2014.



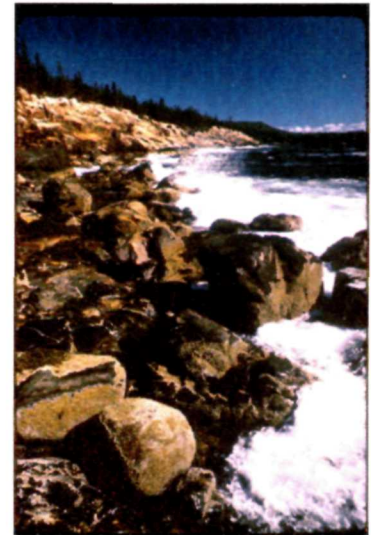
A Collaborative Effort

Each assessment represents a collaborative work effort that includes NPS staff from the Natural Resource Program Center, Vital Signs monitoring networks, Regional Offices and the receiving parks, as well as a team of partner investigators. In most cases, partner investigators come from universities and other institutions affiliated with Cooperative Ecosystem Study Units.



A Successful Project...

- Develops information products that are readily useful for park planning and for park reporting to government "resource condition status" accountability measures;
- Produces scientifically credible findings in the context of an "existing data + best-professional judgment" type of assessment;
- Delivers data and findings that the receiving park considers relevant and useful to their resource setting and information needs.



NPS Coastal Watershed/ Water Condition Assessments

Through the WCA Program, a set of coastal park resource condition assessments will be completed for 53 parks by 2010. These projects evaluate water quality, habitat condition, invasive species, extractive uses, and coastal development. More information on these assessments, including a fact sheet and reports for completed assessments, can be found at the WCA Program website.

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WCA Program Public Web Site:
<http://www.nature.nps.gov/water/watershedconds.cfm>

Intranet Site for NPS Use:
<http://www1.nrintra.nps.gov/wrd/Watershed/index.cfm>