



Foundation Document Overview

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area

Montana and Wyoming



Contact Information

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Purpose



BIGHORN CANYON NATIONAL RECREATION AREA, the first designated area of its kind in the Missouri River Basin, provides the opportunity for recreational use and enjoyment of its waters and lands, and preserves the scenic, pre-contact, and historic cultural and scientific resources that include impressive canyon walls and other noteworthy natural features.

Significance

Significance statements express why Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area offers outstanding recreational opportunities, including hunting and fishing, boating, camping, photography, hiking, and other outdoor pursuits, in a spectacular environment and setting.
- Bighorn Canyon's cultural and historic resources document human presence along the Bighorn River that dates back to the earliest cultures. The national recreation area contains physical evidence of early American Indian cultures and the Western frontier, including resources of enduring importance to traditionally associated tribes and the descendants of pioneer ranchers and other settlers.
- The remote location and high-desert ecosystem that characterizes Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area makes it an exemplary site for biological research and conservation for bighorn sheep and other plant and animal species.
- Landforms, remnant fossils, and evidence of ancient ecological conditions offer insight and comparison of the region's geologic history and processes. These actions were critical to forming the canyon, the surrounding mountains, and the region's water resources.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Bighorn Canyon**
- **Cultural Continuity**
- **Precontact and Historic Sites**
- **Experiential Resources**
- **Recreational Opportunities**

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Bighorn Sheep**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The vast, wild landscape of Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area offers modern visitors unparalleled opportunities to immerse themselves in the natural world and experience the wonders of this extraordinary place.
- The 120,000 acres of land and water in Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area display an astounding diversity of ecosystems supporting hundreds of species of plant life, birds, fish, and other wildlife.
- Bighorn Canyon, the river, and the surrounding environment are a vital part of the ancient and living culture of American Indians, including the Crows, Northern Cheyennes, Shoshones, Blackfeet, Arapahos, Lakotas, and other tribes of the region.
- The lives and stories of 19th- and early 20th-century settlers of European descent in this region illustrate the challenges, changes, perils, and personalities of America's Western frontier, with legacies that live on in the lifeways of their 21st-century descendants.
- Through the ages and into the present day, the water resources of the Bighorn River, Bighorn Lake, and watershed represent a vital, life-giving force in a tough, challenging environment.
- The ancient cliffs and exposed rocks of Bighorn Canyon provide a fascinating geological record of Earth's changes over many millions of years, as well as significant opportunities for archeological and paleontological discoveries.



Description

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area encompasses approximately 120,000 acres straddling the border between southeastern Montana and north-central Wyoming. The dominant feature of the national recreation area is Bighorn Lake, created by construction of the Yellowtail Dam on the Bighorn River. The diversified landscape includes forest and mountains, upland prairies, and deep canyons. Broad, relatively flat valleys bordered by low grassy hills characterize the northern and southern portions of the national recreation area, with the rugged Bighorn Mountains on the east and Pryor Mountains on the west.

The national recreation area was established by an act of Congress (Public Law 89-664) on October 15, 1966, "to provide for public outdoor recreation use and enjoyment of Yellowtail Reservoir and lands adjacent thereto . . . and for the preservation of the scenic, scientific and historic features contributing to public enjoyment of such lands and waters . . ." Adjoining lands are owned and managed by private landowners and multiple governmental and tribal authorities.

The Bighorn River flows northward through the Bighorn Basin in Wyoming and enters Bighorn Canyon north of Lovell, Wyoming. Much of Bighorn Canyon is narrow and confined within sheer rock walls that rise to more than 2,000 feet at the canyon's northern perimeter. Researchers have found fossilized dinosaur bones and tracks from the Upper Jurassic period.

The earliest American Indian inhabitants of the area were hunters and gatherers. More than 500 archeological sites have been recorded. Among the varied sites are pictographs and petroglyphs, hunting blinds and cairns, vision quest sites, quarries, camp and tool-making sites, and bison jumps. For many years the Crow Indians battled other tribes for control of the area until they were granted reservation lands by the US government in 1868. Several other tribes retain cultural associations with the area.

Trappers, explorers, and traders reached the area in the early 19th century. The four primary historic cattle and dude ranches preserved in the national recreation area are the Mason-Lovell Ranch, the Hillsboro (Cedarvale) Dude Ranch, the Lockhart Ranch, and the Ewing-Snell Ranch. The main ranch house at Ewing-Snell was adapted as a science center (Bighorn Canyon Research Center) before it was destroyed in a fire in December 2015.

Wildlife in Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area commonly includes bighorn sheep, wild horses, coyotes, mule deer, mountain lions, bears, snakes, and more than 200 bird species.

Part of the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range lies within the national recreation area, providing habitat for about 160 wild horses. A portion of the Yellowtail Wildlife Habitat Management Area lies within the national recreation area, consisting of riparian areas and wetlands, cottonwood forest, and shrubland that provide habitat for white-tailed deer, bald eagles, pelicans, and other waterfowl. Vegetation communities include desert shrubland, juniper woodland, and sagebrush steppe.

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area attracts some 200,000 visitors a year. Fishermen are drawn to the reservoir and Bighorn River for a wide range of game fish including walleye, sauger, rainbow and brown trout, black crappie, yellow perch, ling, and channel catfish. Other popular visitor activities include boating, hiking, camping, wildlife viewing, photography, hunting, and opportunities to enjoy solitude.

