



Foundation Document Overview

Big Thicket National Preserve

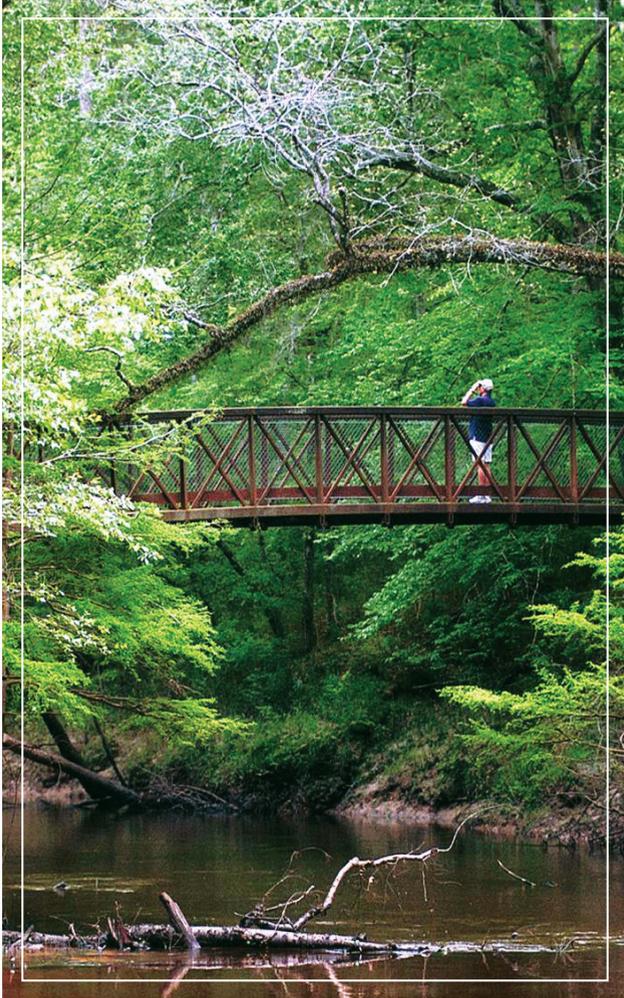
Texas



Contact Information

For more information about the *Big Thicket National Preserve Foundation Document*, contact: bith_superintendent@nps.gov or (409) 951-6700 or write to: Superintendent, Big Thicket National Preserve, 6044 FM 420, Kountze, TX 77625

Purpose



BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE represents a portion of “the Big Thicket” in southeast Texas, which is known for its extensive biological diversity. The Big Thicket National Preserve is dedicated to preserving, conserving, protecting, and enhancing the integrity of the natural and ecological systems in the Big Thicket. The preserve offers both scientific and recreational values and provides for public enjoyment.

Significance

Significance statements express why Big Thicket National Preserve 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.

- **Extraordinary Combination of Habitats and Species and Their Scientific Value.** Big Thicket National Preserve, the first national preserve, contains remnants of the diverse Big Thicket of Texas. The preserve serves as a refuge for a combination of plants, animals, and natural communities that include elements from the four distinct vegetation types. The opportunities for scientific research include the study of biodiversity and disturbance resulting from land uses and natural phenomena.
- **Flowing Water and Dependent Systems.** Big Thicket National Preserve has an extensive, dynamic system of hydrologic processes and associated dependent systems important to maintain the diverse yet specific ecological make-up of the Big Thicket. These include contiguous riverine and wetland systems.
- **National and International Designations.** Big Thicket National Preserve has received both national and international recognition. The preserve was designated an international biosphere reserve in 1981 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. The preserve was also designated a Globally Important Bird Area in 2001 by the American Bird Conservancy because it provides critical cover and forage to migrant neotropical birds.
- **Visitor Experience.** In a state where public lands are not widely available, Big Thicket National Preserve offers the visitor a wide array of recreational and educational opportunities in a natural setting within close proximity to large urban areas.
- **Cultural Resources.** Big Thicket National Preserve has a rich cultural history spanning centuries and cultures—prehistoric to modern American Indians, Spanish explorers, and early settlers to today’s modern users. Resources include remnants of historic land use activities and structures, traces of travel corridors, and archeological sites.

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.

- **Visitor Experience in a Natural Setting**
- **Free-flowing Water and Dependent Systems**
- **Biodiversity**
- **Compositional Diversity**
 - **Biome Level**
 - **Community Level**
 - **Species Level**
 - **Genetic Level**
- **Structural Diversity**
- **Processes and Functional Diversity**
- **Scientific Value**
- **The Thicket**

Big Thicket National Preserve 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.

- **Cultural Resources**



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.

- By preserving remnants of the unique Big Thicket of Texas, the preserve offers opportunities to better understand and appreciate the interdependence of ecological systems. The amazingly rich biological diversity of Big Thicket National Preserve includes rare and endangered species and habitats in an unusual assemblage of common animals and plants.
- Big Thicket National Preserve's intimate landscape and its unique combination of distinct and diverse ecosystems prompts a slower-paced exploration of its many wonders and enables opportunities for peaceful reflection, recreation, and a personal sense of discovery.
- The relationships of people with Big Thicket National Preserve prompts us to consider how past, present, and future land-use decisions will continue to influence those relationships.

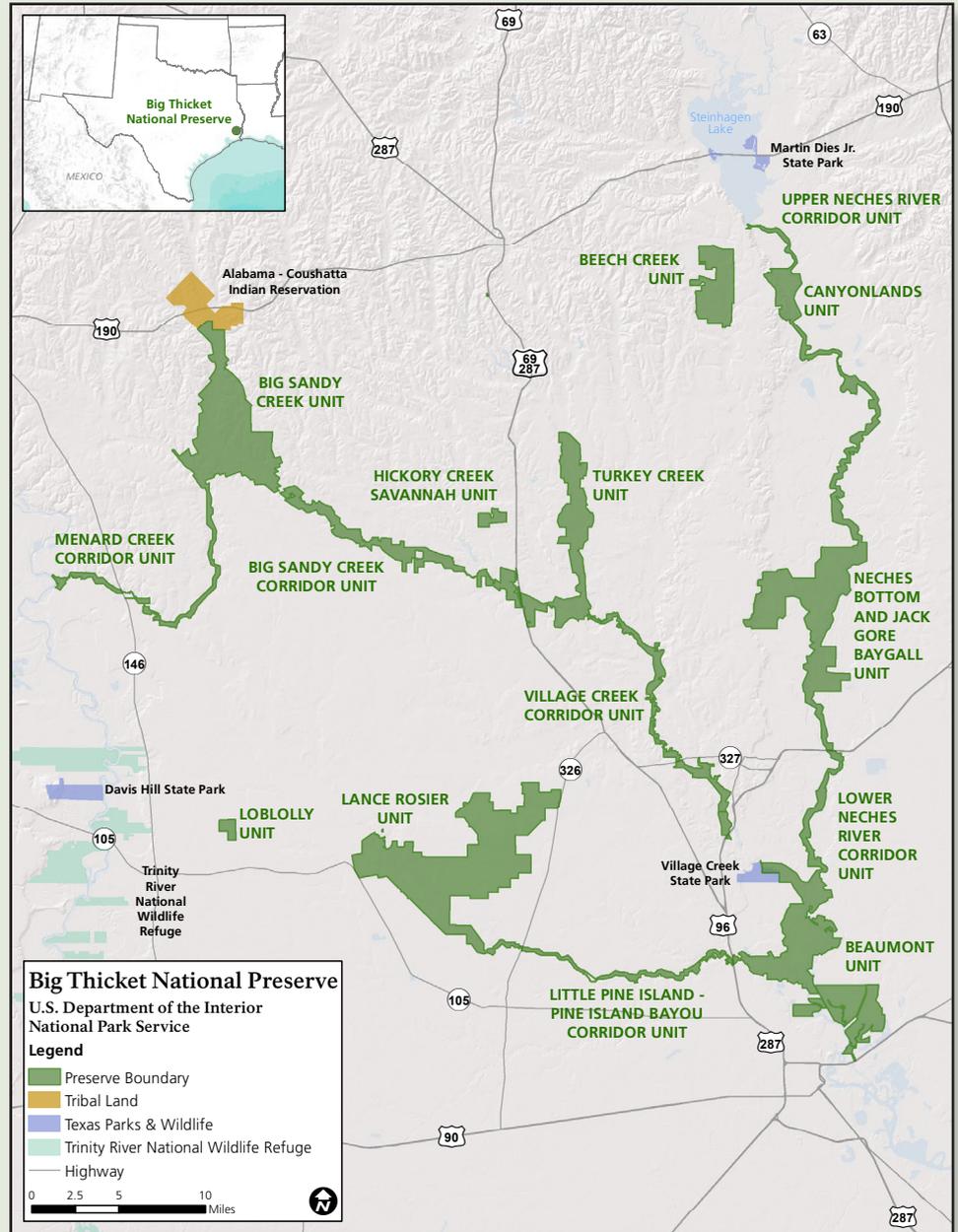


Description

Big Thicket National Preserve is in southeast Texas just north of Beaumont and 75 miles northeast of Houston. The preserve consists of nine land units and six water corridors encompassing more than 108,208 acres scattered across a 3,500-square-mile area. The Big Thicket, often referred to as a “biological crossroads,” is a transition zone between four distinct vegetation types—the moist eastern hardwood forest, the southwestern desert, the southeastern swamp, and the central prairie. Species from all of these different vegetation types come together in the thicket, exhibiting a variety of vegetation and wildlife that has received national interest.

The ecological area represented by the preserve once covered more than 3 million acres of southeast Texas and contained large quantities of natural resources such as gas, oil, and timber. Since the late 1800s, widespread logging and oil production have reduced the original area to approximately 300,000 acres, little of which remains in a pristine state. In 1974 concern that the unique ecological values of the thicket would eventually be completely lost led to the designation of representative segments of the thicket as the first national preserve in the national park system.

Historically, the area was wilderness with limited occupation by American Indian tribes until the early 1800s and 1890s when cattle ranching, timber industry, and railroads moved into the region. An oil well was drilled at Saratoga in 1866. This pioneer effort preceded the east Texas oil boom, which developed between 1901 and 1903, when Spindle Top (Beaumont) and Hooks 7 (Saratoga) came into production. In the three decades after 1900, a wave of new settlers poured into the new oil boom towns in Hardin, Polk, and Tyler counties. Many sawmill communities also experienced renewed prosperity.



Today, forest products and petrochemical industries remain major contributors to the region’s economy. Forest lands are dwindling due to land conversion from forested to pasturelands or development. Housing developments are pressing on the margins of the thicket and creating countless openings through its interior. However, the Big Thicket is also an area where visitors may choose to experience outdoor solitude as well as a variety of recreational opportunities.

