



# Foundation Document Overview

## Carlsbad Caverns National Park

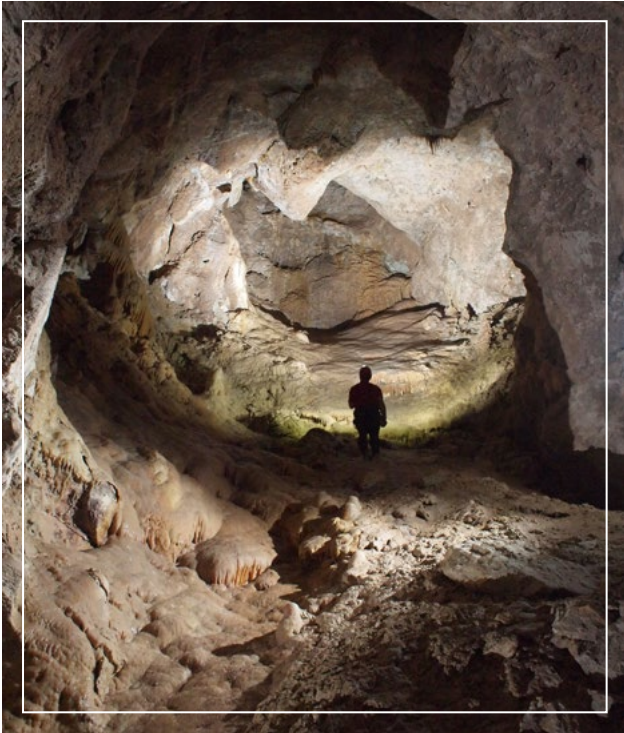
New Mexico



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Carlsbad Caverns National Park Foundation Document*, contact: [cave\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:cave_superintendent@nps.gov) or (575) 785-2232 or write to: Superintendent, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, 3225 National Parks Highway, Carlsbad, NM 88220

## Purpose



*The purpose of CARLSBAD CAVERNS NATIONAL PARK, a World Heritage Site, is to preserve and protect an internationally recognized Permian reef, superlative cave and karst resources, ecosystems, wilderness, and diverse cultural heritage for the enjoyment of the people.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Carlsbad Caverns National Park 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.

- Carlsbad Caverns National Park, a World Heritage Site, protects more than 120 known caves that are outstanding because of their size, exploration potential, mode of origin, unique biology, and the abundance, diversity and beauty of its speleothems (cave formations).
- Carlsbad Cavern attracts visitors from around the world to see spectacular speleothems, the largest and most easily visited cave room in the United States, and the wildlife viewing experience of the Brazilian free-tailed bat flight.
- Lechuguilla Cave is the second deepest limestone cave in the United States and the seventh longest cave in the world. Continuing exploration and research reveals rare and diverse microbes and speleothems, including impressive and iconic gypsum chandeliers.
- Carlsbad Caverns National Park protects a portion of the Chihuahuan Desert ecosystem that supports extraordinary biodiversity within a small geographic area, providing important refuges within the larger desert ecoregion.



## Significance



- Seventy-one percent (33,125 acres) of the park is federally designated as Carlsbad Caverns Wilderness where visitors may experience a natural acoustic environment, clear night skies, clean air and expansive vistas, and opportunities for solitude in a steep, rugged desert environment.
- The park's cultural heritage represents a continuum of human use from prehistory to present of the desert environment and caves as represented by hundreds of surface and subsurface archeological sites, longstanding and ongoing relationships with 14 American Indian tribes, two national register historic districts, two cultural landscapes, and nearly 1 million museum objects.
- Carlsbad Caverns National Park protects a portion of the Permian Age Capitan Reef, one of the world's best preserved and accessible reef complexes with unique opportunities to view the reef from the inside.
- Past environments and climates can be understood at Carlsbad Caverns National Park by studying fossil resources and conducting paleoclimate research using speleothems.

## 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.

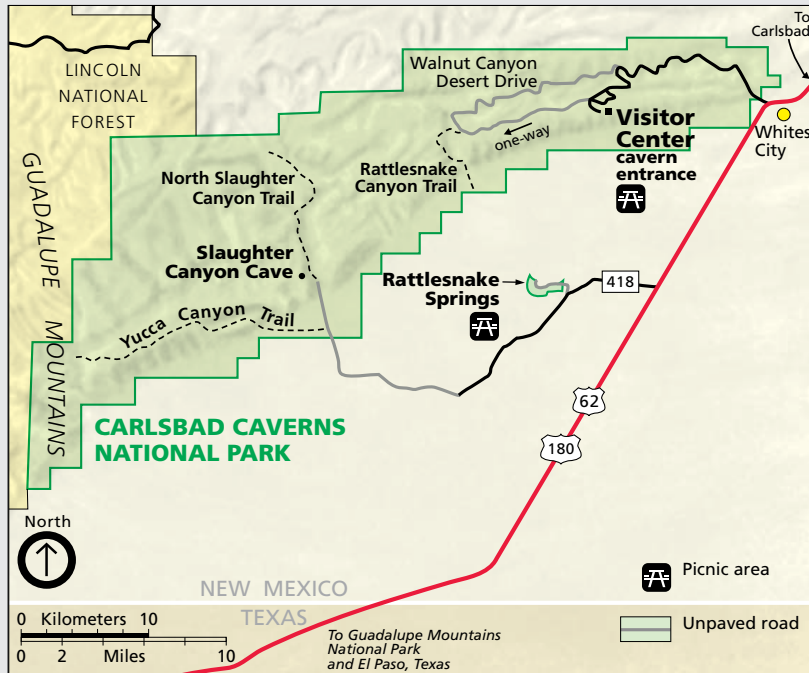
- **Cave and Karst Resources**
- **Chihuahuan Desert and Other Ecosystems**
- **Capitan Reef**
- **Designated Wilderness**
- **Exploration and Research**
- **Opportunities for Connection to the Resources**

Carlsbad Caverns National Park 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.

- **Carlsbad Caverns Historic District and Cultural Landscape**
- **Rattlesnake Springs, Including Its Historic District and Cultural Landscape**
- **Prehistoric Cultural Resources**
- **Museum and Archival Collections**
- **Continuing Connections and Consultation with Associated Tribes**



# Description



Established as a unit of the national park system in 1923, Carlsbad Caverns National Park preserves Carlsbad Cavern and more than 120 other known caves including Lechuguilla Cave, the nation's second deepest limestone cave at 1,604 feet and the world's seventh longest cave. The caves formed over the last 20 million years as sulfuric acid dissolved the surrounding limestone of the ancient reef. The park also protects an extraordinary and unique ecological association of bats, cave climate, speleothems, hydrology, cave fauna, and microbes. In 1995, the United Nations recognized the worldwide significance of the spectacular resources of Carlsbad Caverns National Park by designating it as a World Heritage Site. Visitation at the park totaled more than 440,000 in 2015.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park is located in the Guadalupe Mountains, a mountain range that runs from west Texas into southeastern New Mexico. The Guadalupe Mountains are the uplifted portion of an ancient reef that thrived along the edge of an inland sea more than 250 million years ago during the geologic time period known as the Permian Period.

The park encompasses 46,766 acres in the Chihuahuan Desert of southeastern New Mexico, with more than 33,000 acres designated by Congress as wilderness in 1978. The park is one of the few places where portions of this desert are preserved and protected.

The park supports a diverse ecosystem, including habitat for many plants and animals that are at the geographic limits of their ranges. For example, the ponderosa pine reaches its extreme eastern limit here and several species of reptiles are at the edges of their distributions. The park also provides important habitat for top predators such as cougars, and is home to what is perhaps the largest colony of cave swallows in the northern hemisphere. The Bat Cave area in Carlsbad Cavern provides important habitat for a large colony of Brazilian free-tailed bats as a place to give birth and raise young, as well as a stopover from migration.

The park's cultural resources represent a long and varied continuum of human use and adaptation to the Chihuahuan Desert environment dating to the late Pleistocene Epoch. Twelve to fourteen thousand years ago, American Indians lived in the Guadalupe Mountains; some of their cooking ring sites and pictographs have been found within the present day boundaries of the park. By the 1500s, Spanish explorers were passing through present-day west Texas and southeastern New Mexico. Spain claimed the southwest until 1821 when Mexico revolted and claimed independence. Mexico lost the southwest to the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. For the next 40 years, conflict persisted in the Carlsbad area between several American Indian tribes and the U.S. government. Human activities, including prehistoric and historic American Indian occupations, homesteading and ranching, guano mining, and resource preservation and tourism, have contributed to the rich and diverse history of the area.

The park has two historic districts in the National Register of Historic Places—the Carlsbad Caverns Historic District and the Rattlesnake Springs Historic District, which include 30 historic structures. The park museum, including the park archives, contains approximately 1 million cultural resource artifacts.

