FOUNDATION DOCUMENTS: WHAT THEY ARE; WHERE THEY FIT IN THE NPS PLANNING FRAMEWORK

A foundation document is intended to serve as the underlying guidance for all management and planning decisions in a national park system unit[1]. It describes the core mission and underpinnings of the park unit. Every park needs a formal statement of its core mission to provide basic guidance for all the decisions to be made about the park—a "foundation for planning and management." Increasing emphasis on government accountability and restrained federal spending make it imperative that all park stakeholders understand this underlying guidance. This will help ensure that the most important objectives are accomplished before less important tasks not directly related to park mission are undertaken.

The primary advantage of developing and adopting a foundation document is the opportunity to integrate and coordinate all kinds and levels of planning and decision making from a single, shared understanding of what is most important about the park. A well-prepared foundation document can accomplish many functions. It

- helps focus NPS efforts on protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit before turning to items that are also important, but not critical to achieving the park purpose and maintaining park significance

- provides a basis for ensuring consistency in all park planning and decision making, and for ensuring that all programs and actions contribute to achieving the park purpose and other mandates

- provides a means of communicating, via a tangible document, what is most important about a park unit to stakeholders (including NPS employees)

- serves as the basis for the development/amendment of all NPS plans

- describes NPS policy level conditions for key park resources and values based on laws and policies that apply to those resources and values

- identifies current conditions and threats and issues confronting a park's key resources and values

- identifies and prioritizes plans and studies that are needed for a park

> If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.
>
> —Henry David Thoreau

Foundation documents are not National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents because they are not decision-making documents. However, care must be taken to ensure that no elements of a foundation document go beyond an analysis and interpretation of decisions that have already been made through law or policy. No management actions should be included in a foundation document because this would require NEPA analysis.

An interdisciplinary team consisting primarily of park staff should develop a foundation document. Other NPS regional and Washington offices (e.g., cultural resources, natural resources, partnership

---

1 The term "park" or "park unit" is used here to refer to all units of the national park system, including national parks, historical parks, monuments, reserves, historic sites, recreation areas, seashores, lakeshores, battlefields, cemeteries, memorials, heritage preservation areas, rivers, and other particular designations for units of the system.

and visitor experience directorates) also may be able to provide valuable insights and information. When apppropriate, a planning team may want to seek input from experts within or outside the park (e.g., tribes, survivors of a historic event, scientists, culturally assoiciated groups) in developing parts of a foundation document, such as identifying park significance and fundamental resources and values, and drafting interpretive themes. In addition, a planning team may seek stakeholder or public involvement in reviewing a foundation document. In all cases the decision on whether or not to seek expert or public involvement lies with the park and regional offices. The level of involvement will depend on the park unit, the planning schedule, budget, etc. (If there is significant public outreach, the planning team may wish to include elected officials.) Before involving others, the planning team should carefully consider the goal or intent of involving others—what does the team hope to accomplish? And what are the pros and cons of involving these other individuals? Note: if the public is involved in a foundation document process, members of the public may incorrectly expect their comments to be addressed and incorporated into a foundation document, similar to what happens in a typical NPS planning process. Finally, regardless of whether or not the public participates in a foundation planning process, the public should have ample opportunities to participate in future planning efforts that stem from a foundation document.

A park should never have more than one foundation document. If the document is expanded or revised, plans and decisions should also be reviewed and revised if appropriate, to maintain consistency with the foundation.

Once a foundation document is completed it should remain relatively stable, although threats may change and the planning needs assessment may change with changes in the environment, users, surrounding region, legislation, and NPS policies regarding the park unit. Scientific and scholarly information also may require revision to reflect the most current knowledge about what is most important about the park.

LIST OF COMPONENTS

Park Atlas

The park atlas component provides mapping products that serve as information resources during the development of a park foundation document. The atlas establishes a Web mapping capability that can be used for park planning projects in the future. The atlas is a dynamic product.

Part I

Information in this part of the foundation document is relatively stable and components will not change much over time.

- Description of the Park
- Park Purpose
- Park Significance
- Interpretive Themes
- Identification of Fundamental Resources and Values
- *Identification of Important Resources and Values
- Documentation of Information on Fundamental Resources and Values
- Documentation of Important Resources and Values*

DESCRIPTION OF COMPONENTS

Park Atlas

The park atlas project includes the collection of GIS spatial data; the creation of a large-format "book" of paper maps with each page showing a specific topic; and development of a Web-mapping site. Web maps can be used during development of a foundation document, and later serve as a tool to help showcase park resources, analyze resources, and develop alternatives in future planning projects.

Part I

Description of the Park. Location, size, key attributes, and consideration of the park in its regional context.

Park Purpose. The specific reason(s) for establishing a particular park. Park purpose statements

- are grounded in a thorough analysis of park legislation (or executive order) and legislative history, including studies prior to authorization
- go beyond a restatement of the law to document shared assumptions about what the law means in terms specific to the park unit
- may be changed only by Congress (although the assumptions about how best to interpret the establishing legislation and legislative history of the park unit may be updated as part of the park foundation statement or general management plan)

Park Significance. The expression of why, within a national, regional, and systemwide context, park unit resources and values are important enough to warrant national park designation. Park significance statements

- describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context
- are directly linked to the purpose of the park
- are substantiated by data or consensus
- reflect the most current scientific or scholarly inquiry and cultural perceptions, which may have changed since establishment of the park unit

Interpretive Themes. The most important ideas or concepts to be communicated to the public about a park. Interpretive themes

- are based on park purpose and significance
- connect park resources to relevant ideas, meanings, concepts, contexts, beliefs, and values
- support the desired interpretive outcome of increasing visitor understanding and appreciation of the significance of park unit resources

Identification of Fundamental Resources and Values. These resources and values

- are determined to warrant primary consideration during planning and management because they are critical to achieving the purpose of the park unit and maintaining its significance

- may include systems, processes, features, visitor experience, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other resources and values
- are identified by an interdisciplinary team in consultation with recognized experts and other agencies that share jurisdiction

Identification of Important Resources or Values. * These resources and values

- are determined to be integral to park planning and management, even if they are not related to park purpose
- include those resources and values that are determined to be important in their own right even though they are not related to park purpose and significance

Documentation of Information on Fundamental Resources and Values.

- description of the importance of these resources and values, considering the full ecological, cultural, and/or social context
- the laws and policies that apply to resources and values and what general guidance these laws and policies provide, including the NPS policy level *condition of the resource or value*

Documentation of Important Resources and Values (if these have been identified in "Identification of Important Resources and Values").

- description of the importance of these resources and values, considering the full ecological, cultural, and/or social context
- the laws and policies that apply to resources and values and what general guidance these laws and policies provide, including the NPS policy level condition of the resource or value

Part II

Information in this part of the foundation document is more dynamic and likely to change over time. The assessment of planning needs is expected to be updated on a regular basis.

Assessment of Planning Needs

- Analysis of resources and values
- Identification of key or major issues that need to be addressed in future planning
- Identification of planning and data needs
- Prioritization of planning needs

*Special Mandates and Administrative Commitments

Laws and Policies and NPS Policy Level Condition of Resources and Values

*To be considered during the foundation development process, but included only if relevant.

Assessment of Planning Needs.

- analysis of resources and values, considering the following elements:
  - the current state or condition and related trends
  - potential future threats and opportunities
  - information about the resource or value—existing or needed—that is sufficient to provide an adequate knowledge base for planning and management and to plan for its acquisition
  - related resources
- identification of parkwide key or major issues that need to be addressed by future planning
- identification of needed plans and data needs
- prioritization of planning needs organized in broad bands of high, medium, and lower priority projects

Special Mandates and Administrative Commitments. Special mandates are

- requirements specific to the park that expand upon or contradict a park unit's legislated purpose
- legal requirements that must be fulfilled, along with parks purpose, even if they do not relate to that purpose (examples: a requirement to allow for the continuation of a traditional use, such as grazing)
- specific to the park, but are additional to those directly related to park purpose

Administrative Commitments.

- are generally agreements that have been reached through formal, documented processes; examples include a memorandum of agreement to abide by the policies of an interagency management commission, or to manage fishing in cooperation with the state department of fish and game
- may occasionally represent less formal understandings such as a commitment not to ban motorboats or other traditional uses

Laws and Policies and NPS Policy-level Conditions.

- this listing and narrative captures the laws and policies that apply to fundamental resources and values and other important resources and values (OIRVs), and the guidance these laws and policies provide, including the NPS policy-level condition of the resources and values