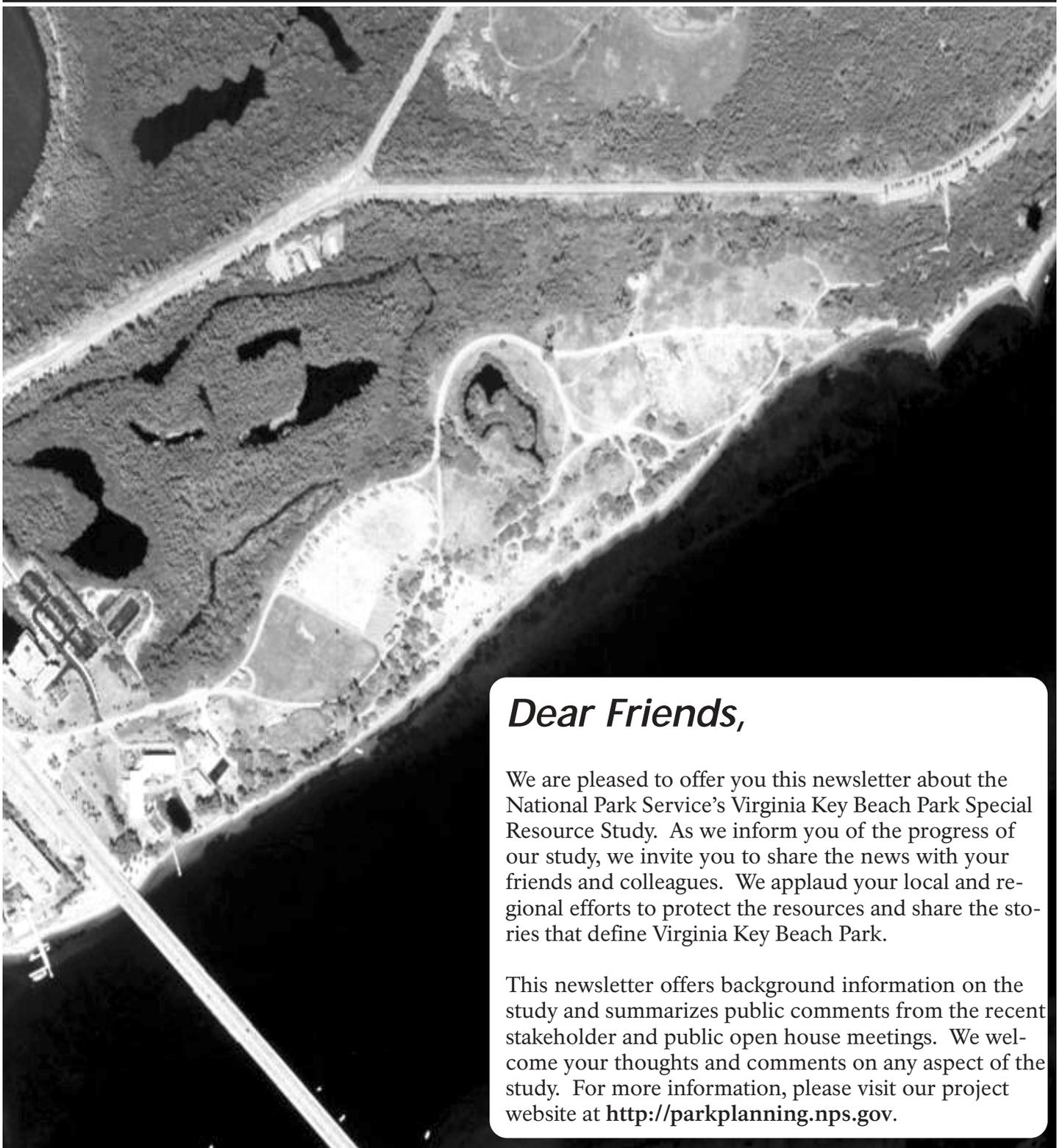




Special Resource Study *NEWSLETTER UPDATE*



Dear Friends,

We are pleased to offer you this newsletter about the National Park Service's Virginia Key Beach Park Special Resource Study. As we inform you of the progress of our study, we invite you to share the news with your friends and colleagues. We applaud your local and regional efforts to protect the resources and share the stories that define Virginia Key Beach Park.

This newsletter offers background information on the study and summarizes public comments from the recent stakeholder and public open house meetings. We welcome your thoughts and comments on any aspect of the study. For more information, please visit our project website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov>.

Virginia Key Beach Park

Background

Virginia Key Beach Park (Park) is an 82.5-acre site on the southeastern side of Virginia Key, an island of approximately 1,000 acres located 2 miles east of downtown Miami, Florida and about 1 mile southwest of the southern tip of Miami Beach. The island is essentially nonresidential and includes ponds and waterways, a tropical hardwood hammock, a large wildlife conservation area, and a sewage treatment plant.

As early as 1925, the beach at Virginia Key was used as a popular recreation spot by African Americans. During World War II, the Navy used Virginia Key Beach for training African American servicemen who were not permitted to train in the waters along the “whites only” beaches. In 1945, Dade County began building recreational facilities there and making the beach more accessible by providing a ferry boat service. Completion of the Rickenbacker Causeway in 1949 allowed access by automobile.

In the summer of 1945, at the “whites only” Baker’s Haulover Beach in North Dade County, a group of African American men led by Judge Lawson E. Thomas staged a protest of the segregation laws that prohibited African American persons from using the

public beaches of Miami and Dade County. In response to the protest, county officials created a public beach for the African American community on Virginia Key. Virginia Key Beach opened on August 1, 1945.



During its heyday, the Park had bathhouses, picnic pavilions, a concession stand, a carousel, and other amenities. The beach remained segregated throughout the 1950s until civil rights laws opened all public beaches in the area. Still, for the next two decades, Virginia Key remained a popular destination for many in the African American community. In 1982, Dade County transferred the Park to the city of Miami with the stipulation that the area be kept open and maintained as a public park and recreation area. However, the city closed the Park soon after the transfer, citing the high cost of maintenance and operations. After nearly 20 years of nonuse, site facilities had fallen into disrepair.

At the present time, efforts are underway locally to promote recognition and restoration of the Park. The Virginia Key Beach Park Trust was established in January 2001 to implement recommendations of a local task force. Beach and building restorations were two of the recommendations and are in progress. In addition, in 2002 the site was added to the National Register of Historic Places as a site of local significance. As part of the ongoing effort to protect the Park, the National Park Service (NPS) has been directed by Congress to conduct a special resource study (SRS) of the Park.



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Can Virginia Key Beach Park Become a Unit of the National Park System?

Public Law 107-343 enacted on December 17, 2002, directs the Secretary of the Interior to “conduct a study of Virginia Key Beach Park in Biscayne Bay, Florida, which was used for recreation by African Americans at a time when public beaches were racially segregated by law.”

The purpose of the Virginia Key Beach Park SRS is to assess the potential of the site for inclusion as a unit of the National Park System. The SRS evaluates the site and formulates recommendations for consideration by Congress. According to NPS policy, the site must satisfy the following criteria to receive a positive recommendation in the study:

National Significance

A proposed unit will be considered nationally significant if it meets all four of the following standards:

- it is an outstanding example of a particular type of resource
- it possesses exceptional value or quality illustrating or interpreting the natural or cultural themes of our Nation’s heritage
- it offers superlative opportunities for recreation for public use and enjoyment, or for scientific study
- it retains a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of the resource

Suitability

To be suitable for inclusion in the National Park System an area must represent a natural or cultural theme or type of recreational resource that is not already adequately represented in the National Park

System or is not comparably represented and protected for public enjoyment by another land-managing entity. Adequacy of representation is determined on a case-by-case basis by comparing the proposed area to other units in the National Park System for differences or similarities in the character, quality, quantity, or combination of resources, and opportunities for public enjoyment.

Feasibility

To be feasible as a new unit of the National Park System an area’s natural systems and/or historic settings must be of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to ensure long-term protection of the resources and to accommodate public use. It must have potential for efficient administration at a reasonable cost. Important feasibility factors include landownership, acquisition costs, access, threats to the resource, and staff or development requirements.

Management Options

Alternatives to NPS management might adequately protect resources even if they are significant, suitable, and feasible additions to the National Park System. Studies of potential new park units evaluate management alternatives that may include continued management by state or local governments, the private sector, or other federal agencies. Some areas have been recognized by Congress as being affiliated with the National Park System and are managed by others under terms of a cooperative agreement with the NPS, but are not “units” of the system. Additions to the National Park System will not usually be recommended if another arrangement can provide adequate protection and opportunity for public enjoyment.



Virginia Key Beach Park

What We Heard From You

More than 60 people participated in public open house and stakeholder meetings held on Key Biscayne, Virginia Key, in downtown Miami, and in Liberty City in May through August of 2005. These meetings produced a wide range of ideas and suggestions about the future of the Park.

Many of you shared your ideas about why the Park is important. You told us:

- Its history is important and it is a testament to the civil rights/segregation past of American history
- It has great potential to serve a large urban population for historical, cultural, and environmental education
- It is one of the few undeveloped coastal lands left in South Florida with beautiful beaches, mangroves, and wildlife with easy access to the public



A wide range of concerns were expressed regarding many aspects of the Park. Notable concerns include:

- Congested traffic in the Park and surrounding areas
- Protection of sea turtle nesting activities since the Park contains the most productive nesting beach for Loggerhead turtles in Dade County

- Overdevelopment of the Park or surrounding area, with development of commercial, retail, hotel, and residences (condos) of particular concern
- Lack of availability of funds for long-term management and upkeep of the Park
- Development of the Park as an active recreation park instead of as a passive recreation area with a high value placed on natural resources
- Public awareness of the Park needs to be increased
- Make sure the Park remains a public facility



You gave a variety of suggestions on how the Park should be used in the future. In particular you told us the Park should:

- Allow for outdoor recreational activities that are mostly passive and nature sensitive (no motor vehicles, jet skis, or motor boats)
- Be used as a museum and meeting place with a focus on environmental, historical, and cultural education
- Be included within Biscayne National Park as a northern gateway

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- Display public art and sculpture that reflect the cultural history of the area, dispersed within a reforested area
- Serve as a place for remembering and telling the story of segregation and for celebrating African American culture

Facilities were also mentioned as an important part of the development of the Park. You mentioned the need for:

- Reducing the footprint of the current parking area
- Structures that support the new museum
- Modest development of trails and displays that highlight the natural area
- Retaining historical structures
- A continuity with the natural area north of the Park by developing interpretive signs and trails



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The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

What Happens Next?

TIME FRAME	ACTIVITY	PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
Summer 2005	Initial Project and Public/Stakeholder Meetings Team members collect and analyze relevant data and public input needed to support the planning effort.	~ Newsletter ~ Attend public meetings ~ Give us your ideas and comments
Spring 2006	Develop and Evaluate Alternatives Using research and public input, the team explores possible management options and proposes a range of reasonable alternatives.	~ Newsletter ~ Attend public meetings ~ Give us your ideas and comments
Fall 2006	Prepare a Draft Document A Draft SRS/Environmental Impact Statment is published.	~ Attend public meetings ~ Give us your ideas and comments
Winter 2007	Publish Final Document Based on review and comment by the NPS and the public, the team revises the SRS/Environmental Impact Statement and forwards a final plan to the Secretary of the Interior.	
Spring 2007	Transmit Study to Congress Congress deliberates the study's finding and decides a course of action.	



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