



National Park Planning

Future for the Parks...Parks for the Future

The National Park Service plans for one purpose - to ensure that the decisions it makes are as effective and efficient as possible in carrying out the NPS mission. That mission is to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations and to cooperate with partners to extend the benefits of resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.



Photographs by Larry Norris

Why the National Park Service Plans

Planning is the means to an end, and that end is good decisions. Every day park managers, staffs, and their partners make difficult decisions about competing public demands for use of park resources, about priorities for using limited funds and staff, and about differing local and nationwide interests and views of what is most important about our national parks. What is the role of a national park in protecting a vulnerable ecosystem from encroaching agricultural and urban development? What types of visitor experiences are appropriate at a Civil War battlefield? How should visitor use be managed to protect fragile desert soils or other natural resources?

Planning is structured decision making. Through planning processes, four fundamental values are ensured:

- A logical, trackable rationale - Decision making can be tracked, beginning with the purpose of the park, and on to broad vision shared with the public, to more detailed decisions about specific actions, to individual work assignments and evaluations of results.
- Analysis - Decisions are based on scientific and scholarly data and analyses and take into account the surrounding region.
- Public Involvement - Decisions are based on understanding and consideration of the public's interests in their national parks as part of their national heritage, cultural traditions, and community surroundings.
- Accountability - Managers are held accountable for achieving the goals agreed to in plans and evaluating and updating plans when necessary.

Legal Requirements for Park Planning

The National Park Service is subject to a number of legal requirements for planning, all intended to support the best possible decision making for the parks and publics they serve. These laws and the associated planning documents are summarized below:

A 1978 amendment to the National Park Service General Authorities Act of 1970 requires comprehensive general management plans for all units of the national park system.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and other federal laws require analysis of potential impacts of management alternatives, which is documented in environmental impact statements or environmental assessments.

The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 require that results-oriented goals be identified and evaluated through park strategic plans, annual performance plans, and annual performance reports.

How Park Planning Is Accomplished

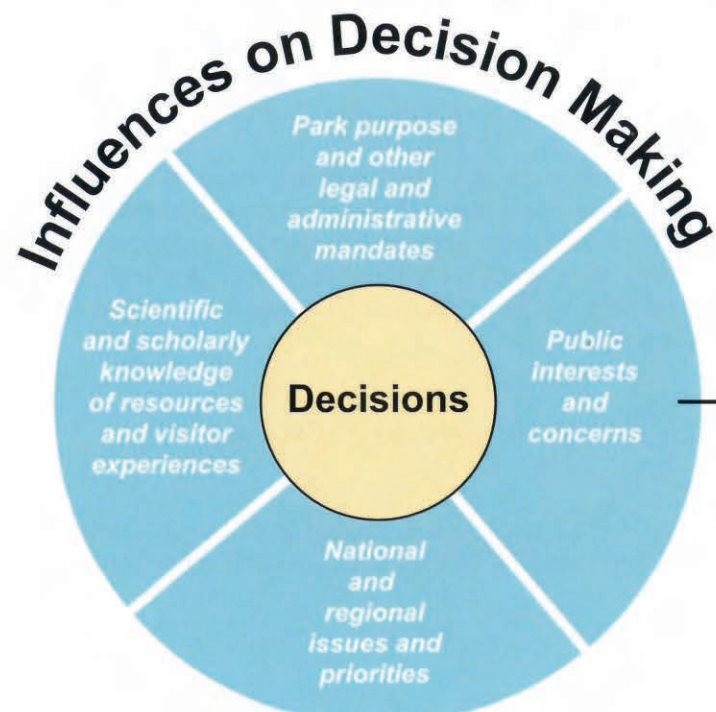
A logical, trackable rationale for decisions is created through four levels of planning, which become increasingly detailed.

1. The general management plan confirms why the park was created and what resource conditions and visitor experiences should ultimately be achieved.
2. The park strategic plan establishes priorities for what should be achieved in the next three to five years, based on an assessment of opportunities and threats.
3. A series of implementation plans describe how the direction set in the general management plan and the work identified in the strategic plan will be carried out through specific projects and programs. These projects and programs may be ongoing or take several years to complete.
4. An annual performance plan specifies what will be accomplished within one year and allocates funding and staffing needed to accomplish that work.

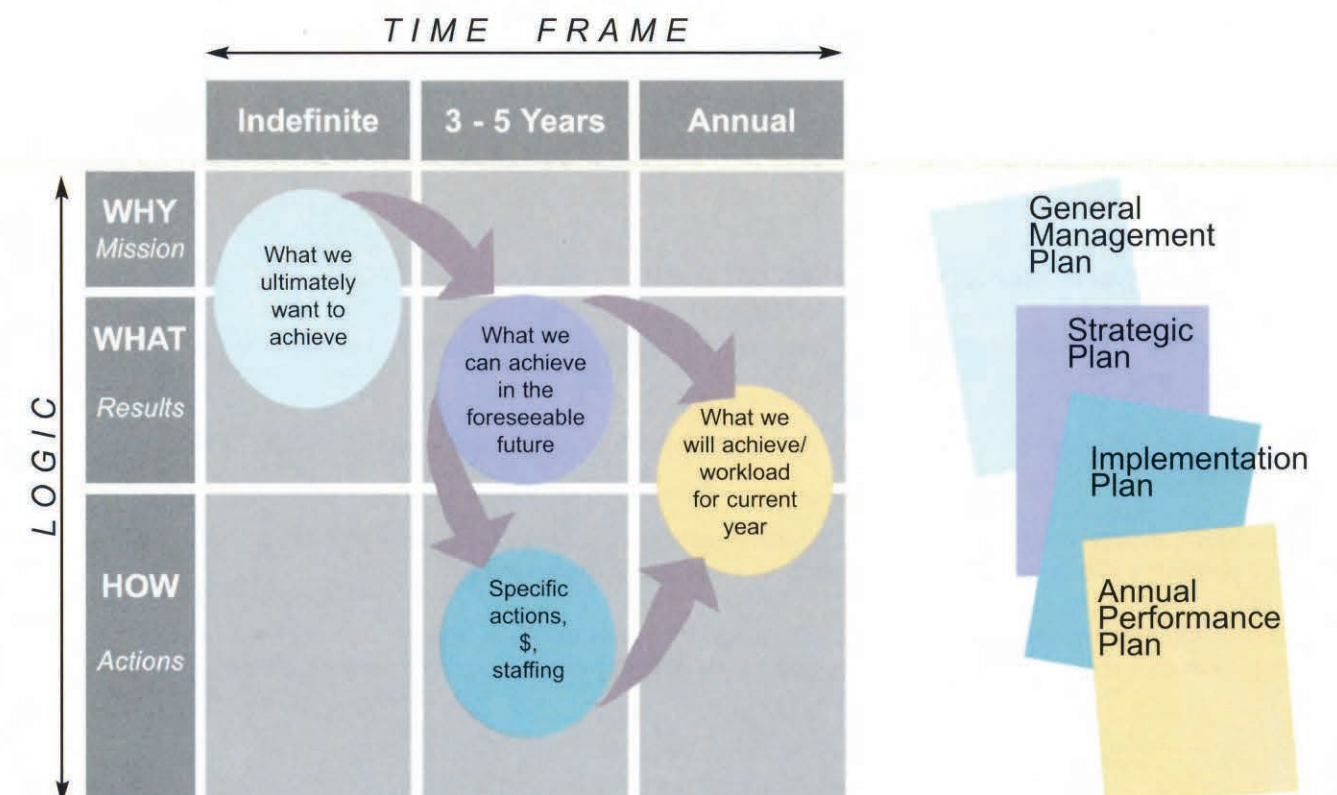
Within this planning framework:

- long-range goals guide more immediate goals and actions
- analysis is tiered from general to specific, focusing first on the park as a whole (including its global, national, and regional context) and then on site-specific details
- annual results are evaluated and fed back into the system in terms of progress toward short-term goals and how that progress relates to what the National Park Service hopes ultimately to achieve at the park

This brochure focuses on general management planning; however general management planning must be explained within the context of the other three closely related park planning processes. Good park management depends on all four processes working together.



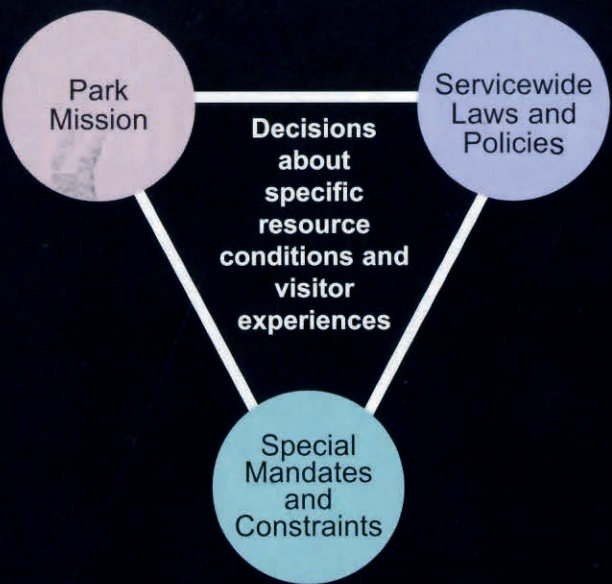
Public interests and concerns are a major factor in decision making for national parks, along with legal and administrative mandates, scientific and scholarly knowledge of resources and visitor experiences, and national and regional issues and priorities.



What Is A General Management Plan?

A general management plan is the first and most comprehensive of four kinds of plans the National Park Service produces for its parks (please refer to "How Park Planning is Accomplished" on the reverse side of this brochure). The general management plan articulates the park's mission (its purpose and significance) and clearly defines what resource conditions and visitor experiences should be achieved and maintained over time. Within the parameters of the park's mission, various alternative approaches to park resource protection, visitor use, and development may be possible. The most desirable overall approach is determined through general management planning. Planning ensures that this decision is based on the best available scientific and scholarly information, an analysis of the natural, cultural, and social impacts of a range of alternatives, attention to long-term economic costs, and consideration of public interests and concerns.

As the broadest level of decision making for a park, the general management plan focuses on why the park was created and what resource conditions and visitor experiences should exist, but it does not go into detail about how to accomplish those conditions and experiences. Decisions about specific actions are deferred to subsequent levels of planning, which deal with shorter timeframes and specific sites and activities. This tiered approach to planning and decision making helps park managers stay focused on the results agreed to in the general management plan while they deal with constantly changing opportunities and problems requiring innovative action and a high degree of collaboration with others.



Management of national parks is directed by law, policy, and plans, in that order. Servicewide and park-specific law and policy dictate "musts" - things that must happen in the park because they have been mandated by Congress or the National Park Service leadership. Park managers and staffs do not make decisions about law and policy, they simply implement them.

General management planning resolves the "wants" - the things that different people want to happen in the park, some of which are mutually compatible and achievable and some of which are not. Laws and policies provide the limits for determining which of these wants can legitimately be considered, and general management planning provides the processes for choosing among them and setting the park's direction for the future.

The GMP Process:
Defining and Comparing Alternative Management Prescriptions

Within the bounds established by the park's mission and other legal and administrative constraints, the GMP process starts by asking questions about desired natural and cultural resource conditions and visitor experience. For example:

What is the desired condition for the park's wildlife?

- The existing mix of native populations?
- or
- A mix of native populations that may include species eliminated from the area years ago?

What is a desired condition for the park's cultural resources?

- An evolving cultural landscape whose elements illustrate the evolving human uses of the site over time and into present?
- or
- A specific historic period landscape from which unrelated elements are removed and significant missing elements are restored?

What is a desired experience for the park's visitors?

- A "walk into the past," through which visitors can experience as directly as possible the living conditions in a 16th century Spanish colonial settlement?
- or
- "A window on the past," through which visitors can observe and participate in the archeological study of colonial ruins in their context as part of a larger cultural landscape?

The answers to these questions form the components for a range of potential management prescriptions for the park. A management prescription describes one way that resources and visitor use could be managed to produce a harmonious combination of natural and cultural resource conditions and closely associated visitor experiences. Management prescriptions also describe the kinds and levels of management and use that would be appropriate to achieving the intended results. Most parks could have several very different combinations of management prescriptions, resulting in different resource conditions and experiences.

The questions for planning, then, are how much of each prescription is appropriate and exactly where in the park should they be applied. To explore these questions, alternative combinations of management prescriptions, representing different visions for the future, are developed and compared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The National Park Service approves a final general management plan only after analyzing potential impacts of the alternatives and considering public comments.

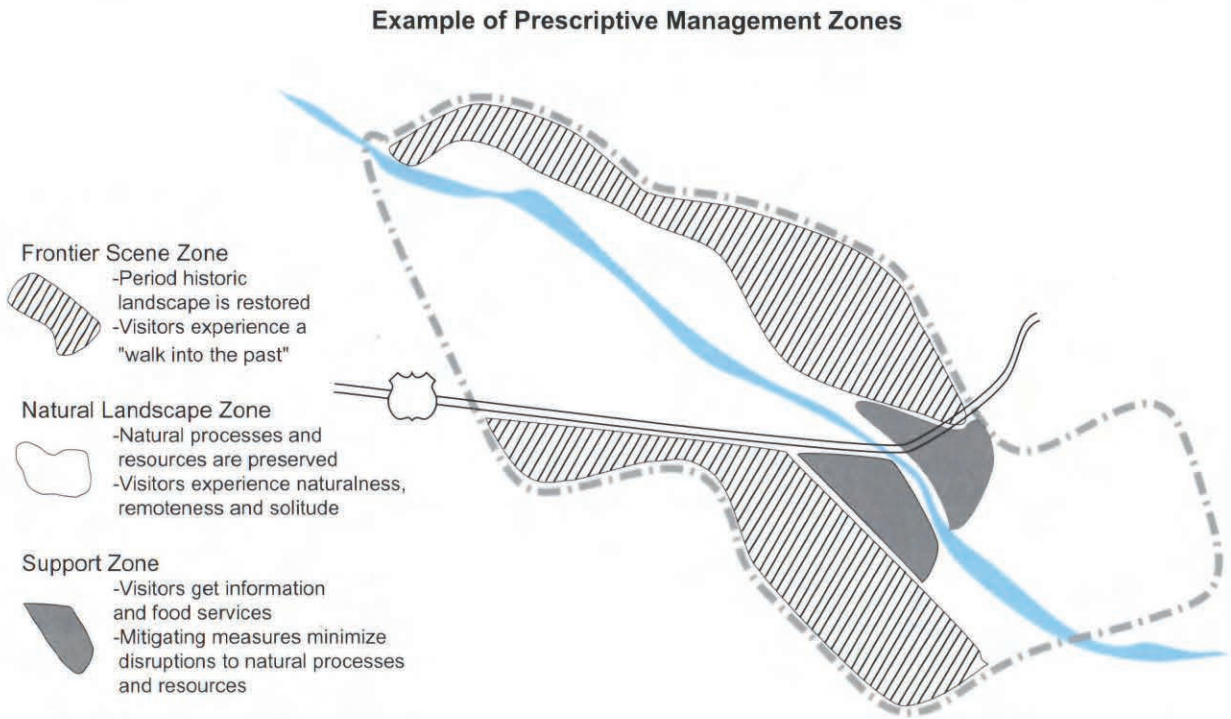
Expect a General Management Plan to:

- establish the resource conditions and visitor experiences that should be achieved and maintained in each area of the park over time
- take the long view, which may be many years into the future when dealing with the time frames of natural and cultural processes
- consider connections among the various park programs and park management zones to avoid inadvertently creating new problems in one area while attempting to solve problems in another
- identify the desired results, providing a foundation for future decision making that will help park managers solve the long-term and short-term problems they are aware of today and also unforeseen problems that will arise in the future

The Result of the GMP Process:
Commitment to Resource Conditions and Experiences

A general management plan represents a commitment by the National Park Service, based on consultations with its partners and the public, to achieving certain resource conditions and visitor experiences in each area of the park. Developing and applying management prescriptions ensures that the park's environmental quality, cultural integrity, and appropriate visitor experiences are not eroded by inconsistent actions. Rather, all future management activities, visitor activities, and facility development must be consistent with achieving and maintaining the resource conditions and visitor experiences specified in the general management plan.

Management prescriptions are applied either by geographic area (prescriptive management zoning) or by resource type parkwide (such as prescriptions related to air quality). Most parks will have both kinds of prescriptions. A simplified example of prescriptive management zoning is shown below.



Do not expect a General Management Plan to:

- commit to specific actions needed to achieve the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences
The specific actions needed to implement a general management plan are identified and described through a series of implementation plans. Implementation plans may include natural and cultural resource management plans, plans covering specific resource management projects or programs (such as fire management plans and historic structure reports), site planning and designs for facility development and other construction projects, comprehensive interpretive plans, and commercial services plans, among others.
- establish priorities and schedule work
Parks set priorities for work in strategic plans, which deal with the next three to five years.
- solve all of a park's problems
A general management plan establishes a framework that guides decision making, but it is not intended to anticipate every decision a park manager must make. Planning and decision making is a cyclic and continuous process.