



Foundation Document Overview

Cape Hatteras National Seashore

North Carolina



Contact Information

For more information about the *Cape Hatteras National Seashore Foundation Document*, contact: caha_information@nps.gov or (252) 473-2111 or write to:
Superintendent, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, 1401 National Park Drive, Manteo, NC 27954

Purpose



The purpose of CAPE HATTERAS NATIONAL SEASHORE is to permanently preserve the wild and primitive character of the ever-changing barrier islands, protect the diverse plant and animal communities sustained by the coastal island processes, and provide for recreational use and enjoyment that is compatible with preserving the distinctive natural and cultural resources of the nation's first national seashore.

Significance

Significance statements express why Cape Hatteras National Seashore 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.

- It was the first national seashore established to preserve significant segments of remote and unspoiled barrier islands and the associated plants, wildlife and coastal processes, and to provide diverse opportunities for resource-compatible outdoor recreation.
- Located at the near-shore confluence of the Gulf Stream and Labrador currents, the seashore is continually shaped by coastal geologic, hydrologic, and weather processes, which together contribute to the evolution of these barrier islands.
- Its coastal location and dynamic conditions have inherent scientific value as a living laboratory for physiographic and ecological research, including the study of climate change and its effects on sea level and ecology. This knowledge base has local, national, and global value and provides a robust source of information for education and stewardship programs and experiential learning opportunities.
- It is representative of a mid-Atlantic barrier island system that is characterized by a diversity of aquatic and terrestrial habitat including open beach, dune, tidal marsh, wetland, shrub thicket, and maritime forest—each of which support a wide variety of wildlife.
- The seashore supports resident and seasonal populations of federally listed and state-listed plants and animals including species such as the piping plover, American oystercatcher, gull-billed tern, green sea turtles, loggerhead sea turtles, seabeach amaranth, and more.
- Its artifacts, historic sites, and geographic setting provide tangible links to understanding humankind's ability to adapt in a harsh and changing coastal environment in isolation from the mainland. These links, which are of deep symbolic significance to local villagers, include lighthouses, shipwrecks, American Indian sites, and more.
- Numerous historical events of national significance have occurred on or near its shores including four centuries of shipwrecks, the United States government's response to protect maritime commerce during the Civil War and World War II, and the experimental development and use of new technology.

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.

- Large expanses of undeveloped shoreline that offer opportunities for solitude and isolation in nature and provide for various types of recreational use that are compatible with the preservation of the distinctive barrier island plants, wildlife, and coastal processes
- Natural sounds of the seashore and ocean
- Expansive, unhindered daytime and nighttime views of the Atlantic Ocean and Pamlico Sound, and natural night lighting along the seashore and offshore
- Barrier island features (lands and submerged elements)
- Continuously changing coastal geologic processes: inlet dynamics, overwash dynamics, dune dynamics, waves and nearshore current dynamics (sediment/sand transport)
- Knowledge base generated from past, present, and future research and information on the island and adjacent waters
- Living laboratory of a barrier island environment that offers research opportunities for natural systems and allows direct comparisons between natural and human-altered elements of a barrier island
- Terrestrial habitats: dunes, open beach, shrub thicket and maritime forest
- Aquatic habitats: wetlands, tidal marshes, freshwater ponds, and seagrass beds
- Important sites for coastal bird migration, breeding, and wintering along the Atlantic flyway
- Natural processes that continue to influence the seashore habitats and allow for the movement or dispersion of native flora and fauna
- All current and future federal and state listed species and other species of special management concern
- Historic structures, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes: light stations, lifesaving stations, shipwrecks, American Indian sites, and Civil War sites
- Artifacts and archival materials that are significant and relate to people and places of the area
- Stories of the evolution of land, species, and human survival on these islands, the role of maritime commerce in the area's culture, the settlement of these islands and creation of the first national seashore, wartime events, and the "Graveyard of the Atlantic"

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.

- **Topic: Barrier Island Processes.** Cape Hatteras National Seashore is part of a natural system, with geologic processes unique to or associated with barrier islands, characterized by constant change and adaptation.
- **Topic: Habitat and Species.** Dynamic barrier island processes shape the ever-changing and interdependent habitats that support vibrant communities of diverse wildlife—avian, terrestrial, and marine.
- **Topic: History and Heritage.** Within this dynamic and once isolated barrier island system, unique cultures have evolved that serve as a testament to humankind's relationship with the boundary of land and sea.
- **Topic: Relaxation/Renewal.** The remoteness of these islands and the vastness of the surrounding waters made these islands ideal for resource-based scientific study, education, recreation, and inspiration.
- **Topic: Stewardship and Preservation.** Stewardship of the national seashore and preservation of its history provides future opportunities for people to access, experience, and learn about coastal dynamics/cultural change.



Description

In 1937, Cape Hatteras became the first national seashore. It was designated to preserve dynamic barrier islands and its unique vegetation, wildlife habitat, and coastal processes, and to provide recreation and enjoyment for the public. Located within a day's drive of several urban centers, Cape Hatteras National Seashore is a popular vacation destination that receives over two million visitors each year. Stretching over 70 miles from north to south, Cape Hatteras National Seashore crosses three barrier islands: Bodie, Hatteras, and Ocracoke. Barrier islands are narrow, low-lying landforms that run parallel to ocean coasts and are constantly shifting and reshaping as a result of wind, waves, storms, ocean currents, and sea level changes. These three islands are linked by North Carolina Highway 12 and by the Hatteras Inlet Ferry. Although not part of the park, the islands are also inhabited by eight villages predating the park that reflect the history of the Outer Banks region. Cape Hatteras National Seashore provides a special opportunity to protect a widely diverse natural community and a robust collection of cultural resources, while also providing a unique, unspoiled seashore experience for visitors.

