

## National Park Carrying Capacity Requirements

The National Park and Recreation Act of 1978 established a statutory requirement (54 U.S.C. § 100502) that national park general management plans include “visitor carrying capacities for all areas” of each park unit.

### 100502. General management plans

General management plans for the preservation and use of each System unit, including areas within the national capital area, shall be prepared and revised in a timely manner by the Director. On January 1 of each year, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a list indicating the current status of completion or revision of general management plans for each System unit. General management plans for each System unit shall include-

- (1) measures for the preservation of the area's resources;
- (2) indications of types and general intensities of development (including visitor circulation and transportation patterns, systems, and modes) associated with public enjoyment and use of the area, including general locations, timing of implementation, and anticipated costs;
- (3) identification of and implementation commitments for visitor carrying capacities for all areas of the System unit; and**
- (4) indications of potential modifications to the external boundaries of the System unit, and the reasons for the modifications. (Emphasis added)

## National Park Carrying Capacity Management Policies

Excerpts; see <https://www.nps.gov/policy/mp/policies.html> for full text

**§ 8.2 – Visitor Use:** “Management controls and conditions must be established for all park uses to ensure that park resources and values are preserved and protected for the future. If and when a superintendent has a reasonable basis for believing that an ongoing or proposed public use would cause unacceptable impacts to park resources or values, the superintendent must make adjustments to the way the activity is conducted to eliminate the unacceptable impacts. *If the adjustments do not succeed in eliminating the unacceptable impacts, the superintendent may (1) temporarily or permanently close a specific area, or (2) place limitations on the use, or (3) prohibit the use.* Restrictions placed on recreational uses that have otherwise been found to be appropriate will be limited to the minimum necessary to protect park resources and values and promote visitor safety and enjoyment. ... When practicable, restrictions will be based on the results of study or research, including (when appropriate) research in the social sciences.” (Emphasis added)

**§ 8.2.1 – Visitor Carrying Capacity:** “By identifying and staying within carrying capacities, superintendents can manage park uses that may unacceptably impact the resources and values for

which the parks were established. *Superintendents will identify visitor carrying capacities for managing public use. Superintendents will also identify ways to monitor for and address unacceptable impacts on park resources and visitor experiences.*

When making decisions about carrying capacity, superintendents must use the best available natural and social science and other information, and maintain a comprehensive administrative record relating to their decisions. *The decision-making process should be based on desired resource conditions and visitor experiences for the area, quality indicators and standards that define the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, and other factors that will lead to logical conclusions and the protection of park resources and values.* (Emphasis added).

**§ 8.2.2.1 – Management of Recreational Use:** “Superintendents will develop and implement visitor use management plans and take action, as appropriate, to ensure that recreational uses and activities in the park are consistent with its authorizing legislation or proclamation and do not cause unacceptable impacts on park resources or values. Depending on local park needs and circumstances, these plans may be prepared (1) as coordinated, activity-specific documents (such as a river use plan, a backcountry use plan, a wilderness management plan, an off-road vehicle use plan, a winter use plan); (2) as action-plan components of a resource management plan or general management plan; or (3) as a single integrated plan that addresses a broad spectrum of recreational activities. Regardless of their format or complexity, visitor use management plans will (1) contain specific, measurable management objectives related to the activity or activities being addressed; (2) be periodically reviewed and updated; and (3) be consistent with the carrying capacity decisions made in the general management plan.

The Service will seek consistency in recreation management policies and procedures on both a Service-wide and interagency basis to the extent practicable. However, because of differences in the enabling legislation and resources of individual parks, and differences in the missions of the Service and other federal agencies, an activity that is entirely appropriate when conducted in one location may be inappropriate when conducted in another. The Service will consider a park’s purposes and the effects on park resources and visitors when determining the appropriateness of a specific recreational activity.

*To the extent practicable, public use limits established by the Service will be based on the results of scientific research and other available support data. However, an activity will be restricted or prohibited when, in the judgment of the superintendent, its occurrence, continuation, or expansion would (1) violate the criteria listed in section 8.2, or (2) conflict with the findings of a carrying capacity analysis with no reasonable alternative that would avoid or satisfactorily mitigate the violation or conflict.”* (Emphasis added)