

PLANNING APPROACH FOR THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN/EIS

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Abstract. The Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area is preparing a General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement for the park. The CRNRA, established in 1978, was established to preserve and protect the natural, scenic, recreation, historic, and other values of a 48-mile segment of the Chattahoochee River and certain adjoining lands from Buford Dam downstream to Peachtree Creek. The General Management Plan is being developed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and National Park Service guidance. The process includes early identification of concerns, issues, expectations, and values of the existing and potential visitors, neighbors, people with traditional cultural ties to lands within the park, cooperating associations, other partners, scientists, scholars, and other government agencies. Public input is gathered that is used in the EIS to assess and compare the effects of management alternatives on the natural and man-made environment. The EIS will also recommend selection of a preferred management alternative. NPS managers have a stewardship mandate, and in carrying out this mandate, difficult decisions are made about ways to preserve significant natural and cultural resources for public enjoyment, address competing demands for limited resources, establish priorities for using available funds and staff, and balance different local and nationwide interests and views of what is most important. This paper describes the process that is underway to develop the plan and EIS.

INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) is currently preparing a General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (GMP/EIS) for the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA). The CRNRA is a 48-mile long linear park located between Lake Lanier and Peachtree Creek in Atlanta. The

CRNRA has recently been expanded from approximately 6,800 acres to 10,000 acres, creating a continuous corridor between Buford Dam/Lake Lanier and Peachtree Creek in Atlanta (Figure 1). This paper describes how an interdisciplinary team is currently preparing the new GMP/EIS.

The CRNRA is one of the largest urban national parks in the United States. The park is located in a one of the fastest developing urban regions, which places increasing pressure on the natural and cultural resources. The objective of the plan is to institute an approach that will protect these resources while simultaneously allowing for the public to enjoy them without impairment.

The NPS is required to update the GMP for each national park every 10 years. The NPS has significantly revised the process by which GMPs are prepared since the last GMP was completed. This

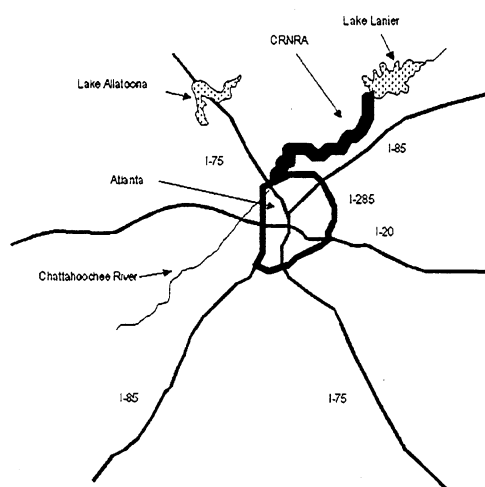


Figure 1. Location of the 48-mile long CRNRA.

paper describes how the new 11-step GMP/EIS process has been applied to the CRNRA by an interdisciplinary team consisting of key members of CRNRA, NPS Atlanta Regional Planning Office, NPS Denver Service Center, and Parsons Engineering Science, Inc.

The 11-Step GMP method represents the most recent direction provided by the NPS Planning (National Park Service 1999). In the past, the approach used by the NPS in preparing GMPs has been relatively detailed and focused on specific design features such as visitor centers and other facilities. The latest GMP planning process is much broader and focuses on developing a set of desired future conditions in each park, called "prescriptions". This revised process has been developed in response to changes in the complexities surrounding NPS regulatory requirements, fiscal constraints (maximum value required for minimum expenditure; priority setting required), restructuring processes (trend towards delegation of decision making to the field offices), and the need for increased accountability for results, as opposed to efforts. The new GMP procedures are designed to provide a logical, trackable rationale for developing the prescriptions for each park, and to simultaneously meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA).

The project was initiated in the fall of 2000 and will last approximately 2 years. The Draft GMP/EIS is due for public release in the fall of 2001. In the future, site-specific recommendations for park facilities will be made based on this GMP/EIS. Future projects for specific facilities will also require NEPA Environmental Assessments (EAs) that are "tiered" to the GMP/EIS to provide consistent planning guidance and objective impact assessments. Future design elements will be included in the Implementation Phase of the process. This phase comes after the GMP has been prepared, and is much more detailed. This approach provides for a consistent and trackable approach to NPS decisions, and provides the park superintendent with a decision making tool to be used for assessing new proposals for specific facilities or activities in the future.

DISCUSSION

The last GMP for the CRNRA was developed in 1989, and provided a relatively detailed approach for managing the park. The 1989 GMP, as others

prepared during that timeframe, was somewhat similar to a city master plan in that it provided relatively detailed descriptive plans for park facilities such as visitor centers and administrative facilities, parking areas and roads. In the 1989 GMP, a NEPA Environmental Assessment was also prepared that assessed the potential impacts of several alternatives. The plan that is currently being prepared will provide a completely new and much broader set of prescriptions (desired future conditions) for the CRNRA. The alternatives are based upon the large body of issues and ideas that different people want to achieve in the park and are expressed as alternative management zoning plans. Through prescriptive management zoning (or areas), decision makers set the future direction for the park by prescribing what specific conditions and visitor experiences will be achieved and maintained in each area of the park over time.

A total of three action alternatives are being developed initially, and a "preferred" alternative will be developed and ultimately selected for use in the next 10-year planning cycle. The no action alternative is also being analyzed.

The GMP/EIS process is completed in 11 steps. The following is a summary of how each step is being conducted for the CRNRA GMP/EIS, with emphasis on the unique characteristics of this park.

Step 1 - Establish Park Mission and Goals. The interdisciplinary team assessed the original CRNRA purpose, significance statements and mission goals. The park purpose statement was revised and a set of goals were then

developed that reflect the most recent NPS mandates, laws and policies. This establishes the "sideboards" within which the GMP must be developed. Alternatives that would cause impairment to CRNRA resources cannot be proposed.

Step 2 - Acknowledge Special Mandates and Constraints. Special NPS mandates and constraints for the CRNRA were identified. This established additional limits, or sideboards, on alternatives that could be proposed for the CRNRA. The revised NPS Director's Order (DO) 55 and DO 12 were used to help frame this part of the process (NPS 1999; 2000). For example the term "impairment" has been clarified, and must be heeded in the planning process.

Step 3 – Acknowledge Servicewide Laws and Policies. A review of the most recent servicewide laws and policies was conducted to ensure that these were included as sideboards in the plan. The goal is to stay inside the regulatory “coral” and not propose anything for the CRNRA that would stray outside that coral. Thus, Steps 1, 2 and 3 establish those things that the NPS “must” do. To accomplish these first three steps, workshops were held and all policies were identified.

Step 4 – Identify Needs for Management Prescriptions. This is equivalent to “scoping” under NEPA. In this step, the public concerns regarding future conditions in the park (prescriptions) are identified. A series of six public scoping meetings were held along the corridor of the park. In addition, numerous meetings were held with local, state, and federal agencies, as well as environmental groups, to obtain their input and concerns. Formal written comments were obtained from the people at each meeting. The comments were organized into categories according to “cant’s”, “musts”, and “mights” and “mights, other plans” (issues that might be resolved via other types of NPS planning processes, but not the broad GMP process – these could include issues associated with implementation plans, for example). “Might” category issues are carried forward for further use in developing the alternatives for the GMP/EIS. “Cant’s” and “musts” are regulatory or policy sideboards that cannot be considered as a GMP alternative. Thus, public input is a key element of the GMP/EIS process, and is the basis for all of the alternatives. In the CRNRA project, a variety of “might” issues were brought up by the public, including increased recreational use via trails, the types of facilities in the park, water quality and quantity concerns, natural resources, fishing/fisheries, education, and many other broad topics. These issues represent the range of concerns expressed by the public.

The issues were sorted and were then analyzed to create a set of “decision points” for the CRNRA GMP. This is a key element of the process because it condenses all of the public issues down to 3-5 statements about future conditions in the park that are used as the basis for developing the NEPA alternatives. The decision points are designed to:

- Reflect different desires for future conditions;
- Reflect inherent conflict or tensions among those desires; and
- Define the end points of a continuum of options.

The decision points therefore establish a range of possible future conditions in the park that reflect public concerns.

Step 5 – Analyze Resources. Existing data concerning natural and cultural resources in the CRNRA were collected and mapped using a Geographic Information System (GIS). The GIS will be used for making informed decisions regarding potential impacts of future proposed actions. In addition, information gathered in future studies of the park would be added to the GIS, providing a useful tool for resource management.

Step 6 – Describe the Range of Potential Management Prescriptions. A set of desired potential future conditions, or prescriptions, was developed for the park that is within the regulatory coral/sideboards. Prescriptions were developed for a series of “zones” that are mapped in Step 7. In Step 6, the zones are simply defined with no mapping. The prescription zones were developed formally in workshops by the interdisciplinary team using all available information. The objective of this step was to establish a set of prescriptions that could be applied to the CRNRA within established regulatory and policy parameters.

Step 7 – Define Alternative Concepts. A set of alternate concepts was developed for the entire park based on the prescription zones and other information. The alternate concepts are the most difficult part of the GMP process because they condense a large amount of information from all previous planning phases. They must be agreed upon by an interdisciplinary team of scientists and planners, and they must stay within the regulatory and policy sideboards (i.e., they must be “real world” concepts). A total of three action alternative concepts and the no action concept are being developed for the CRNRA.

Step 8 – Use Management Zoning to Apply Alternate Concepts to Park Resources. In this step, the prescription zones were applied and mapped. This has required additional workshops and a team approach to agreeing on where the various zones should actually be placed along the 48-mile park corridor. These decisions are made based on real world constraints and conditions, and are designed to be at a relatively broad scale. For some resources, however (i.e., cultural resources), smaller zones were mapped. One map is being prepared for each alternate concept using GIS. The preliminary maps and prescriptions will be

announced in a newsletter prior to being finalized in order to obtain further input from stakeholders. The concepts will be revised as appropriate in response to concerns.

Step 9 – Describe Environmental Impacts of Alternatives. The impacts of selecting each alternative are being assessed using NEPA resource analysis techniques and categories. The effect of the alternatives are compared in the GMP/EIS and used as the basis to evaluate potentially adverse effects.

Step 10 – Estimate Costs of Alternatives. An approximate cost of implementing each of the alternatives, including the no action alternative, will be conducted and presented in the GMP/EIS.

Step 11 – Select a Preferred Alternative: a preferred alternative will be selected. This step is completed after all of the comparisons between the alternatives are made in the GMP/EIS and the effects of each alternative are well understood. The preferred alternative is carried forward and approved in a formal NEPA Record of Decision (ROD).

CONCLUSIONS

The approved GMP will be used by the CRNRA/NPS as the basis for making all decisions regarding allowable park activities for the next 10 years. Since the CRNRA is located in one of the most rapidly developing metropolitan areas of the United States, the decisions made in this GMP/EIS will be a key tool in the protection of the important, unique natural and cultural resources in this 48-mile Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area.

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