



### Background

The National Park Service (NPS) is responsible for the stewardship of 61 designated wilderness areas. Per agency policy, the NPS also manages eligible, proposed, recommended, and potential wilderness. In total, over 80 percent of all NPS lands are managed as wilderness, from Alaska to Florida.

### What is wilderness character?

The 1964 Wilderness Act's Statement of Policy, Section 2(a) states that wilderness areas "shall be administered... so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character." This affirmative legal mandate to preserve wilderness character, and related NPS policy, applies to all NPS wilderness.

Wilderness character is a holistic concept based on the interaction of biophysical environments, personal experiences, and symbolic meanings. This includes *intangible qualities* like a sense of adventure and challenge or refuge and inspiration.

Wilderness character also includes five *tangible qualities* associated with the biophysical environment:

- **Natural** - Wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization
- **Untrammeled** - Wilderness is essentially free from the intentional actions of modern human control and manipulation
- **Undeveloped** - Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation
- **Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation** - Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation
- **Other Features of Value** - Wilderness preserves other features that are of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value

These qualities are interrelated and wilderness character preservation often requires thoughtful trade-offs between qualities.



### How do NPS managers preserve wilderness character?

The Wilderness Character Building Blocks provide managers with the foundational framework for effectively integrating wilderness character into planning, management, and monitoring. The three Building Blocks break down the components of wilderness character preservation into achievable and meaningful steps and give staff a common reference point and vocabulary when determining the status of wilderness character in a park.

The overall Building Blocks Report (comprised of Building Blocks #1 and #2) is an internal management tool. This report is not subject to environmental compliance and does not require public review.

#### BUILDING BLOCK #1: Wilderness Character Basics

This document succinctly describes fundamental information about a specific NPS wilderness area, consolidating key reference information in one location. The Basics are a good tool for training new staff or sharing with partners. The Basics include three components:

1. **Background Wilderness Information** (2-4 pages)  
The background includes a 1) GIS-developed wilderness

boundary map, 2) simple legislative history of wilderness designation process (if applicable) and any direct or inferred references to wilderness character in park enabling legislation; and 3) references to other park documents that help emphasize wilderness values (i.e. Foundation document, management plans, etc.).

## 2. Wilderness Character Narrative (5-7 pages)

The Narrative qualitatively describes what is unique and essential about the wilderness area. This includes a general overview (situating both the intangible and tangible qualities of wilderness character in the context of the wilderness area) and a section summarizing the overarching status of each tangible quality of wilderness character -- what about each quality is particularly strong and evident and what is diminished or threatened? Items referenced here serve as a starting point for Building Block #2.

## 3. Issues for Future Wilderness Stewardship Planning (1 page)

This component documents wilderness-related issues and needs that could be addressed in upcoming planning and management initiatives. Issues may be addressed in wilderness-specific efforts (e.g. Wilderness Stewardship Plan) or topic-specific/park-wide efforts (e.g. Climbing Management Plan; programmatic Minimum Requirements Analysis; addressed by park wilderness committee).

### **BUILDING BLOCK #2: Wilderness Character Baseline Assessment**

This assessment, and accompanying monitoring framework, establishes a pathway to track change in wilderness character over time, giving managers a tangible means of answering the question "Are we preserving wilderness character?" The framework and baseline assessment begin with standardized interagency monitoring questions and indicators, helping to improve implementation consistency across the National Wilderness Preservation System, while park-selected measures ensure contextual relevance. Once the baseline assessment is completed, ongoing monitoring occurs on a five-year interval (minimum). Baseline and five-year monitoring interval data are entered into the interagency Wilderness Character Monitoring Database.

### **BUILDING BLOCK #3: Integrate Wilderness Character into Management and Operations**

Park operations can have both positive and negative effects on wilderness character, and management actions should be based on careful planning. Unlike Building Blocks #1 and #2, this Building Block is

ongoing, and can be initiated prior to or in tandem with the other Building Blocks. Specific integration efforts include ensuring that a Minimum Requirements Analysis is completed for all actions that have the potential to impact wilderness character. Parks are also encouraged to establish a wilderness committee to discuss wilderness stewardship and review potential management actions through an interdisciplinary lens.

## Resources

### [Keeping It Wild in the NPS: A User Guide to Integrating Wilderness Character into Park Planning, Management, and Monitoring \(2014\)](#)

Agency-specific guidance and considerations for integrating wilderness character. This is where the concept of the Wilderness Character Building Blocks was first introduced.

### [Keeping It Wild 2: An Updated Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System \(2015\)](#)

Interagency guidance specific to the wilderness character monitoring referenced in Building Block #2. This describes the overall monitoring framework, including standardized monitoring questions and indicators, and considerations for park-selected measures.

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To learn more about NPS wilderness visit:  
[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)