

Program Brief

Wilderness Character and Fire

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Wilderness Stewardship Division
Division of Fire and Aviation



Background

The 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 from Alaska to Florida are managed as wilderness.

The NPS Wilderness Stewardship Division collaborates with the NPS Division of Fire and Aviation Management to meet the management and stewardship objectives of each respective program, including the preservation of wilderness character.

Preserving Wilderness Character in NPS

The 1964 Wilderness Act and NPS policy mandate the preservation of wilderness character, a holistic concept based on the interaction of biophysical environments, personal experiences, and symbolic meanings. This includes five tangible qualities of wilderness character:

- **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 tradeoffs.

Wilderness Character in Fire Management

Fire management actions in wilderness have potential to both enhance and degrade wilderness character. For example, managed lightning-ignited fires promote the natural quality, promoting ecological processes of fire-dependent landscapes. On the opposite side, suppressing naturally-ignited wildfire degrades the untrammeled quality as this intentional manipulation



of the environment, stops natural processes that would otherwise occur.

The use of motorized equipment and landing of aircraft also impacts wilderness character. While common to many fire management operations, use of chainsaws or sling loads for helicopter transport degrades the undeveloped quality in wilderness. These are generally considered “prohibited uses,” per Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act, and their use is only permitted “to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act,” as determined through a minimum requirements analysis.

When fire and wilderness practitioners work together through thoughtful planning and implementation, including incident action plans, fire management plans, and wilderness stewardship plans, the NPS can achieve resource management objectives of safety, science, stewardship, at the same time as preserving wilderness character.

Resources

The following resources provide additional information:

- [Interagency Wilderness Character Toolbox](#)
- [Interagency Fire Management Toolbox](#)
- [Interagency Minimum Requirements Analysis Toolbox](#)
- [Minimum Impact Strategies + Techniques](#)
- [NWCG Resource Advisor Guide \(see Appendix H\)](#)
- [NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

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