



INTRODUCTION TO THE WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP PLAN HANDBOOK

August 11, 2004

A Wilderness Stewardship Plan (may also be titled Wilderness Management Plan) guides the preservation, management, and use of the park's wilderness to ensure that wilderness is unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. Policy directs that the plan will "identify desired future conditions, as well as establish indicators, standards, conditions, and thresholds beyond which management actions will be taken to reduce human impacts to wilderness resources". Policy also requires that management plans be completed for all National Park Service (NPS) wilderness areas.

How to use this handbook:

This handbook was developed by the National Wilderness Steering Committee as a tool for helping park staff to write their park's Wilderness Stewardship Plans and attendant Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) compliance documents. It is best used as a guide to help in what can be a time consuming and difficult task. While it is not intended to dictate an exact format, if the format of the handbook and the compliance process are followed, the result should be an acceptable plan and EIS or EA.

Developing a comprehensive plan, which includes a collaborative public process, is one of the most important considerations in preserving an enduring wilderness resource. Such a plan provides for the accountability, consistency and continuity of the park's wilderness stewardship program. This also means that the park has a plan that clearly identifies the values and characteristics of the wilderness resource and explains to park managers, and the general public, the different management practices that will be allowed to occur in wilderness as opposed to other areas of the park. Further, the plan describes what activities are appropriate in wilderness, how the park intends to preserve and monitor wilderness resources and their values, and how the concept of minimum requirement will be applied to administrative activities that have the potential to affect wilderness character.

A park's wilderness plan can take any format as long as it meets NPS planning and compliance requirements described in the Program Standards for Park Planning (May 2004), DO #2 on Park Planning, and DO #12 and Handbook: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-Making (2001). While this handbook will help you meet NEPA planning requirements it also allows for considerable flexibility in developing a plan that reflects individual park needs.

The planning process integrates the development of a Wilderness Stewardship Plan as part of an EIS or EA. The steps in this process are the public scoping process to determine the scope and significance of issues to be addressed, the preparation of a draft EIS or EA for public comment, and the preparation of a final EIS or EA and

documentation of the decision in a Record of Decision (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (EA). The alternative identified for implementation in the ROD or FONSI can be extracted from the final environmental document and reorganized into a separate document for more effective use as an implementation tool. This product is considered the final wilderness management plan.

Director's Order #41 for wilderness suggests that an Interdisciplinary Team be formed at the park to ensure that an effective, collaborative approach to public involvement, issue identification, alternative development and issue/impacts analysis is employed throughout the process. An ID Team composed of park managers and technical experts, including natural and cultural resource specialists, is an invaluable asset in wilderness planning and formation of such a group is strongly recommended (note that DO #41 requires inclusion of cultural resource expertise). The DO is also a good reference to use to insure that Wilderness Stewardship Plans have included all the pertinent sections required.

Handbook Organization:

This handbook has two distinct but closely related functional layers. The first layer, Level I, provides the basic format or outline for a Wilderness Stewardship Plan EIS/EA. The second layer, Level II, contains guidance, instructions and hints for each section of the Level I outline that will explain what to include and how the sections relate to one another. In the future, a third layer, Level III, will be developed and made available (probably as a web-linked database) for the purpose of providing examples from existing wilderness plans that illustrate a reasonable range of options and strategies. Currently there are so few completed wilderness management plans that tried and true examples are rare.

Planning and Compliance Requirements

Wilderness planning is an integral part of the National Park Service planning framework. Wilderness plans are generally considered program level plans that provide a linkage between the desired conditions set out in the GMP and the specific detailed actions that are spelled out in park strategic plans and implementation plans. It is important that the wilderness stewardship plan tier from the park's GMP and be closely coordinated with other approved plans. Depending on the issues involved, special circumstances and status of other plans a park's Wilderness Stewardship Plan can be in the form of a GMP amendment, a program plan or an implementation (action) plan.

Most often a wilderness plan can be developed using an EA process and format. However, where highly controversial issues or the potential for significant impacts exist an EIS may be necessary. Some wilderness management plans in the NPS are approached as GMP amendments and by policy require an EIS process and format. For example, Backcountry/Wilderness Management Plans in Alaska require an EIS, and when completed, will serve as GMP amendments and/or program or implementation plans for backcountry and wilderness.

What has been presented in the Level I outline is an EIS format. Although it is anticipated that most plans will be prepared with an Environmental Assessment, there is little difference between the formats of an EA and an EIS. The outline should be equally useful for either level of environmental compliance. Your process, rather than the outline, will reflect the required differences in compliance.

The preparation of a wilderness plan is a process that will involve stakeholders, partners and staff in a comprehensive planning process. The resulting plan should provide a solid foundation for management and preservation of the unique wilderness resource in your unit.