



# Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park Strategic Plan 2019–2023





On the front cover:  
Mules pulling replica canal  
boat. Photo by Roy Sewall.

Inside cover:  
Map of C&O Canal NHP.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This strategic plan sets the course for Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park by reaffirming the park’s purpose as derived from its enabling legislation and articulating the park’s vision, goals, strategies, and actions for the next five years. The plan will guide annual work planning as well as prioritization of major projects and programs for the park. Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park staff, staff in the National Capital Regional Office and the Denver Service Center, partners, and volunteers collaborated on this plan (appendix A).

## Park Purpose

To preserve and interpret the 19th-century transportation canal from Washington, DC, to Cumberland, Maryland, and its associated scenic, natural, and cultural resources, and to provide opportunities for education and appropriate outdoor recreation.

## Vision Statement

We are leaders in the stewardship of the park’s historic corridor, and we provide inspirational experiences that connect the past to the present and the future.

## Goals

Goal 1: Maintain and Protect Wisely: Ensure towpath continuity, and protect and preserve cultural and natural resources.

Goal 2: Engage and Inspire Creatively: Provide opportunities for visitors to safely experience and enjoy the park’s cultural, natural, and recreational resources.

Goal 3: Collaborate Purposefully: Engage stakeholders who are focused on the implementation of shared priorities that align with the park’s vision, goals, and capacity.

Goal 4: Manage and Lead Smartly: Implement sound business practices, and establish a positive leadership culture that engages and values employees.

Goal 5: Operate Safely and Efficiently: Provide high-quality visitor and administrative services.



Great Falls Tavern in winter. Photo by Larry Goodman.

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Canal towpath in Georgetown. Photo by Tom Bilcze.

# INTRODUCTION

## Superintendent's Introduction

Welcome to the 2019–2023 Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park (park) strategic plan. This plan will guide and focus our efforts and those of our partners over the next five years. The plan seeks to reconcile the divergent forces that affect our ability to accomplish the National Park Service (NPS) mission here at the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal (C&O Canal). While there are many factors that influence our work, none are more important than how we use our annual appropriated budget and special project funds; how we engage and work with our partners, volunteers, and visitors; and how we prepare for and respond to severe weather such as floods and high winds.

Before 2010, the park's budget and staffing were increasing. We looked toward the Centennial of the National Park Service in 2016 and imagined ways to enhance the preservation of our cultural and natural resources and the visitor's experience both in the park and online. We collaborated with stakeholders and laid plans to restore the Conococheague Aqueduct and expand our canal boat programs to Williamsport. We grew our volunteer programs and created the curriculum-based Canal Classroom program that has served more than 50,000 students—mostly fourth graders. With our partner the C&O Canal Trust, we have restored seven lockhouses into the award-winning Canal Quarters immersive overnight interpretive experience, which allows thousands of visitors to spend a night reminiscent of an earlier time.

Over the last decade, the park's annual appropriation has remained fairly flat, while at the same time, the park has experienced rising operational costs. This has led to a decrease in the park's discretionary budget and the number of full-time staff. In the same period, visitation to the park increased nearly 20 percent to 4.8 million in 2017. We have balanced our budget by selectively filling only a few of the vacancies created when staff retired or transferred. Our current budget cannot sustain the size, scope, and diversity of our present level of activities. Our situation leaves the physical infrastructure of the park deteriorating faster than it can be repaired and visitor services declining.

It is in this environment of diminishing capacity that the park's strategic plan is so important. The plan, and the planning process that developed it, will direct the park's resources on efforts that will most benefit the protection of the park's resources and maintain the visitor's enjoyment and use of the park. It identifies the park's current top priorities and provides a roadmap to success that future efforts will build upon.

The goals, strategies, and actions of this five-year strategic plan are based on the conceptual framework that the principal focus for the park and its partners will be on creating and sustaining desired visitor experiences along a continuous towpath and at the Interpretive Zones of Georgetown, Great Falls, and Williamsport. These areas continue to present major historic restoration opportunities where the park visitor will be able to see a functioning canal in a historic setting. The areas were identified in the park's 1976 general plan and selected for accessibility, availability of parklands for development of visitor facilities, and the compatibility of the surrounding environment outside the park. The towpath and the three Interpretive Zones will offer diverse and complementary experiences for park visitors. Collaborating with partners as we maintain this focus will be essential to meeting the mission of the National Park Service and the vision we hold for the C&O Canal National Historical Park.

This focus will require us to increase our understanding of what it will take to sustain the physical infrastructure of the towpath and prioritize preservation of cultural resources in the three zones. These efforts, and other activities in the park, will largely rely on the willingness of partners and stakeholders to support and build upon the basic operations that the park is charged to accomplish.



Cushwa Basin in Williamsport.  
Photo by Judy Hoffman.

In addition to these areas of focus, the park will take actions now to create opportunities in the future. By that, we mean taking actions now to stabilize—in their current condition—cultural resources such as lockhouses, locks, culverts, aqueducts, and other features from further deterioration so that future generations will have opportunities to restore and enjoy original elements of canal history. Here in the early 21st century, we have benefitted from the actions taken decades earlier to stabilize and protect structures such as the Monocacy, Catoctin, and Conococheague aqueducts. These gifts remind us that we, too, must think ahead 25, 50, or even 100 years so that more of the canal’s history can be revealed and shared with future generations.

This strategic plan identifies routine activities necessary to sustain park operations as well as projects, programs, and activities that will be continued or initiated by park staff as our capacity permits. The park will continue efforts to accomplish projects and programs through collaboration with partners and stakeholders. Activities and opportunities not included in this strategic plan are not off the table forever but can be considered for inclusion in a future strategic plan. The park considers this plan to be part of an ongoing discussion with all of our stakeholders, and we invite you to join the conversation.

## Introduction to the Park

The C&O Canal began as a dream in the 1820s to access new fortunes in the West at a time when prosperity in the United States (US) depended on its waterways. Stretching along the Potomac River from Rock Creek at Georgetown in Washington, DC, to Cumberland, Maryland, for 184.5 miles, the canal served as a major transportation corridor operating as a conduit for coal, lumber, and agricultural products to propel western development and satisfy demands from eastern US markets. Construction of the canal, which was intended to connect the Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio River, began in 1828. Falling short of the original vision for the canal, construction ended in Cumberland in 1850 and the canal remained in operation until 1924.

Building the C&O Canal was one of the nation’s most ambitious industrial projects of the time—equivalent to NASA’s Apollo program to put a man on the moon. Construction efforts provided thousands of jobs for immigrants and hundreds of families who lived along the canal’s extensive system of locks, aqueducts, culverts, and flumes. Its 74 lift locks raised canal boats from sea level to an elevation of 605 feet at Cumberland. The hand-built, 3,118-foot-long Paw Paw Tunnel and 516-foot-long Monocacy Aqueduct are striking testimonies to the skill of canal engineers and craftsmen.



Historic photo of canal boats near Brunswick. Photo credit: B.O. Railroad.

During its 96 years of operation, the C&O Canal was impacted by the competition from railroads, devastating floods, the growth and decline of communities and businesses along the banks of the Potomac River, and technological improvements that made canals obsolete. The canal company lands were acquired by the federal government in 1938; however, not until the 1950s was the park fully recognized for its valuable connection to the nation's past. In 1954, as part of the movement to save the canal from becoming a modern parkway, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas led a highly publicized hike from Cumberland to Georgetown.

C&O Canal became a national monument in 1961, and in 1971, Public Law 91-664 established the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park “to preserve and interpret the historic and scenic features . . . and develop the potential of the canal for public recreation.” Further guidance was included in the introduction of the 1976 general plan, which stated, “. . .protecting for public enjoyment a historical park which will, more and more, become an outlet for urban seekers after outdoor recreation will be the difficult task facing the National Park Service in its stewardship of this limited resource.”

Today, the remnants of the C&O Canal route, the spirit of its builders and operators, and a legacy of outdoor recreation and educational opportunities endure in this national park. About 5 million people visit the park each year, making it one of the twenty most-visited units in the national park system. Originally built for mule travel, today hikers, bicyclists, and runners enjoy the canal's 12-foot-wide towpath. Numerous access points along the park's nearly 20,000 acres provide visitors the opportunity to experience the rich history and natural resources of the Potomac River Valley. Watered sections of the canal provide further recreation for canoeists, boaters, and anglers.



Lockhouse 25. Photo by Tyra Guyton.

## THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

This strategic plan is a result of a yearlong, collaborative effort. The first major step in the process involved the distribution of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges (SWOC) questionnaire with park staff (including employees and interns), volunteers, and partners to elicit feedback and ideas for the strategic plan (see appendix B for a copy of the survey). The park received 70 responses to the SWOC questionnaire.

The park compiled the survey responses and held a workshop in September 2017. All park employees were invited to participate in the workshop, along with facilitators from the NPS Denver Service Center and NPS National Capital Region staff, as well as park partners, volunteers, and other stakeholders (appendix A). During the workshop, participants developed vision and purpose statements for the strategic plan. The participants also discussed the park's internal systems and processes, the results and implications of the SWOC survey, key issues and opportunities for the park in upcoming years, and potential solutions to challenges.

The C&O Canal Strategic Planning Team discussed the scope and scale of programs, projects, and funding. During these meetings, the park developed and refined goals, strategies, and actions. The facilitated sessions were structured to encourage participants to think holistically about the park and to encourage staff from different divisions to work together and share ideas.

The park is already outlining specific tasks that will support the plan's strategies and actions and accomplish the park's goals. These tasks will aid in the development of the park's overall annual work plan and the work assignments of individual staff.

## PURPOSE AND VISION STATEMENTS

The purpose statement identifies the specific reason for the establishment of the park and outlines the core mission of the park's managers and staff. The following purpose statement lays the foundation for understanding what is most important about Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park.

*To preserve and interpret the 19th-century transportation canal from Washington, DC, to Cumberland, Maryland, and its associated scenic, natural, and cultural resources and to provide opportunities for education and appropriate outdoor recreation.*

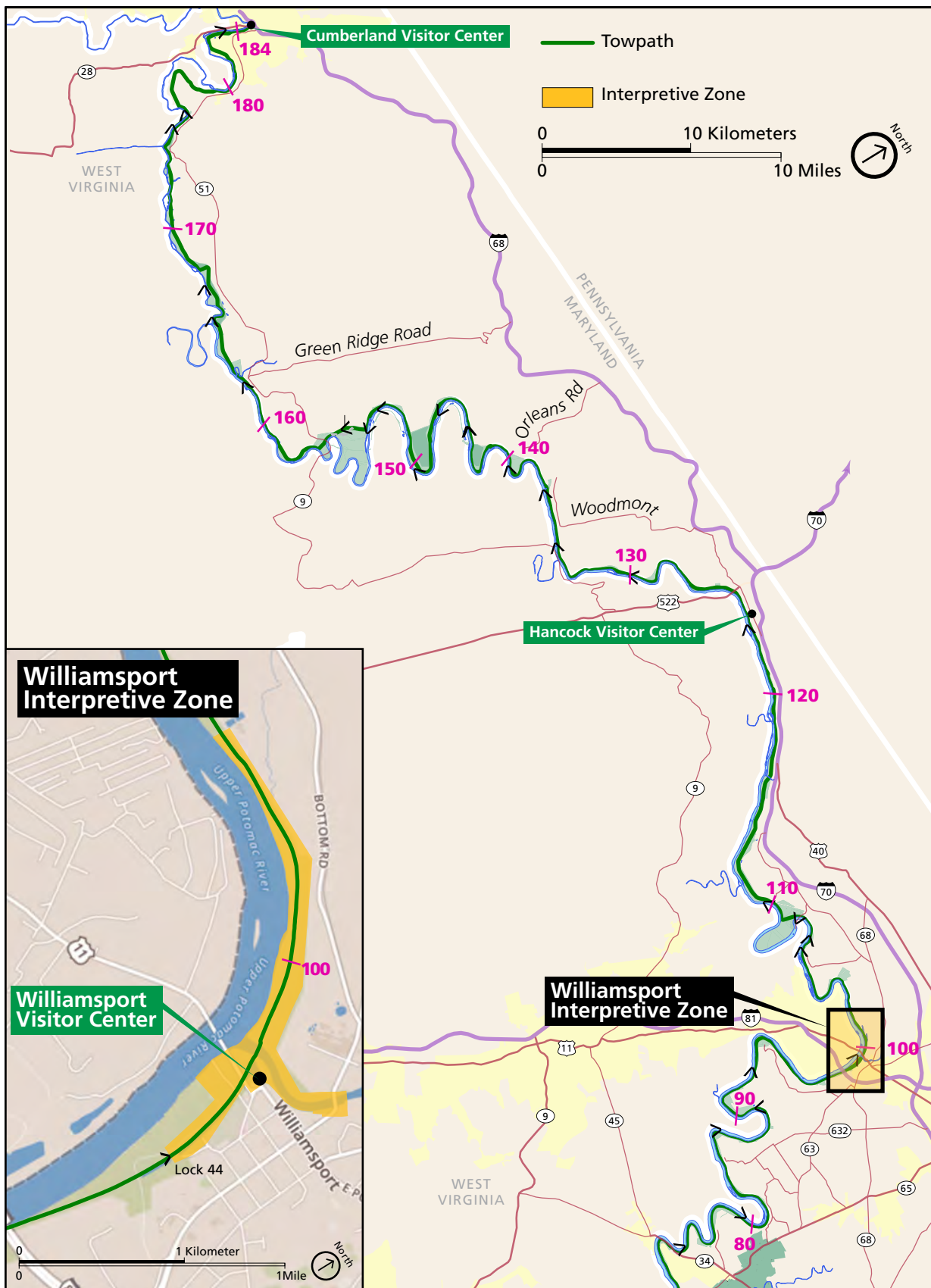
The vision statement articulates an ideal description of the park at a future point in time. It provides an inspiring overall goal to guide all decisions in the park for the next five years.

*We are leaders in the stewardship of the park's historic corridor and provide inspirational experiences connecting the past to the present and the future.*

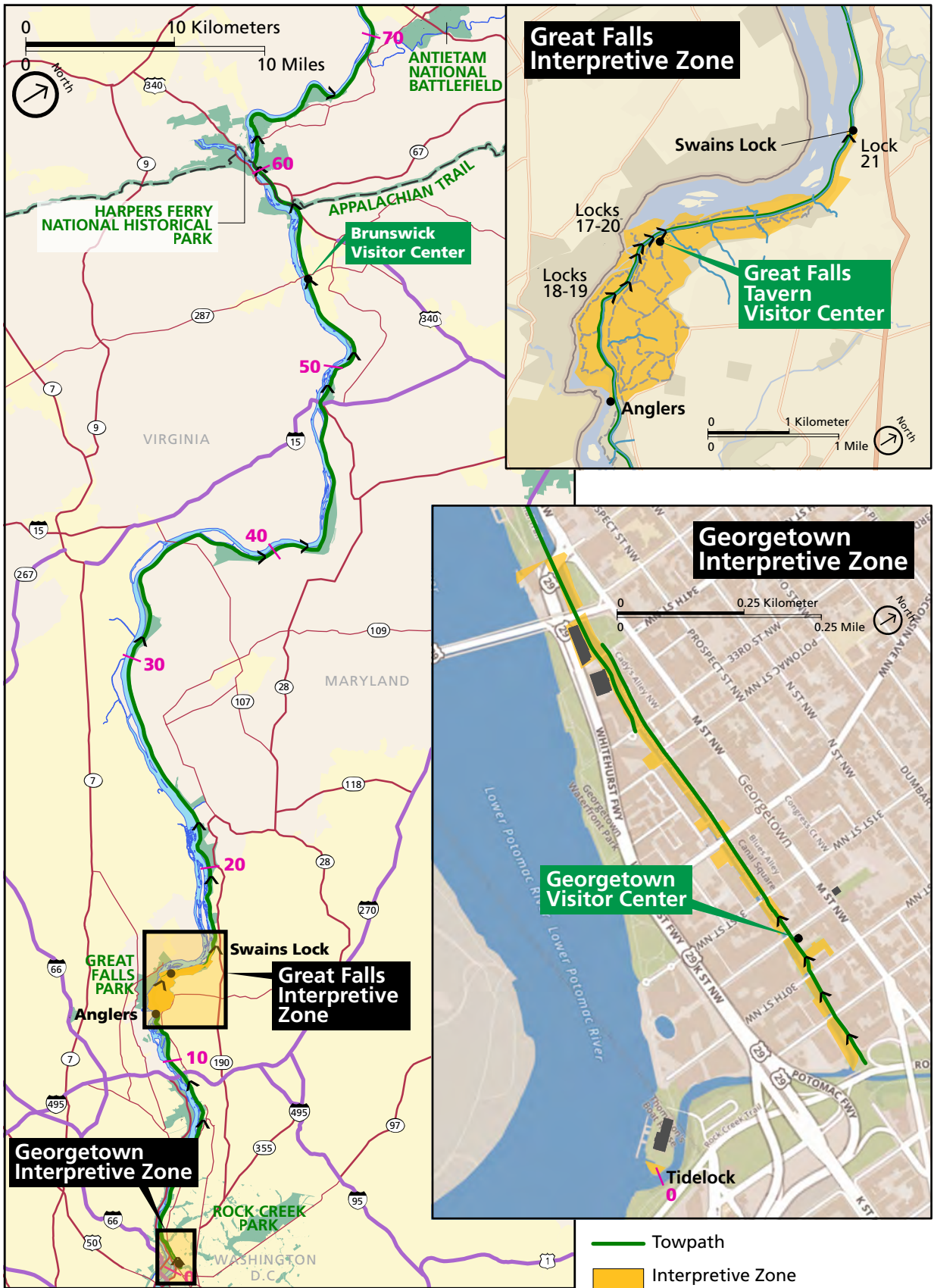


Visitors enjoying the C&O Canal towpath. Photo by Chris Hanessian.





Map of the western half of C&O Canal National Historical Park displaying the towpath and the Williamsport Interpretive Zone – Lock 44 to Hagerstown Filtration Plant (1.6 miles).



Map of the eastern half of C&O Canal National Historical Park displaying the towpath and the Interpretive Zones at Great Falls – Anglers to Swains Lock (4.2 Miles) plus water delivery and intake at Inlet Lock 2, and Georgetown – Tidelock to Potomac Aqueduct (1.1 Miles) plus water delivery and intake at Inlet Lock 1.

# PARKWIDE GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND ACTIONS

This section details the key goals, strategies, and actions for the park for the next five years. Under each goal is a list of strategies and underlying actions that will aid in the accomplishment of the goal (in no particular order of importance). The park will develop tasks that support the strategies and actions as part of the park's annual work plan.

Each goal is a long-term target or aim. The goals broadly describe what the park wants to accomplish and become over the next five years. The goals provide the basis for decisions about the nature, scope, and relative importance of all projects and activities.

Each strategy, action, and underlying task is a measurable target that must be met on the way to attaining a goal. They help to “operationalize” the goals and act as benchmarks to measure progress. The strategies listed in this section articulate those areas where energy and resources should be focused. These goals, strategies, and actions will be the primary focus of the park over the next five years. Activities that do not support them will be postponed. However, physical, natural, cultural, legal, and political conditions may require adjustments during the life of this plan.

## Goal 1: Maintain and Protect Wisely: Ensure towpath continuity, and protect and preserve cultural and natural resources.

### Strategy 1: Ensure Towpath Continuity

**Action 1:** Develop and implement a comprehensive plan to maintain towpath continuity and ensure the towpath surface is in a safe condition for pedestrians and bicyclists.

### Strategy 2: Focus on Three Interpretive Zones

**Action 1:** Prepare and implement a strategic facility plan, in tandem with the visitor experience and use plans, for the three Interpretive Zones—Georgetown, Great Falls, and Williamsport.

### Strategy 3: Create Future Opportunities

**Action 1:** Develop and implement a plan, including best practices, for the long-term stabilization of the cultural resources outside of the three Interpretive Zones and not required for towpath continuity.

### Strategy 4: Protect Resources of Special Concern

**Action 1:** Develop and implement a resource management plan that prioritizes critical natural areas and species of special concern.

### Strategy 5: Understand the Boundary and Address External Influences

**Action 1:** Inventory and map the park's boundary, inholdings, and ownership encumbrances—including rights-of-way and easements.

**Action 2:** Engage park neighbors to create awareness of park resources and develop means to minimize or eliminate impacts.

**Action 3:** Acquire priority inholdings from willing sellers and resolve indeterminate boundary situations.

## Goal 2: Engage and Inspire Creatively: Provide opportunities for visitors to safely experience and enjoy the park’s cultural, natural, and recreational resources.

### Strategy 1: Focus on Three Interpretive Zones and the Continuous Towpath

**Action 1:** Develop and implement visitor experience and use plans that create inspirational opportunities found in the Interpretive Zones at Georgetown, Great Falls, and Williamsport and the experience of a continuous towpath.

### Strategy 2: Enhance Visitor Facilities Parkwide

**Action 1:** Improve the gateway experience at park access points, and provide safe and clean visitor facilities.

### Strategy 3: Embrace 21st-Century Interpretation

**Action 1:** Generate relevant, audience-centered, and site-specific content with the best current scholarship for cultural and natural resource understanding.

**Action 2:** Present relevant content using contemporary technology and techniques.

### Strategy 4: Engage Diverse Audiences

**Action 1:** Extend outreach and programming to diverse populations so that park visitation and stewardship resembles the broader population.

### Strategy 5: Sustain Canal Boat Operations

**Action 1:** Develop sustainable support to provide canal boat experiences in the Interpretive Zones.

### Strategy 6: Sustain Canal Classrooms

**Action 1:** Focus the park’s curriculum-based education program in Williamsport using onsite, distance learning, partner programming, and teacher-led activities.



Canal Classroom participants closing lock gate. NPS photo.

## Goal 3: Collaborate Purposefully: Engage stakeholders who are focused on the implementation of shared priorities that align with the park's vision, goals, and capacity.

### Strategy 1: Collaborate with Partners

**Action 1:** Communicate the park's vision, goals, and strategies with existing and proposed partner groups to ensure alignment.

**Action 2:** Work with partners to achieve shared priorities.

### Strategy 2: Involve Volunteers

**Action 1:** Assess existing and proposed volunteer programs and operations to ensure alignment with park goals and strategies, including best practices.

### Strategy 3: Engage Local Stakeholders

**Action 1:** Work with the public and local and state jurisdictions to encourage alignment and achieve mutual interests.



Park After Dark. Photo by Turner Photography.

## **Goal 4: Manage and Lead Smartly: Implement sound business practices, and establish a positive leadership culture that engages and values employees.**

### **Strategy 1: Strengthen Park Operations**

**Action 1:** Complete the establishment of an effective and identifiable C&O Canal Headquarters in Williamsport, Maryland, in cooperation with the Town of Williamsport and the State of Maryland.

### **Strategy 2: Implement Sound Business Practices**

**Action 1:** Evaluate key park operations, and develop long-term sustainable and effective practices.

**Action 2:** Maintain an integrated annual work planning process that includes project, program, and position management review.

### **Strategy 3: Prepare for a Changing Climate**

**Action 1:** Develop a comprehensive approach to flood emergency preparation and post-flood assessment.

### **Strategy 4: Communicate Broadly**

**Action 1:** Ensure communication and dialogue that supports understanding of park operations and management with the public, stakeholders, park staff, volunteers, and partners.

### **Strategy 5: Create a Leadership Culture**

**Action 1:** Foster a culture of leadership for the entire workforce through training and support, including the principles of operational leadership, relevancy, diversity, and inclusion.

**Action 2:** Invest time and resources to develop staff through training, coaching, and professional growth experiences, including implementing a comprehensive supervisory training program.

## **Goal 5: Operate Safely and Efficiently: Provide high-quality visitor and administrative services.**

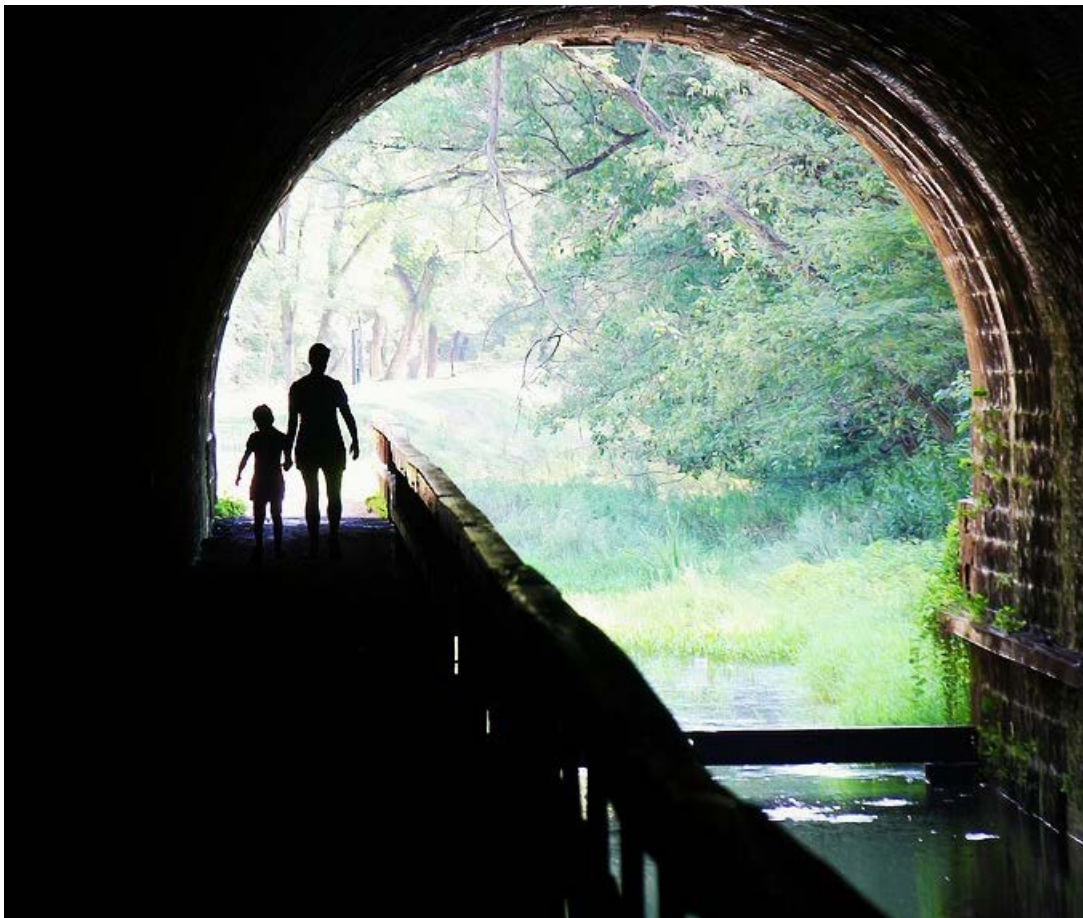
### **Strategy 1: Sustain Park Operations**

**Action 1:** Operate the park in a safe, clean, and accountable manner in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, and policies.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Effective strategic plans include mechanisms for implementing the plan and monitoring progress toward the goals and priorities included within them. This section describes how and when the park's management team will implement the strategic plan and monitor progress over the next five years; the management team consists of the Superintendent's Office as well as the chiefs of each division. Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park envisions the strategic plan as guiding the majority of the work they will be undertaking over the life of the plan. As such, the strategic goals will be visible in the park's annual work plan and in the individual work plans of the park's employees.

- The goals, strategies and actions will guide the creation of annual work plans for park staff beginning in 2019. Park managers and staff will collaborate as the goals, strategies, and actions are translated into the task level. The sequencing of priorities may be adjusted over time to align with opportunities.
- Division chiefs will use the park strategic plan to draft their division's annual work plan for existing and proposed activities. Activities not directly tied to the strategic plan may be discontinued or not initiated. The management team will review each divisions' work plan and collaborate on an integrated annual parkwide work plan that includes projects, programs, and position management.
- The management team will develop action criteria and processes that will be used in prioritization. In addition to specific ranking criteria, two general variables to be considered in the action prioritization are: (1) feasibility of accomplishing the action, and (2) effectiveness of the action in achieving a goal.
- The management team will periodically review the strategic plan to determine and record progress as well as identify new and evolving priorities.



Paw Paw Tunnel. Photo by Brian Breighner.

# APPENDIX A: PLAN CONTRIBUTORS AND WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

## C&O Canal NHP Contributors:

### *Superintendent's Office:*

Kevin Brandt, Superintendent\*  
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Josh Cunningham\*  
Jason Gaskin  
Nathan Glenny  
Momed Green  
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Dan Johnston  
Darius Jones  
Shaun Lehmann\*  
Adanna Nwaro  
Todd Stanton\*  
Leigh Zahm

## National Capital Regional Office Contributors:

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Perry Wheelock

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Cherie Shepherd

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### ***Law Enforcement and EMS:***

Jan Lemons

### ***Partnership and Outreach:***

K. Lynn Berry

### ***Planning, Compliance, and GIS:***

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### ***Planning***

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## Observing Participants:

C&O Canal Trust  
Georgetown Heritage  
Friends of the Historic Great Falls Tavern  
C&O Canal Association  
Volunteer Bike Patrol  
Volunteer Bike Loaner Program  
Volunteer Billy Goat Trail Stewards  
Volunteer Roving Interpreters  
Eastern National  
Canal Towns Partnership  
Canal Place Preservation and  
Development Authority  
C&O Canal Federal Advisory Commission  
Subcommittee

\*Denotes a member of the C&O Canal  
Strategic Planning Team

# APPENDIX B: STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND CHALLENGES QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Stakeholder,

We are in the early stages of preparing a strategic plan for Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park (CHOH) that will articulate the park's vision and goals and identify key priorities to guide work over the next 3 – 5 years. The strategic plan will help the park management team to more effectively manage the park's resources. As part of the strategic planning process, we are gathering views and ideas that will directly inform the strategic planning process. We invite you to play a role in helping us identify the park's biggest strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges by responding to the following five questions. Please note that your feedback will remain anonymous.

Please provide your feedback by **Friday, August 11, 2017**. Many thanks for your time and contributions to this effort.

- 1. What is the single biggest strength of CHOH as an organization?** In other words, what are you doing exceptionally well at CHOH? Please be specific. *(For example, the park provides an outstanding interpretive/education program, providing programs ranging from the living history canal boat and canal launch programs to lock demonstrations, guided hikes along the towpath and Junior Ranger camps.)*
- 2. What is the single biggest weakness of CHOH as an organization? What's the one thing that most needs to happen to improve this weakness?** *(For example, the park lacks boundary data for parts of the park, making it difficult to know when adjacent landowners are encroaching on the park. A solution would be for the Lands Division to complete a boundary survey for all of the park.)*
- 3. What key opportunities do you see for CHOH in the next few years?** Opportunities are outside factors or situations that can affect the park in a favorable way. *(For example, the park staff can work with local land trusts and the Maryland Department of Conservation to protect wildlife habitat and lands within and adjacent to the park boundary.)*
- 4. What key challenges do you see for CHOH in the next few years?** Challenges are outside factors or situations that can affect the park in a negative way. *(For example, increasing recreational use levels makes protecting resources and providing high-quality visitor experiences a challenge.)*
5. Imagine it's the year 2020 and CHOH is featured on the front page of the Washington Post for a highly successful initiative or accomplishment. **What is the headline for the story?**



Construction work on Conococheague Aqueduct. Photo by Joe Reed.

On the back cover:  
Conococheague Aqueduct.  
Photo by John Gensor.



As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering sound use of our land and water resources; protecting our fish, wildlife, and biological diversity; preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historic places; and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of all our people by encouraging stewardship and citizen participation in their care. The department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.

NPS/CHOH/412/147814A DECEMBER 2018

