



# United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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Memorandum

To: National Leadership Council  
All Superintendents

From: Director *Jenatha S. Jarvis*

Subject: Applying National Park Service Management Policies in the Context of Climate Change

This memorandum addresses emergent questions regarding the influence of climate change on the guiding principles of park natural resource management. Additional policy memos will follow regarding management of other issues, such as facilities and cultural resources. Our planet is warming and the effects are here and now; current and projected impacts from climate change will increasingly become compelling considerations in park management decisions.

The National Park Service (NPS) Climate Change Response Strategy guides our efforts in developing responses to climate change. The pervasiveness of climate change requires that we reexamine our approaches to park management and consider what a larger magnitude of change means for our responsibilities to:

- Conserve natural systems, processes, and native biodiversity; protect our cultural and historic heritage; and provide for the enjoyment of the same;
- Determine desired natural, cultural, and experiential conditions;
- Address the inevitable movement, loss, or gain of species associated with parks;
- Address the inevitable loss of cultural knowledge and resources of parks and associated communities;
- Develop and implement park plans;
- Site and construct park facilities; and
- Balance flexibility and adaptive management with the need for consistency across the Service in decision-making processes.

These are important considerations that challenge us to think in new ways. As our management approaches evolve within a context of greater uncertainty, *Management Policies 2006* provides comprehensive and flexible guidance to deal with the challenges of climate change, and remains as the central guidance for conserving park resources and providing for visitor enjoyment. Our management policies require that decisions be grounded in best available science. They require careful consideration of all pertinent factors, and transparent decision-making through public

involvement. However, they do not require what is impossible, economically infeasible, or likely ineffectual. Climate change does not alter these principles.

I would like to specifically address two questions that frequently arise regarding climate change and our management policies. The questions center on how climate change relates to: (1) impairment, and (2) our commitment to maintain “natural” conditions and processes within parks.

### **The Impairment Prohibition**

Chapter 1 of *Management Policies 2006* discusses the prohibition on impairment to park resources primarily associated with in-park activities over which managers have control (See *The Prohibition of Impairment of Park Resources and Values 1.4.4; What Constitutes Impairment of Park Values 1.4.5; Unacceptable Impacts 1.4.7.1*). Regarding potential impairment from largely-external sources (such as climate change caused by global emissions) over which managers have no control, managers are directed to work cooperatively with others (See e.g. *Cooperative Conservation Beyond Park Boundaries 1.6; Chapter 4 Introduction; Partnerships 4.1.4; Plant and Animal Population Management Principles 4.4.1.1.; Air Quality 4.7.1*). Additionally, managers may be required to document and analyze alternatives that could be applied to mitigate unacceptable impacts from external sources (See *Cooperative Conservation Beyond Park Boundaries 1.6; Goal Orientation 2.1.4; Cooperative Planning 2.3.1.8*).

Our policies are clear that managers cannot be held accountable for impairment from external sources—particularly those of global dimensions—over which managers have no control. However, managers can be held accountable for engaging partners and using the best available science, including climate change science, to inform park planning and implementation of cooperative solutions. The recently established system of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives and other local partnerships will provide excellent opportunities for cooperation and sharing information among neighboring land managers. In short, the NPS must continue to work to preserve resources unimpaired from in-park activities, and also engage fully in cooperative conservation and civic engagement to mitigate impacts arising from external forces.

### **Resource Stewardship of “Natural Conditions”**

*Management Policies 2006* defines “natural condition” as “the condition of resources that would occur *in the absence of human dominance over the landscape*” (Ch. 4 Introduction, italics added). Considering that current science tells us that climate change is linked in large measure to human activity, and that the rate of climate change will continue to accelerate, achieving natural conditions is a challenging directive. Although “natural conditions” may be both increasingly difficult to characterize and ineffective as a guide for desired future conditions, traditional practices targeted to maintain “natural conditions” in parks – such as removing invasive species and other stressors; maintaining natural processes and disturbance regimes; restoring naturally functioning ecosystems; supporting biodiversity and landscape connectivity; and continuing other actions that build and support system resilience – remain as viable management strategies that are also consistent with our need to adapt to climate change.

### **Toward the Future**

Widespread, cascading effects from climate change challenge park managers in ways unimaginable even a few decades ago. In 1963, the *Leopold Report* promoted a vision of parks as

maintaining “vignettes of primitive America” – a vision that anchored the evolution of today’s principles of resource management in national parks. I recently appointed a group of renowned scientists to examine this vision and propose a new paradigm for natural and cultural resource management for the National Park System. Their work will culminate with a report in August 2012 that will address conservation goals within the context of climate change and other global influences. I also recently established a Climate Change Coordinating Group to provide NPS leadership on this issue. The group will advance and coordinate the work of NPS programs in incorporating climate change response into NPS practices and operations.

I will close by saying I am extremely proud of the way our employees have proactively applied existing knowledge and skills to deal with this unprecedented challenge. I am confident that the National Park Service will continue to improve our knowledge and skills in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change, and in providing leadership and education to our partners and the public.