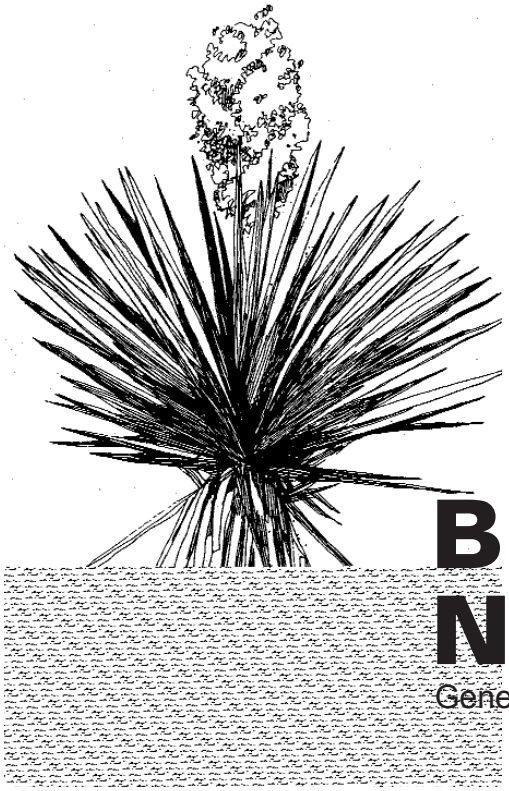


Big Bend National Park

General Management Plan / Newsletter 2, Summer 2001

Dear Friends:

We are pleased to share this *General Management Plan* newsletter with you and ask for your continued help in planning the future of Big Bend National Park. As a reminder, general management plans provide guidance for overall management of each national park. This process requires that we develop a range of possible alternative future conditions and management strategies for the park. The plan will determine how the park will address resource preservation, visitor uses, development needs, and information/education issues for the next 10 to 15 years.

This newsletter is the first opportunity for you to respond to preliminary alternatives. Your comments and suggestions will help in developing a preferred alternative, which will be published in a *Draft General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement* that will be made available for a formal review and comment period.

Your participation is important to us, and we urge your continued involvement in this planning effort.

Sincerely,

Frank J. Deckert
Superintendent
Big Bend National Park

Big Bend Management Prescriptions

Visitor Services

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

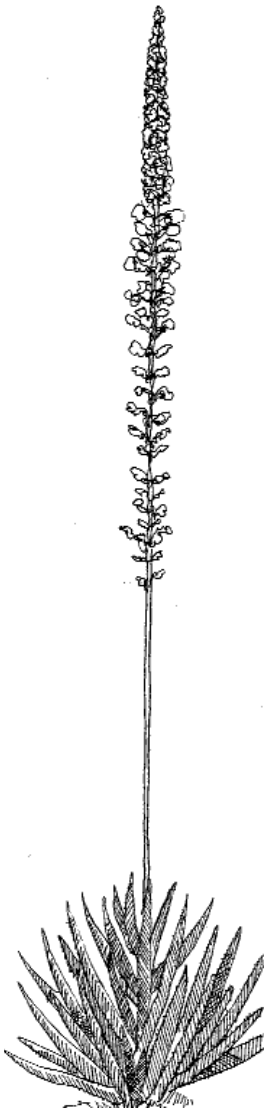
The visitor experience in this area would be highly social and focused on interpretation, education, orientation, visitor comfort, and safety. This structured environment would be highly accessible, and contacts with park staff and other visitors would be common; overcrowding would be avoided. Visitors would have an opportunity to get an overview of park resources in a short time with a minimum of physical exertion. An opportunity to learn about the park's significance and compelling stories through the interpretation of themes would be an important element. Visitors would have an opportunity to purchase materials related to the park. Necessary food and lodging would be available here.

RESOURCE CONDITIONS

To the greatest degree practical in this management prescription, facilities would be models of best management practices and sustainable development. This prescription would be where there are limited or no significant resources or in areas that were previously disturbed by development. The natural environment could be modified for park operations, but it would still harmonize with the surrounding environment. Although the environment could be highly modified within the area, pollutants and other disturbances (e.g., storm-water runoff and dust from construction) would be contained and mitigated before affecting adjoining areas. The physical footprint of structures and stored material in this area would be minimized. Archeological resources would be avoided or mitigated if necessary.

FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

Sightseeing, learning about the park through interpretive media, self-guided and ranger-led tours, short walks, and programs could be common activities. The area also would serve as a staging area for more extended tours. Orientation and interpretation facilities such as visitor centers, kiosks, wayside exhibits, and other interpretive media would be appropriate. Support facilities such as fee collection, restrooms, running water, first-aid areas, and hardened circulation areas and trails could be present. Recreation facilities such as developed campgrounds might be available. Space could be available for research, classroom activities, and libraries. Utilities would include water, electricity, telephones, and computer access.



Operations

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

This area is not intended for visitors; however, limited incidental visitor use would be permitted. Most visitors would be only slightly aware of the facilities in this area during their visits.

RESOURCE CONDITIONS

To the greatest degree practical, facilities in this management prescription would be models of best management practices and sustainable development. This prescription would be where there are limited or no significant resources or in areas that were previously disturbed by development. The natural environment could be modified for park operations, but facilities would still harmonize with the surrounding environment. Although the environment could be highly modified in this area, pollutants and other disturbances (e.g., storm-water runoff and dust from construction) would be contained and mitigated before affecting adjoining areas. Facilities and operations in the area would be buffered to avoid visitors seeing them or being disturbed by associated noise. The physical footprint of structures and stored material in this area would be minimized. Archeological resources would be avoided or mitigated if necessary.

FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

The area could include structures and grounds used for administration and operations, such as offices, maintenance shops, storage areas, warehouses, garages, research facilities, conference/meeting/training facilities, housing, boat and equipment storage, vehicle maintenance, and outdoor storage. Facilities for park utilities and communication needs would be located in this area. Facilities would provide a safe, efficient, comfortable, and aesthetic work environment for park staff. Hardened circulation and parking areas would be appropriate in this area as well as service roads and boat launch areas for operations activities. Housing would have sufficient space for family activities.

Big Bend Management Prescriptions

Recreation

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Visitors could enjoy many appropriate recreational experiences. Social and group activities would result in a high degree of contact with other visitors. Visitors would have occasional contact with park staff conducting patrols and doing other work assignments. Visitors would have safe, accessible, and enjoyable experiences that have a very high probability of meeting their expectations.

RESOURCE CONDITIONS

Recreation would take place where there would be minimal impacts on resources. Resource manipulation would vary by the amount and intensity of physical development necessary for particular types of recreation. Some recreation would cause incidental damage to natural resources; other recreational activities, like fishing, would consume natural resources within the constraints of applicable laws, regulations, and policies.

FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

Visitors could participate in a wide variety of activities including watching wildlife, camping, hiking, walking, jogging, and bicycling. Facilities could include picnic tables and grills, campsites, accessible restrooms, and paved and unpaved roads and parking.

Wilderness

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

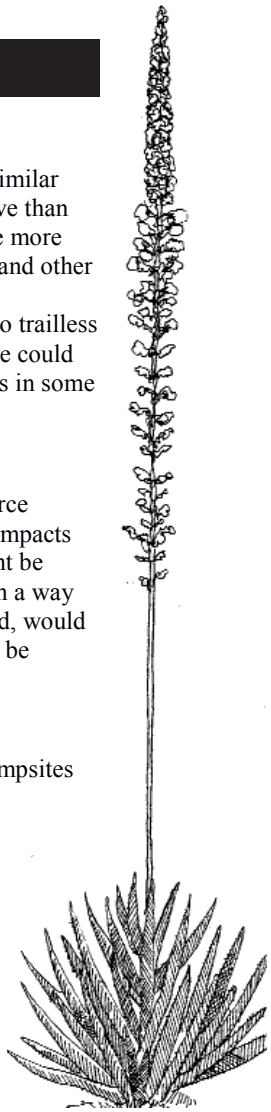
Wilderness management would be coordinated with the backcountry nonwilderness prescription and similar experiences would be provided. However, management strategies and options would be more restrictive than under the nonwilderness prescription. Visitors would use these areas for day and overnight use. On the more popular trails, there would be a moderate probability of encountering others, particularly at campsites and other points of interest. Visitors would be influenced less by other human activities than they would in the nonwilderness prescription area. Travel would be along a range of routes from well-maintained trails to trailless backcountry requiring a high degree of of outdoor skills and self-reliance. Use levels might vary. There could be limits on the number of campers. There might be established primitive campsites and other facilities in some locations. Hiking, camping and stock use would be permitted.

RESOURCE CONDITIONS

Natural conditions would be mostly undisturbed, but evidence of visitor use might be apparent. Resource impacts would be primarily from hiking, camping, stock use, and allowable administrative activities. Impacts would be reversible, although areas might take many years to recover. Previously disturbed areas might be restored. Resource conditions might be modified for essential visitor and operational needs, but only in a way that harmonizes with the setting and retains natural biodiversity. Archeological resources, if discovered, would generally be left in place. Historic buildings and sites might be preserved and stabilized, or they might be recorded and removed.

FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

Facilities could include maintained trails, footbridges, directional signs, and primitive campsites. If campsites were designated, they might contain primitive toilets and food storage lockers.



Big Bend Management Prescriptions

Backcountry Nonwilderness

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

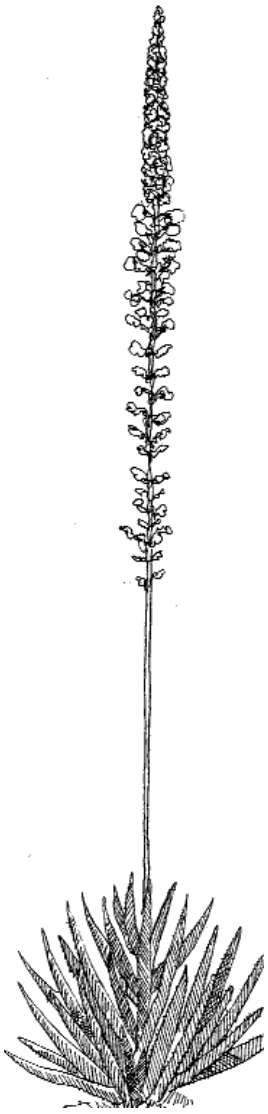
Backcountry nonwilderness management would be coordinated with the wilderness prescription and similar experiences would be provided. However, management strategies and options would be less restrictive than under the wilderness prescription. Visitors would use these areas for day and overnight use. On the more popular trails, there would be a moderate probability of encountering others, particularly at campsites and points of interest. Visitors would be influenced by other human activities more than they would in the wilderness prescription area. Travel would be along a range of routes from well-maintained trails to trailless backcountry requiring a high degree of outdoor skills and self-reliance. Use levels might vary. There would be limits on the number of campers. There might be established campsites, food storage containers, and toilets in some locations. Hiking, camping, and stock use would be permitted.

RESOURCE CONDITIONS

Natural conditions would be mostly undisturbed, but evidence of visitor and administrative use might be apparent. Resource impacts would be restricted to hiking and stock use, campsites, and approved administrative facilities and activities. Past impacts would be reversible, although areas might require intensive effort and long periods to recover. Resource conditions might be modified for necessary visitor and operational needs, but in a manner that would minimize visual and resource impacts.

FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

Facilities might include maintained trails, unpaved backcountry roads, footbridges, interpretive and directional signs, primitive campsites, administrative roads, and administrative equipment (such as wells or radio repeaters). If campsites were designated, they might contain facilities such as toilets and food storage lockers.



Cultural

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Visitors would be immersed in a cultural setting that reflects a historical period with minimal exposure to modern intrusions, both visible and audible. Visitors could explore sites on their own or participate in ranger-conducted programs. Recreational activities would be managed to support the area's historic character. Some areas may be closed to visitors to protect resources and resource values.

RESOURCE CONDITIONS

Intensive management of cultural landscapes highlighting the historical period would occur. Structure exteriors would be preserved; interiors would be preserved for interpretation or adaptively used for park and visitor support needs. Cultural sites inventories will be completed. Archeological and ethnographic resources would be protected and preserved.

FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

Interpretive exhibits, programs, demonstrations, and tours could take place in these areas. Historic structures and settings would be key features. There would be limited visitor amenities through adaptive use of historic structures (sales, restrooms, water fountains, etc.) and limited administrative supports (staff offices, storage, housing, etc.).

The Alternative Concepts

Alternative A – Existing Conditions / No Action

This alternative, presented for comparison with the action alternatives B, C, and D, continues current management direction, and there would be no significant change in interpretation and management of the park. Coordination would continue with agencies and other groups.

There would be very little change or improvement of visitor facilities except for the following. A new building would be constructed at Panther Junction that would consolidate functions now occurring in other locations. This structure would be more sustainable and efficient than current scattered operations. The facilities at Panther Junction would continue to increase slowly over the coming years to meet park needs. The park would upgrade the utility systems (water and sewer) throughout the park to meet Texas compliance requirements.

Cultural and natural resources would be managed as time and funding allowed. The park would continue to protect and maintain known resources. Cultural and natural resource inventory work and monitoring would continue and be expanded if possible. Park staff would encourage the research that is needed to fill in the gaps.

Alternative B – Enhance Natural Resource Stewardship and Visitor Facilities While Increasing Opportunities for Cultural Resource Appreciation

Concept

This alternative would provide better protection for the park's natural resources and upgrade park facilities. The park would preserve and interpret the tangible remains of ranching and other human activities in West Texas in several locations throughout the park such as Wilson Blue Creek Ranch, Harte Ranch and Mariscal Mine.

Actions

- **Chisos Basin**
  - Keep existing development in the basin and provide no additional facility development.
  - Upgrade all utility systems (water, wastewater, and power) and underground all utilities.
  - Rehabilitate and make all facilities more energy efficient.

- **Panther Junction**
  - Upgrade and improve utility systems (water, wastewater, and power).
  - Upgrade visitor services at Panther Junction and maintain development including post office and school.
  - Retain park personnel at current levels.
  - Manage the largest portion of the area following the operations prescription and the area around the visitor center following the visitor services prescription.

- **Castolon**
  - Develop new campground and amphitheater in mesquite flat or southeast along the river; remove current campground and amphitheater.
  - Relocate concessions housing out of historic district.

- **Rio Grande Village**
  - Relocate the gas station and store outside the 500-year floodplain.
  - Relocate or remove some campsites to provide for better resource protection and visitor safety.
  - Continue irrigation of the campground and associated areas.
  - Evaluate the Barker House to determine if the structure meets the National Register of Historic Places criteria. If this structure is determined eligible, then undertake preservation measures.

- **Harte Ranch**
  - Manage area to preserve the tangible remains of West Texas ranching, including the preservation of structures around Buttrill Spring, Mountain Lodge, Bone Spring, and other sites associated with ranching.
  - Maintain the landing strip and other facilities for park operations.
  - Manage most land in Harte Ranch area following the backcountry nonwilderness prescription.
  - Manage some west and south sections of the Hart Ranch area following the wilderness prescription.

- **Christmas Mountains**
  - Encourage the Texas General Land Office to find a buyer for the land who would manage it to be compatible with park purposes.

Alternative C – Providing for Natural Resource Stewardship and Preservation While Creating a More Sustainable Park

Concept

This alternative would provide better protection for the park's natural resources than the no-action alternative and upgrade park facilities. Actions would be taken to help make the park more sustainable. This means that park facility design would sit lightly upon the land demonstrating resource efficiency, and promoting ecology restoration and integrity. It further means that the park would make those choices, decisions, and actions that would best achieve ecological/biological diversity.

Actions

■ **Chisos Basin**
- Remove all concession and park facilities from Chisos Basin except for campground and two residences for law enforcement and maintenance.
- Develop a day-use trailhead in the basin using areas that are already disturbed.
- Relocate the lodge and concession operations to an area between Basin Junction and Panther Junction. If this action were not feasible, then permit no concession lodging in the park.

■ **Panther Junction**
- Expand visitor center to best interpret the park's natural and cultural material.
- Move up to 15% of park personnel and functions to gateway communities. Place those functions not needed at the park on a daily basis outside park boundaries.
- Upgrade and improve utility systems (water, wastewater, and power) and visitor services.
- Retain post office.
- Manage the largest portion of the area following the operations prescription and the area around the visitor center following the visitor services prescription.

■ **Castolon**
- Develop new campground and amphitheater in mesquite flat or southeast along the river; remove current campground and amphitheater.
- Relocate concessions housing out of historic district.

■ **Rio Grande Village**
- Relocate campsite facilities and certain park support facilities such as visitor center and housing outside the 100-year floodplain.
- Relocate the gas station, store, and park support facilities such as maintenance outside the 500-year floodplain, possibly at the junction of the road to Boquillas.
- Reduce park facilities to a total of five residences (three for maintenance and two for law enforcement).
- If sufficient space can be identified, develop additional campsites.
- Allow limited recreational overnight parking.
- Reduce the irrigation of the campground and associated areas up to 50% with priority given to maintaining trees for shade.
- Preserve the Barker House.
- Manage most of the Rio Grande Village area following the backcounty nonwilderness prescription.
- Reduce concessions facilities to two residences.

■ **Harte Ranch**
- Designate a substantial portion of Harte Ranch for a wilderness study and manage it following the wilderness prescription. Exclude the county road, landing strip with surrounding buildings, and mountain lodge from this study.
- Allow the remaining structures to deteriorate in place; if necessary for visitor safety, remove them.
- Manage most land in the Harte Ranch area following the wilderness prescription.

■ **Parkwide**
- Develop in situ display of paleontological resources and improve fossil bone exhibit.

■ **Christmas Mountains**
- Encourage the Texas General Land Office to find a buyer for the land who would manage it to be compatible with park purposes.

Alternative D – Maximize Natural Resource Stewardship and Preservation of the Park for Future Generations

Concept

This alternative would provide for the enduring protection and preservation of the park's natural resources. Actions would be undertaken to give greater resource protection while allowing for visitor use.

Actions

■ **Chisos Basin**
- Remove all concession and park facilities from Chisos Basin.
- Develop a day use trailhead.

- Permit no concession lodging in the park; encourage the private sector to develop lodging facilities outside park boundaries.
- Manage most of the Chisos Basin following the backcountry nonwilderness prescription.

■ **Panther Junction**
- Move up to 15% of park personnel and functions to gateway communities. Place those functions not needed on a daily basis outside park boundaries.
- Upgrade and improve utility systems (water, wastewater, and power) and visitor services.
- Retain post office.
- Manage the largest portion of the area following the operations prescription and the area around the visitor center following the visitor services prescription.

■ **Castolon**
- Develop new campground and amphitheater in mesquite flat or southeast along the river; remove current campground and amphitheater.
- Relocate concessions housing out of historic district.

■ **Rio Grande Village**
- Remove the gas station, store, visitor center, campsites, and park support facilities at Rio Grande Village and revegetate most of the area.
- Establish a trailhead for day use only.
- Allow a more natural appearance to occur; revegetate large portions of the area with native drought-tolerant species.
- Explore options for reallocating the park's portion of river irrigation water to maintaining the flow and quantity of water in the Rio Grande.
- Allow the Barker House to deteriorate and if necessary remove for public safety.
- Manage most of the Rio Grande Village area following the backcounty nonwilderness prescription.

■ **Harte Ranch**
- Designate a substantial portion of Harte Ranch for a wilderness study and manage it following the wilderness prescription. Exclude the county road, landing strip with surrounding buildings, and mountain lodge from this study.
- Allow the remaining structures to deteriorate in place; if necessary for visitor safety, remove them.

■ **Christmas Mountains**
- Enlarge the park's boundary to include the Christmas Mountains and seek funds for land acquisition.

Now It is Your Turn!

The next step is to send us your comments on these preliminary alternatives, interpretive themes, visitor experience goals, and management prescriptions. You may like some but not all the elements of one alternative, or you may like a concept but disagree with the way we have translated that concept into actual visitor experiences or resource protection in the park. **We need to know the reasons for your likes and dislikes.** Maybe you have an entirely different vision that would solve major issues better than any of the alternatives presented. This is the kind of feedback that will help us formulate the best possible future for the park. We encourage all ideas. Please take time to fill out the enclosed comment form and return it within 30 days. We will consider your comments when we develop the *Draft General Management Plan*, which will include an analysis of the environmental consequences of implementing each of the alternatives. If you prefer, you may fill out a comment form via the Internet at:

http://www.nps.gov/planning/bibe/gmp/news2/home.htm

Also, please be aware that due to the requirements of public disclosure (318 Department Manual 4 App.2.11), the National Park Service must make the names and addresses of commenters public if requested. Individual respondents, however, may request that this information not be released. The National Park Service will then determine whether the information may be withheld under the Freedom of Information Act and will honor your request to the extent allowed by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comment. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection if requested.

THE APPROVED PLAN BECOMES REAL

Implementation of any approved alternative depends on funding. A general management plan provides analysis and justification for future funding, but in no way guarantees that money will be forthcoming. The plan will establish a vision that will guide year-to-year management of the park. Full implementation of the approved plan could take many years.

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