

Air Tour Management Plan – Frequently Asked Questions

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

What are the existing commercial air tour operations at the park? How would conditions under the ATMP be different than what is currently occurring?

- Under interim operating authority, two operators are currently authorized to fly a combined total of 1,920 commercial air tours per year over the Park. Interim operating authority does not set routes or operating conditions for an operator except to limit the number of air tours the operator is permitted to fly each year. On average from 2017-2019, Whirl'd Helicopters, Inc. reported 864 commercial air tours per year over the Park. Additionally, Great Smoky Mountain Helicopter Inc. is estimated to fly 82 commercial air tours over the Park per year. ATMPs include conditions designed to protect natural and cultural resources and visitor experience. These conditions may include the number of authorized air tours, routes, altitude, aircraft type, day or time restrictions, and restrictions for particular events.

Does the proposed ATMP require that air tours follow specific routes and/ or fly at certain altitudes?

- Yes, Section 3.2 of the ATMP specifies routes and altitudes. Except in an emergency or to avoid unsafe conditions, or unless otherwise authorized for a specified purpose, upon approval of the final ATMP, the operators would not be able to deviate from the routes and altitudes in the ATMP.

Does the proposed ATMP specify when commercial air tours could occur? Why are those conditions recommended?

- Yes. Sections 3.4, 3.5, and Appendix A of the ATMP specify proposed days and times when air tours may occur. ATMPs include conditions designed to protect natural and cultural resources and visitor experience. These conditions may include the number of authorized air tours, routes, altitude, aircraft type, day or time restrictions, and restrictions for particular events.

Why are specific operating conditions recommended in the proposed ATMP?

- ATMPs include conditions designed to protect natural and cultural resources and visitor experience. These conditions may include the number of authorized air tours, routes, altitude, aircraft type, day or time restrictions, and restrictions for particular events. Section 3 of the draft ATMP provides the proposed operating conditions at the Park.

How does the proposed ATMP protect wilderness character and opportunities for solitude in wilderness?

- The proposed annual flight limits, routes, minimum altitudes in this ATMP are intended to protect wilderness and visitor experience by limiting the number of potential disturbances caused by commercial air tours, by providing opportunities for solitude and remoteness from sights and sounds in the recommended and proposed wilderness, and by reducing the intensity of air tour noise at ground level. The hours of operation would provide quiet periods of the day during which visitors can enjoy natural sounds and preserves opportunities for solitude.

Would commercial air tours be visible to park visitors?

- Whether a visitor on the ground sees a commercial air tour aircraft depends on a number of factors including how often tours occur, the time of day of the occurrence(s), proximity to the flight path, altitude, topography, and the presence of other sounds that may mask detection. Visitors near an air tour's flight path are more likely to see and hear the aircraft passing overhead; however, a viewer's eye is often drawn to the horizon to take in a park view, and aircraft at higher altitudes are less likely to be noticed. Aircraft at lower altitudes may attract visual attention but are also more likely to be screened by vegetation or terrain. Aircraft are transitory elements in a scene and visual impacts tend to be relatively short.

Would park visitors be able to hear commercial aircraft tours from the ground?

- Whether a visitor on the ground can hear a commercial air tour depends on a number of factors, including proximity to the flight path, type of aircraft, other sources of noise, and surrounding landscape features. Visitors near an aircraft's flight path are more likely to hear the aircraft passing overhead, but other noise sources such as vehicles, people, insects and other wildlife activity, wind, and precipitation can mask the sound of an aircraft. Terrain features and buildings, which block the direct line-of-sight between a noise source and a visitor also may have an effect.

How does the proposed ATMP seek to protect cultural resources?

- The proposed annual flight limits and designated routes in this draft ATMP are intended to protect cultural resources and related cultural landscapes and ethnographic resources throughout the Park by limiting the number of potential disturbances caused by commercial air tours. The ATMP may include additional conditions as identified during consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The route and altitude conditions would improve conditions at cultural properties and landscapes by reducing the intensity of air tour noise at ground level.

How would the proposed ATMPs protect tribal lands, properties, ceremonies, or practices?

- The proposed ATMP allows restrictions for particular events, which are intended to prevent noise interruptions of Park events or tribal practices. The ATMP may include additional conditions as identified during consultation with tribes under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, including protections for tribal lands outside the park but within ½ mile outside of the Park boundary.