

Visual Resources Program *Inventory Factsheet*

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resource Stewardship & Science
Air Resources Division



Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, NPS photo

Why Inventory Views?

The process of documenting location, quality, and condition is as vital for managing and protecting a park's visual resources as it is for any other natural or cultural resource. A structured inventory method makes it possible to truly incorporate visual resources into informed and effective park management.

Visual resources include the landscape and all of the visible natural and human-made elements in it—everything the eye can see. In many cases, significant park views extend beyond the boundaries of National Park System lands. It is especially critical that the National Park Service (NPS) have an accepted approach for inventorying these views in order to effectively partner with neighbors in protecting the visitor experience.

An NPS Approach

A visit to a National Park is a rich and varied multi-sensory experience, and what visitors see—their visual experience of the park—plays a key role in their enjoyment and appreciation of park resources. Capturing and these visual experiences accurately and consistently across NPS landscapes is a key goal of the NPS visual resources inventory. Breathtaking scenic landscapes, historic battlefields, archaeological sites, urban corridors, and wilderness areas all have visual resource values that must be considered in context rather than compared against a single standard.

As part of the NPS visual resources inventory, views are identified, mapped, described, and evaluated in a way that seeks to represent the visitor's experience. Each view is mapped and described from the viewers' perspective and is evaluated to capture two distinct facets of a view:

- What is its scenic quality?
- How important is it to the visitor experience?

View mapping, description, and scenic quality assessments are conducted through field work. An inventory team visits identified viewpoints, spatially defines the view, describes it in a systematic way, and rates the scenic quality on defined criteria. Following the field work exercise, a team of local experts document viewpoint and viewed landscape significance before rating the importance of each view for park visitor services, interpretive themes, and viewer

sensitivity. Scenic quality and view importance ratings are combined into an overall scenic inventory value that can be represented on maps and applied to a variety of spatial analyses. Visual resources inventory information facilitates incorporation of scenic values in park management, and informs collaborative efforts to protect views within and beyond park boundaries.

Planning an Inventory

Who?

A multidisciplinary team of park staff is often key to the success of an inventory. Natural and cultural resources, interpretation, facilities management, and other park divisions all bring unique knowledge and experience to the process. The visual inventory can also include volunteers, partners, and/or stakeholders if desired. Scenic quality field teams should be composed of 4–8 members to ensure balanced discussion and reasonable maneuverability. Diverse and in-depth local knowledge is most critical for the view importance evaluation.

When?

For an inventory to best capture visitor experience, scenic quality evaluations should be timed to capture conditions most often experienced by a given park's visitors. In some cases, especially where seasonal deciduous vegetation is prominent and year round visitation occurs, it may be desirable to inventory under both leaf-on and leaf-off conditions. It is best to avoid collecting visual inventory information during temporary or unusual circumstances. For example, very hazy or smoky days could diminish a visual experience and thus degrade scenic quality evaluations. Similarly, the peak of wildflower blooms or colorful tree displays could lead to inflated evaluations.

Where?

Identifying which views to include is critical to developing an informative inventory. Specific situations, such as proposed development near a park, may make it easy to identify an area of focus. For a baseline visual resources inventory practical considerations such as the view's potential for change, popularity with visitors, and/or significance for park interpretation may dictate narrowing the scope. Because location and scenic quality information are collected in the field, logistics including access routes and travel time between viewpoints are important to consider in planning an efficient inventory.

Conducting an Inventory

It all starts with training. A training workshop provides a foundation of visual resource knowledge, explains the procedures for conducting both parts of an NPS visual resources inventory, and includes time for field work and practice. Workshops equip teams with the skills needed for additional inventory work in the future.

View Description and Scenic Quality Rating

View Description

Ask three people to describe a view and you will likely hear three different responses. The NPS visual inventory method includes a structured approach to view description that asks teams to record information for each view. This systematic approach removes opinion from the description and ensures that views within parks, and across the service, are considered in a similar way. Structured descriptions are also useful for helping team members look at landscapes analytically, which can inform project design or mitigation considerations. Some of the data recorded in the description include the type of view (e.g., panoramic, enclosed); the primary landscape character type (e.g., natural, rural, agricultural); the elements in the view, such as the landforms and land use; and the essential forms, lines, colors, and textures of the landscape.

Scenic Quality Rating

After completing the view description, inventory teams rate the scenic quality of the view. The rating process involves assessing three scenic quality factors: landscape character integrity, vividness, and visual harmony. For each factor, the rater assesses the degree to which the view has the following characteristics:

- **Landscape character integrity:** How intact is the landscape character? Is the landscape character impacted by elements that are inconsistent with the landscape character? What are the quality and condition of the elements in view?
- **Vividness:** Does the view have strong focal points? Does the view have bold forms and lines? Are there memorable, striking colors or contrasts?
- **Visual harmony:** Are elements of the view in scale with each other? What is the quality of the spatial relationships? Do the colors in the scene work well together?

For each of the elements above, raters assign a numeric score of 1–5. Team members rate each factor independently, and record their ratings on an individual rating data sheet. The full team then discusses and agrees on a team rating for each factor, which are then combined into an overall scenic quality rating. The final scenic quality rating for the team is recorded and becomes the first half of the scenic inventory value.

View Importance Description and Rating

Similar to the view description process for the scenic quality rating, the first step in the view importance process is to identify and describe the natural, cultural, historic or other resource values for both the viewpoint and viewed landscape. This includes such information as whether the viewpoint or viewed landscape include designated scenic or cultural features, historic properties, cultural landscapes, or other specially designated areas.

View Importance Rating

Inventory teams rate view importance by considering:

- **For the viewpoint:** How well is it publicized? How much effort has the park put into facilities or management? To what extent is it used for interpretation?
- **For the viewed landscape:** How well publicized is the landscape that makes up this view? Does the view contain significant/designated features or landmarks? How well does the view represent park scenic character or interpretive themes?
- **Viewer concern:** What portion of park visitors see this view? How long does the average viewer spend observing the view? How sensitive would viewers be to a change in view?

As with scenic quality, each rating factor is equally weighted, given a score from 1–5, and combined for a view importance rating. In the view importance rating, the full team discusses and agrees on a team score for each factor; individual ratings are not made. The final view importance rating for the team is recorded and becomes the second half of the scenic inventory value.

Scenic Inventory Value

The scenic quality rating and view importance rating for each view are combined to determine the view's scenic inventory value. The value ranges from Very Low to Very High, and represents the scenic value of the view for the park. A geographic information system is used to map the inventoried views, and to display combined scenic inventory values for areas where the viewed landscape is shared by multiple views.

Using the Inventory Information

The NPS visual resources inventory provides parks with a systematic and defensible inventory of scenic values that can be used for integrating visual resources in to overall park management. Inventory information also provides a baseline for monitoring changes over time. Coupled with viewshed analysis and composite maps, the information can help park planners identify effective strategies for conserving important views. It can also be used in discussions with developers and stakeholders about how future development within shared viewed landscapes can occur while retaining the valued characteristics of important views.

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