

Visual Resources Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resource Stewardship & Science
Air Resources Division



Joshua Tree NP, NPS photo

Background

Park views inspire future generations, are windows to the natural world, and foster connections with history and culture.

The National Park Service (NPS) Organic Act, which created the agency in 1916, explicitly calls for the preservation of scenery. Some of our nation's most spectacular and historically significant landscapes are entrusted to the NPS. In fact, each unit of the national park system has special visual characteristics that are often central to the unit's management and visitor experience. For the past 100 years, individual parks have addressed scenery conservation in a variety of ways. The need for a systematic, servicewide approach to managing scenery as a resource has become increasingly apparent in the past decade as changing landscapes—from renewable and conventional energy development, urban growth, and internal park changes—affect our most valued scenery.

Program Summary

Visual resources (views) include the natural setting and all other visible objects—everything the eye can see. Naturally, many views extend past park boundaries so partnerships with other agencies, organizations, private landowners, and businesses, among others, are crucial for communication and conservation.

The Air Resources Division of the NPS Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Directorate is leading the development of a Visual Resources Program. The comprehensive inventory, planning, and technical assistance aspects of this program help parks systematically identify and understand their visual resources so that they can develop credible protection strategies, best management practices, and collaborative efforts. This will support parks in proactively engaging with neighbors to protect shared values and treasured views for future generations.

Key Elements

Inventory

The first step in protecting visual resources is identifying and assessing them. The Visual Resources Program has developed a 2-pronged inventory system for evaluating selected views:

1. What is this view's scenic quality?
2. How important is this view?

This approach values historic and cultural attributes of the landscape equally with natural features. When determining a view's importance, park personnel consider its significance for interpretation, viewer sensitivity, and the investment in access and infrastructure.

Planning & Management

Incorporating visual resources into NPS planning process is essential to securing future protection. This program provides tools and guidance to assist parks in this effort. Parks can also develop dedicated visual resource management plans describing goals and recommendations for actions to protect important scenic views.

Technical Assistance

Understanding the potential visual impacts of projects in or near parks is more involved than it may seem. Upon request, program staff provide assistance to parks in interpreting project proposals, developing comments on environmental documents, and identifying mitigation measures to reduce impacts to views, both within and beyond park boundaries.

Policy & Guidance

Servicewide guidance will help foster consistency, understanding, and protection of visual resources across the NPS.

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