

Executive Summary

CELEBRATING & CONSERVING A NATIONAL TREASURE:

Exploring the Opportunities & Alternatives

Responding to a request from Congress, the National Park Service (NPS) has explored the potential for a new unit of the National Park System focused on the Chesapeake Bay. This section summarizes the product of that effort – the *Chesapeake Bay Special Resource Study (SRS) and Final Environmental Impact Statement*.

Most importantly, the *Chesapeake Bay Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement* describes a series of conceptual alternatives and a preferred approach for how the National Park System might best represent the national significance of the Chesapeake Bay.

The National Park System

The National park System protects America’s treasured places—grand and wild, historic and human, on mountain peaks and under water. Our national parks, 388 of them, welcome visitors to the best of the American experience.

The Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay is a spectacular national treasure, rich in nature and history. Almost 200 miles long with 2,500 square miles of water, the Bay drains 64,000 square miles of land from New York to Virginia through 150 rivers and thousands of streams. It is home to millions and influences and inspires our culture, our economy and our recreational pursuits. Simply put, the Chesapeake Bay is a vital part of the American experience.

Many people, organizations and agencies are working hard to celebrate and conserve the Chesapeake and restore key natural resources and functions. Local residents and visitors, groups, stakeholders, and regional, state and federal agencies have long cherished the Chesapeake Bay and its important role in the natural environment and cultural development of the United States. However, we all also recognize the Chesapeake Bay faces significant pressures, which in some cases threaten the long-term sustainability of the Chesapeake ecosystem. This study provides an opportunity to look beyond existing programs and consider additional ways of conserving and celebrating the Chesapeake Bay.

The Special Resource Study

This study does three things:

- Examines whether having additional Chesapeake Bay resources within the National Park System would make sense and would advance partnership efforts to conserve and celebrate the Chesapeake Bay;

- Defines any concepts for how resources or areas of the Bay might fit within the National Park System;
- Makes recommendations regarding these findings.

At a series of public workshops in September 2002, many people discussed initial concepts for this study. New ideas and refinements came from those sessions and from comments submitted in writing and on the SRS website. Those refinements, combined with analysis by the study team and Chesapeake Bay partners, led directly to a series of five conceptual alternatives. (See Section 3 for more information and public comments that led to the current alternatives.)

The Alternatives

The alternatives described in the study are concepts for how the Chesapeake Bay might be represented within the National Park System. They provide different answers to the questions: If a Chesapeake Bay-focused unit of the National Park System were to be created . . .

- What would it be like?
- What focus or emphasis would it have?
- What types of resources would need to be included?
- What would be the conservation goals or priorities?
- What would a visitor experience?

Of the five alternatives, one (alternative A) is a “no action” alternative that would simply continue current NPS roles in the Chesapeake Bay. The four “action alternatives” (B, C, D & E)¹ vary significantly. One of these, alternative B, is quite different from the others and would not technically be labeled a unit of the National Park System.

The descriptions on the following pages are summarized. Full descriptions and a comparison chart can be found in Section 4. An environmental analysis can be found in Section 6. This detailed information is also available on the study website – www.chesapeakestudy.org.

Alternative A: Today’s Programs – No New Initiatives

Rather than adding a new Chesapeake Bay-focused unit of the National Park System, this alternative assumes the National Park Service would simply continue its existing roles related to Chesapeake Bay conservation, restoration and interpretation. Generally, these roles include:

- Partnership in the Chesapeake Bay Program, the federal/state Bay watershed conservation effort;
- Management of existing National Park System units in the Chesapeake Bay watershed;
- Coordination of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network through 2008; and

¹ Note: Alternatives B-E assume the continuation of existing initiatives for the duration of their authorized programs and funding. However, alternatives B-E add new elements, concepts or approaches as well.

- Providing technical assistance to communities and organizations to facilitate conservation of watersheds, natural and cultural resources.

Alternative B: An Enhanced Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network – A Permanent Watershed-wide System of Special Bay Places for Experiencing the Chesapeake

This alternative would enhance and build upon the existing Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, the partnership system of 140-plus parks, refuges, maritime museums, historic sites and trails around the Bay watershed. The Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network would retain its current core characteristics, but be enhanced to fill several identified gaps in Bay conservation and restoration. It would:

- Be authorized as a permanent program of the National Park System giving the Network a continuity limited by current legislation; this would provide the broadest and most far-reaching means of addressing the geographic and thematic diversity of the Chesapeake Bay watershed;
- Stimulate the creation of and add two partnership Bay interpretive/education facilities; and
- Create a new means of linking Gateways to their surrounding working Bay landscapes.

Alternative C: Chesapeake Bay Estuary National Park – Conserving and Exploring the Bay’s Waters

The Chesapeake Bay is a vast estuary – 2,500 square miles of water – known not just for its size, but also its high productivity as a natural system. This alternative would create a national park that exemplifies the larger Bay’s estuarine character with only limited land resources for access and interpretation. The park would:

- Encompass a reasonably large, but still proportionally small water area representative of core aspects of the Chesapeake’s estuarine environment, including limited, but related shoreline areas;
- Protect aquatic resources within the park in a high quality natural system, reflecting the Bay’s importance as habitat, breeding ground and refuge for countless species;
- Provide public access that allows visitors to explore, enjoy and learn about the estuary and its resources without degrading the estuary’s natural systems; and
- Interpret the Chesapeake Bay as an outstanding natural system through a land-based visitor orientation/interpretive center and other programming in the park.

Alternative D: Chesapeake Bay National Reserve – Protecting Bay Maritime & Rural Heritage

National reserves protect and sustain the working landscape, recognizing the vital role of continued human uses in the heritage of a special place. This alternative would create a reserve representative of the Chesapeake’s maritime and agricultural heritage. The reserve would:

- Encompass an area of land and water reflective of the region’s rural maritime, agricultural heritage;
- Retain the living, working character and pattern of human use of the lands and waters;

- Protect traditional resource dependent activities (commercial and recreational fishing, crabbing, oystering, agriculture, forestry) and manage the resources for permanently sustainable use;
- Conserve the reserve landscape, preserving high priority, sensitive natural and cultural resources;
- Interpret the Chesapeake Bay’s heritage through media and programming at a central interpretive center and multiple partner sites within and beyond the reserve; and
- Be fully dependent on a partnership approach to management, involving local, state and federal government and the private sector.

Alternative E: Chesapeake Bay Watershed National Ecological & Cultural Preserve – A Living Example for the Bay and the Nation

The Bay is fed by over 124,000 miles of rivers and streams from a 64,000 square mile watershed. This alternative would establish a national ecological and cultural preserve focused on one exemplary Bay tributary – from headwater stream to open Bay – as a representative of the larger watershed. It would:

- Conserve and restore the tributary ecosystem such that human uses are in optimal balance with natural processes, ensuring a vital, sustainable and clean future;
- Protect key natural resources and river shorelines along a core riparian area along the tributary;
- Demonstrate and apply the best in evolving stewardship practices on public and private lands throughout a resource conservation area encompassing the entire tributary watershed;
- Provide a series of opportunities for experiencing and learning about the transition of natural areas from headwaters to Bay and how human actions influence the health of the Bay; and
- Be fully dependent on a broad partnership approach to management.

Selection of Preferred Alternative

A draft Chesapeake Bay Special Resource Study and Environmental Impact Statement, including the alternatives described above, was available for public comment in summer 2003. The draft stimulated over 3,000 comments from the public by mail, fax, email and the internet, as well as at a series of public open houses. A summary of public comments is provided, beginning on page 61. The National Park Service used these comments to help formulate a preferred alternative for this study.

A final special resource study is required to “identify what alternative or combination of alternatives would in the professional judgment of the Director of the National Park Service be most effective and efficient in protecting significant resources and providing for public enjoyment.”² This standard guides the identification of a “preferred alternative.”

Several factors combine to make the Chesapeake Bay Special Resource Study different from typical “new area studies” – and ultimately shape the most

² Public Law 105-391.

effective and efficient approach for a National Park Service role in the Chesapeake:

1. As a natural and cultural resource and source of recreational opportunities, the Chesapeake's scope is immense in significance, size and diversity.
2. The region has a wide range and variety of established institutions involved in various aspects of resource conservation, interpretation and recreation, including the Chesapeake Bay Program's guidance of a multi-faceted regional strategy for restoring water quality.
3. Through an extensive partnership system of multiple sites – the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network – the National Park Service has a unique existing role in interpreting the Chesapeake, enhancing public access, and stimulating involvement in Bay restoration.
4. While there appears to be strong interest in the role a unit of the National Park System could play in contributing to Bay conservation and interpretation, there is not yet a site-specific park proposal within the study area.

These factors and other findings summarized on pages 63-65 point to a most effective and efficient approach combining elements of several alternatives in two principal outcomes:

The Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network should be enhanced and made permanent:

The existing partnership system of Chesapeake Bay Gateways represents the most comprehensive approach for visitors to experience the diversity of the Chesapeake Bay. The Gateways Network links Chesapeake sites throughout the watershed, enhancing their interpretation, improving public access to Bay resources, and stimulating citizen involvement in conservation. In addition to scores of sites are twenty designated water trails, extending well over 1100 linear miles – with outstanding potential for an integrated and nationally recognized Chesapeake Bay water trail system.

Though the Gateways Network exists today, under current law the National Park Service – the coordinating agency for the entire Network – would cease its involvement in 2008. This sunset date should be eliminated if the Gateways Network is to continue to function.

The National Park Service plays the core, integrating role in the Gateways Network: drawing together 140 independent sites in five states and the District of Columbia; coordinating overall planning for the Network with the states and other partners; providing technical and financial assistance to partner sites; and carrying out a range of Network-wide initiatives. The National Park Service role in the Gateways Network is unique – not duplicated by any other organization. However, it is fully consistent with legislation and precedent for key federal roles in the federal-state Chesapeake Bay watershed partnership.

Continuation of the Gateways Network and the National Park Service role is broadly supported by public and organizational comments – summarized as follows in comments by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources:

With millions of visitors coming to enjoy the Bay watershed each year . . . , a permanent commitment by the nation and NPS to the Gateways Network is instrumental to sound tourism, conservation and stewardship efforts. NPS's direct involvement in partnership with the states and regional and local conservation partners is critical. . . . The Bay is a vast resource representing several states, many diverse interests, multiple geographic locations, and a wide range of related sites and site types. The Gateways Network seems to be the most flexible option for providing for full recognition, assistance and interpretation of the vast array of sites that are related to the Bay. Furthermore, it seems the most efficient to implement, and the most fiscally responsible.

The Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network should be a permanent partnership system for experiencing the Chesapeake. For this to occur, alternative B would be implemented in its entirety: the Gateways Network would be designated a permanent program of the National Park System with an on-going funding commitment; creation of two partnership Chesapeake Bay interpretive/education facilities would be stimulated through two 1:1 matching grants (NPS grant share capped at \$2.5 million each); and the Gateways Network would enhance links to surrounding working landscapes.

Alternative B represents a remarkably efficient and effective approach to advancing public understanding and enjoyment of Chesapeake resources and stimulating resource conservation.

The park/reserve/preserve concepts (or combination of alternatives C, D & E) meet NPS criteria and fill a key gap in protection and public enjoyment of Bay resources:

While the Bay is large and diverse, with many ongoing protection and interpretation efforts (including the Gateways Network), some key gaps in those efforts remain. Those gaps relate to certain types of resources and themes – representative of the Bay – that are encompassed with the scopes of alternatives C, D and/or E.

At some time in the future, a unit of the National Park System encompassing either one or several of these alternative concepts could make a significant contribution to protection and public enjoyment of the Chesapeake Bay. While the alternatives are described in this study as individual concepts, many who commented on the draft study correctly observed that several concepts could be linked together. There are models for this at other locations within the National Park System, where several different sub-units are managed by the National Park Service, or a partner in association with the Park Service, as part of a larger unit. The sub-units typically protect and interpret key under-represented natural and cultural themes of the region. Existing park units neighboring the Bay (Fort McHenry National Monument, Colonial National Historical Park, and George Washington Birthplace, which each represent a narrow spectrum of Bay cultural themes) could be viewed as initial elements of such an approach.

However, there are no detailed, broadly supported site-specific proposals for any of alternatives C, D or E, or a combination thereof, at this time. As noted in the findings above, a finding on the feasibility of a potential future unit is wholly dependent upon site-specific analysis.

No further consideration and evaluation of these concepts as a potential Chesapeake Bay focused unit of the National Park System is necessary unless and until a specific proposal enjoying demonstrated state and local government, Chesapeake Executive Council³ and public support is advanced. Proposals suitable for future consideration would focus on those concepts (Alternatives C, D & E) and their core resources, or a combination of those concepts, determined through this study to preliminarily meet National Park Service criteria. Such proposals would clearly articulate how the key elements of the relevant concepts described in this study are met. The National Park Service would ultimately consider and offer a finding on any such proposal relative to new unit criteria – with a particular emphasis on feasibility and management alternatives – and this study’s findings and relevant concept descriptions.

³ The Chesapeake Executive Council – which guides the Chesapeake Bay Program – consists of the Governors of Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia, Mayor of the District of Columbia, Chair of the Chesapeake Bay Commission and Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.