

## Section 7:

# Environmentally Preferred Alternative

In accordance with Director's Order # 12, the National Park Service is required to identify the "environmentally preferred alternative" in all environmental documents, including environmental impact statements.

Identifying the environmentally preferred alternative is not the same as selecting a "preferred alternative" for implementation. The National Park Service is not required to select the environmentally preferred alternative as the final preferred course of action. The study's preferred course of action is described on pages 65-67.

An environmentally preferred alternative is determined by applying the criteria suggested in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, which is guided by the Council on Environmental Quality. The Council on Environmental Quality provides direction that "[t]he environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in Section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act," which considers:

- Fulfilling the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
- Assuring for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
- Attaining the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
- Preserving important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintaining, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
- Achieving a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
- Enhancing the quality of renewable resources and approaching the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources (National Environmental Policy Act, Section 101)."

## METHODOLOGY

Choosing the environmentally preferred alternative(s) for this study is difficult because the degree of the impact is largely dependent on the design and layout of the park unit, local conditions, and visitation levels, which have not been determined at this point of the study. For this programmatic study, the National Park Service study team evaluated:

- Changes to the levels of protection, conservation and education from the creation of a new park unit or implementation of a new program or policy,
- The effects of any new development plans, such as the construction of an interpretive center and related improvements; and
- The anticipated visitor levels and visitor uses typical of each park unit proposed.

Each alternative has a different focus or objective: the Enhanced Gateways Network is focused on telling the whole Bay story through a permanent system of more than 140 designated Chesapeake Bay Gateways; the Chesapeake Bay Estuary National Park focuses on the aquatic and estuarine character of the Chesapeake Bay; the National Reserve is directed towards the working maritime and agricultural landscape; and the National Ecological and Cultural Preserve highlights one exemplary Bay tributary and its watershed management. Therefore, a key consideration in choosing the environmentally preferred alternative is weighing the potential benefits or impacts associated with the protection, conservation, education and technical and financial assistance offered by each of the alternatives.

To assist in this evaluation, the gap analysis described in Section 3 was considered in determining intensity levels for the changes in levels of protection, conservation, education and technical and financial assistance. For instance, the gap analysis identified niches for potential park concepts in: (a) Expanded natural resource conservation, especially aquatic resources, in a focused area that complements and goes beyond current programs; and (b) enhanced recognition, conservation and interpretation of broad cultural resource areas, specifically working landscapes and traditional water dependent communities. While both niches reflect gaps, there is a higher degree of existing state and local programming providing significant protection to natural and aquatic resources than for working landscapes. Therefore, the degree of potential environmental benefit or gain might be higher for a concept protecting Bay landscapes than for a concept offering additional protection for aquatic resources. Another key consideration was the context of the impact. Does the program or policy have localized, bay-wide or watershed-wide benefits or impacts?

The study team also considered other potential impacts in selecting the environmentally preferred alternative, in which the gap analysis had no bearing on the intensity levels. The impacts generally resulted from capital improvements such as the construction of an interpretive center, anticipated visitor uses typical of each park unit, and an increase in visitation to the area.

## **ANALYSIS**

It is anticipated that the No Action Alternative, Alternative A, would not have considerable benefits compared to the other action alternatives. In comparison to Alternative B, an enhanced Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, the benefits are considerably less. All the action alternatives offer benefits in the areas of conservation, restoration, education, and interpretation and therefore, all alternatives are consistent with fulfilling criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 listed under Section 101 of NEPA.

The Enhanced Gateways Network (Alternative B) has by far the broadest geographic and thematic scope and approach to education, protection, and conservation. Alternative B addresses sites, resources and themes throughout the Bay watershed at more than 140 different sites. Especially in terms of interpretation, education and public access, this alternative goes farther than the others. In terms of conservation and restoration, this alternative may provide less direct impacts than a new single site-focused park unit, as most

Gateway sites already exist. However, expanding conservation assistance to certain Bay landscapes would provide a new degree of beneficial effects.

Alternative C, the Chesapeake Bay Estuary National Park, has a narrower focus – the conservation and interpretation of a specific representative example of the Bay’s aquatic, estuarine environment. While this concept goes beyond existing models in the Bay region, there are existing federal, state and local programs specifically focusing on conservation and restoration of aquatic resources. Thus, the conservation benefit may be incrementally less than that in alternatives D and E. Alternative C would provide distinct educational, interpretive and public access opportunities at the park. These site-specific benefits would not be as sizeable as the watershed-wide educational and interpretive opportunities of Alternative B.

Alternatives D (National Reserve) and E (National Ecological and Cultural Preserve) each have a narrower focus than B, but a broader one than C. In different ways, each of them incorporate land and water resources and natural and cultural themes, going beyond the solely natural systems focus of alternative C. Moreover, D and E encompass different strategies and emphases in conserving fairly broad sets of resources making up a whole landscape or sub-watershed (respectively). Because they address conservation and stewardship of land resources – the greatest source of Bay pollutants – they would have higher conservation benefits than alternative C. However, like alternative C, they both address a single contiguous area. Even if the areas are fairly large, the geographic and thematic scope of D and E remains small relative to alternative B.

The degree of adverse impacts associated with the new interpretive center(s) and associated improvements (in alternatives B, C, D & E) is dependent on existing site conditions. It is expected that impacts would be minimized to the extent practical through existing NPS practices and management policies. One noticeable difference exists when looking at the four action alternatives. Under Alternative B, the interpretive/orientation center would be located in an existing high-traffic area, most likely near or in an urbanized environment. The centers in the other alternatives would likely be in less developed areas, though not necessarily on undeveloped land. Thus, the adverse impact from the development of an interpretive center under Alternative B would most likely have less long-term, adverse impacts to the terrestrial and aquatic resources when compared to Alternative C, D, and E. Also, under Alternative B there may be more opportunities for enhancing, redeveloping, co-leasing, or restoring an existing site, which would be consistent with the NPS sustainability management practices.

Lastly, each of the action alternatives is expected to draw added tourism and increased visitation. Increased visitation would have beneficial impacts such as increased revenues to local businesses or adverse impacts such as added demands on existing transportation systems. The degree of the impact is highly dependent on the park unit’s carrying capacity and surrounding conditions; however, each alternative is expected to meet criterion 5 “Achieving a balance between population and resource use....”

One difference associated with increased visitation is the number of visitors anticipated under Alternative B would be dispersed amongst the 140+ Gateway sites, whereas, the visitor use in Alternatives C, D, and E would be

localized to an area that may not have been previously adapted to such uses. Under Alternative B, it is assumed that the carrying capacity and site amenities would be adequate to handle any increases to each site because the overall increased visitation would be dispersed over the entire Gateways Network; therefore, the impact would be negligible to the natural and socio-economic environment surrounding each site. In this case, there would be no impairment to the existing Gateways' resources and values as a result of implementing Alternative B.

## **ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE(S)**

At the conceptual level of this study, a clear distinction cannot be made between the overall benefit of Alternatives B, D and E. However, each of these three alternatives has greater environmental benefits than alternatives C and A. Accordingly, these three alternatives are the environmentally preferred alternatives.<sup>14</sup>

Alternative B provides conservation, interpretive, educational and public access benefits over a broader scope and regional context (watershed-wide) than the other alternatives. In addition, the construction of the interpretive centers and associated improvements under Alternative B would have fewer impacts to the environment because any construction/development would occur in more developed areas than in the other alternatives.

However, alternatives D and E, though not watershed-wide in scope, have broader scope and environmental benefits than alternative C (which is solely focused on the aquatic system) and alternative A, a core part of which expires in 2008. Moreover, these alternatives have a direct conservation benefit through land conservation strategies that is more specific than in alternative B.

Weighing the differing environmental benefits of alternatives B, D & E suggests the overall benefits may be roughly equivalent.

---

<sup>14</sup> It bears repeating that the environmentally preferred alternative is not the same as selecting a "preferred alternative" for implementation. The National Park Service is not required to select the environmentally preferred alternative as the final preferred course of action. This study's final preferred course of action is indicated on pages 65-67.