



# Foundation Document Overview

## Cape Lookout National Seashore

North Carolina



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Cape Lookout National Seashore Foundation Document*, contact:  
Park Headquarters at [CALO\\_Information@nps.gov](mailto:CALO_Information@nps.gov) or [www.nps.gov/caloc](http://www.nps.gov/caloc)  
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## Purpose



*THE PURPOSE OF CAPE LOOKOUT NATIONAL SEASHORE is to preserve the outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational resources and values of a dynamic, intact, natural barrier island system, where ecological processes dominate.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Cape Lookout National Seashore resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Cape Lookout National Seashore, 56 miles of barrier islands off the North Carolina coast, is an outstanding example of a dynamic, intact, natural barrier island system, where ecological processes dominate.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore is one of the few remaining locations on the Atlantic coast where visitors can experience and recreate in a primarily undeveloped, remote barrier island environment, which can be reached only by boat.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore preserves a diversity of coastal habitats, which support aquatic and terrestrial plant and animal life, including several protected species, such as piping plovers, American oystercatchers, sea turtles, black skimmers, terns, and seabeach amaranth.
- The free-roaming Shackleford Banks wild horse herd is legislatively protected within Cape Lookout National Seashore.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore contains a rich concentration of cultural resources that tell the history of people living at the edge of the sea, dating from approximately 3000 B.C. to the present.
- The Cape Lookout Lighthouse protected the nation's maritime commerce from one of the most significant hazards of the North Carolina coast—the Cape Lookout shoals.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore preserves Portsmouth Village, a National Register Historic District and unique, intact coastal Carolina community that played a critical role in the conduct of maritime commerce in North Carolina from the colonial period until the outbreak of the American Civil War.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore preserves the Cape Lookout Village, a National Register Historic District that was an important community for local families beginning with establishment of a life-saving station at the Cape in 1886.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore provides an outstanding natural laboratory for studying ecological and geological processes, as well as the effects of climate change and sea level rise on the Atlantic coast.
- Cape Lookout National Seashore provides a remote setting for visitors to experience unobstructed ocean views and one of the darkest publicly accessible areas along the East Coast for nighttime vantages.



# Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values (FRVs) are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

**Intact Barrier Island System Driven by Coastal Geologic Processes.** The seashore's 56 miles of barrier islands provides one of the best examples of a dynamic coastal barrier island system in the world. The natural interplay of winds, waves, tides, and currents continually restructures the barrier island system. With time, beaches and dunes shift location through erosion and accretion processes.

**Undeveloped Character.** One of the seashore's most distinguishing values is its primarily undeveloped qualities in contrast to neighboring barrier islands. There are no roads or bridges to the seashore's islands, which contributes to unique visitor opportunities. Visitors can witness the vast ocean viewshed by day and enjoy some of the darkest night sky vantages along the East Coast by night.

**Lighthouse and Other Federal Maritime Structures within the Cape Lookout Village National Historic District.** Structures and sites in the national historic district represent over two centuries of federal efforts to protect maritime commerce and human lives at the Cape, including the 1812 lighthouse (site), 1859 lighthouse and light station, 1886 U.S. Life-Saving Station, and the 1917 U.S. Coast Guard Station. The most iconic structure—the 1859 lighthouse—was the first of the four tall brick lighthouses built on the North Carolina coast.



**Shackleford Banks Horse Herd.** Shackleford Banks is one of the few places in the eastern United States that visitors can see wild horse herds. The Shackleford horses are protected by federal legislation.

**Portsmouth Village National Historic District.** Chartered in 1753 by the North Carolina Colonial Assembly, Portsmouth Village played a critical role in the conduct of maritime commerce in North Carolina from the colonial period until the American Civil War. It remains an intact village, featuring 21 historic buildings and structures.

**Birds.** The seashore's location along the Atlantic Flyway provides nesting, resting, and feeding habitat for a diverse assemblage of birds. In 1999, the American Bird Conservancy designated Cape Lookout National Seashore as a Globally Important Bird Area in recognition of the value the seashore provides to bird migration, breeding, and wintering.



**Sea Turtles.** Cape Lookout National Seashore is used as nesting habitat by four federally listed sea turtles: the loggerhead, green, leatherback, and Kemp's ridley. One other federally listed sea turtle species, the hawksbill, occupies the surrounding waters.

**Scientific Study.** The seashore's wealth and diversity of natural and cultural resources provides a premier location to study coastal adaptation. The seashore's resources also serve as a natural laboratory to study barrier island dynamics, climate change, and ecological changes over time.

**Recreational Opportunities and Experiences in a Remote Setting.** The seashore's recreational opportunities are nationally significant due to the variety and scale afforded by its unique geography and primarily undeveloped character. In addition, multigenerational activities, such as surf fishing, hunting, shelling, and beachcombing celebrate rich cultural traditions.

**Aquatic Habitat.** The seashore's wetlands, tidal marshes, seagrass beds, and freshwater ponds support nursery habitat and form the aquatic base of the barrier island ecosystem.

**Terrestrial Habitat.** The seashore's open beaches, dunes, shrub thickets, and maritime forest stabilize the island's low profile terrestrial existence and provide the ecological foundation for its unique flora and fauna.

**Human Connection to the Banks.** The human connection to the seashore's remote geographic setting provides a link to understanding peoples' ability to adapt to a changing coastal environment isolated from the mainland.

## Other Important Resources and Values

Cape Lookout National Seashore may contain other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

**Archeological Sites (prehistoric sites, shipwrecks, cemeteries).** The seashore retains an archeological legacy associated with survival at the edge of the sea. Sites include prehistoric occupation sites, cemeteries at Portsmouth Village Historic District and Shackleford Banks, and sunken ships and cargoes from colonial exploration to losses associated with German submarine attacks during the first months of World War II.

**Diamond City and Whaling Industry.** Shackleford Banks was the site of Diamond City, an abandoned whaling village on its east end that was one of the most distinctive of the pre-1900s “Down East” Outer Banks communities. Few remnants remain of the settlement; however, its story is exemplary of the region’s early commercial whaling industry and the attempt to sustain commerce at the edge of the sea.

**Seabeach Amaranth.** Seabeach amaranth is another sensitive species supported by the seashore’s unique natural ecosystem. This annual plant is typically found in suitable habitat of overwash fans, sand flats, and low dunes. It is a federally protected species and acts as an efficient sand binder capable of creating mini sand dunes.

