



# United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

## **Policy Memorandum 24-03**

To: National Park Service Senior Leadership  
Superintendents

From: Director

Subject: Managing National Parks in an Era of Climate Change

### **1. Purpose and Duration**

This Policy Memorandum clarifies direction and responsibilities for managing national park units and other National Park Service (NPS) administered areas as human-caused climate change increasingly alters resources and ecosystems and affects infrastructure and visitor experiences. It affirms NPS commitments and obligations to understand and respond to climate change impacts, in collaboration with Tribes, State and local governments, Federal agencies, other partners, NPS collaborators and stakeholders, and the public. This Memorandum supplements the following previously issued NPS climate change Policy Memoranda:

[Policy Memorandum 12-02](#) Applying National Park Service Management Policies in the Context of Climate Change;

[Policy Memorandum 14-02](#) Climate Change and Stewardship of Cultural Resources; and

[Policy Memorandum 15-01](#) Addressing Climate Change and Natural Hazards for Facilities.

This Memorandum will remain in effect until amended, superseded, or rescinded by the Director.

### **2. Background**

The NPS was established and the majority of its first century occurred under conditions of assumed and comparatively stable environmental conditions expected to largely mirror those of the historical past for decades to come. Meeting the NPS mission of preserving “unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System”<sup>1</sup> therefore meant preserving or restoring, to the extent feasible, the “natural condition” of natural resources,<sup>2</sup> and preserving, over the long term, the “features, materials, and qualities contributing to the significance of cultural resources.”<sup>3</sup> However, the ubiquitous effects of climate change demonstrate modern human impacts even in the most remote areas of the planet, and on all types of resources. Due to changes in temperature, precipitation, storm events, and other factors

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<sup>1</sup> See the [NPS Mission Statement](#).

<sup>2</sup> See *NPS Management Policies* (2006), [section 4.1](#).

<sup>3</sup> See *Management Policies*, [section 5.3.5](#).

experienced under accelerated warming caused by climate change, national parks will increasingly look and function differently in the decades to come. Environmental conditions driven by climate change now affect all aspects of NPS planning, management, and operations, and impact cultural and natural resources, sacred and iconic places, park infrastructure, visitor experiences, and public safety. Many consequences may be irreversible. NPS activities, programs, and investments must plan for and be able to respond to the novel challenges created by climate change.

### **3. Policy**

#### **3.1 Responsibilities for Proactive Climate Change Response**

NPS leaders and managers are expected to apply existing authorities and policies that promote climate change response to understand, prepare for, and adapt to, climate change impacts on park resources, infrastructure, and visitor experiences, including by proactively resisting, accepting, or directing those impacts. The NPS Organic Act ([54 USC 100101](#) *et seq.*) offers the broadest support for response by affirming NPS responsibility to address human-caused impacts to protect park resources and leave them unimpaired for future generations. Additionally, most park enabling legislation includes specific resource preservation and visitor experience-related responsibilities that require proactive attention by the NPS, including understanding and addressing climate change effects. [Management Policies](#) further affirm NPS responsibility to address human-caused impacts with proactive management when necessary and appropriate to protect and restore NPS values. Indeed, it is both consistent with and expected by NPS authorities and policies that managers purposefully understand and respond to the effects of climate change on NPS units, resources, and responsibilities. Park and program managers are directed and empowered to take actions including, but not limited to:

- implementing climate change adaptation actions;
- incorporating climate change response as a key element in planning documents;
- engaging in relevant dialogue about the impacts of climate change on parks and how the NPS is responding with park visitors, local communities, and virtual audiences;
- incorporating climate change response into guidance and resources associated with the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Archeology and Historic Preservation](#); and
- engaging in and supporting external planning efforts led by State and local governments, Tribes, community partners, NPS collaborators, cooperating organizations, and other Federal agencies, that undertake adaptation and restoration projects that will affect NPS resources.

The NPS must move forward in informed and purposeful ways, drawing from the best available science and experience from Indigenous peoples, to advance on-the-ground actions that help understand, adapt, mitigate, and communicate about climate change.

#### **3.2 Applying Climate Change Science in Planning and Decision Making**

In the face of climate change and related environmental challenges, NPS managers cannot expect the future to resemble the past. Instead, managers must anticipate and plan for a range of plausible future conditions based on climate change projections for their areas. This includes

conducting climate change vulnerability assessments; determining and implementing appropriate adaptation actions; ensuring that facility and infrastructure investments use sustainable designs and materials and incorporate climate change adaptation and resilience strategies; exploring new ways to provide visitor services; and using effectiveness monitoring and adaptive management practices to learn from our actions. In this context, park and program managers will incorporate, as a routine practice, high-quality information from observations of current climate change and future climate change projections into planning and decision making, using scenarios that span a range of potential outcomes whenever feasible, and ensuring consideration of the higher risk outcomes. As appropriate, NPS program managers should review relevant policies, such as Director's Orders, Reference Manuals, and Handbooks, to incorporate updates that may be required to provide guidance in the context of climate change. Guidance to consider future projections rather than past conditions and determine appropriate adaptation options is available in Service-wide documents (e.g., [NPS Climate Change Response Strategy](#), [Green Parks Plan, Planning for a Changing Climate](#)), and tools such as the [Resist-Accept-Direct \(RAD\) Framework](#) can also assist (also see section 4 below).

### 3.3 Managing Through Uncertainty Amid Continuous Change

While NPS management decisions are often necessarily made with incomplete information, climate change brings numerous additional sources of uncertainty. Although we know the climate is changing significantly, precisely how it will change, and by extension how it will affect park resources and values in the future is uncertain. Societal responses and landscape changes are uncertain. And while direct effects of climate change may be possible to envision, indirect and compounding effects are harder to anticipate and will bring surprises.

Climate change will thus present issues for which solutions in some cases are unclear or unknown. Consequently, managers should routinely and intentionally analyze the implications of projected climate change for resources, facilities, and visitor use and experience. If current or projected future climatic conditions are likely to cause unacceptable impacts<sup>4</sup> to park resources, managers should take anticipatory action using the best available science, Indigenous knowledge, and information, recognizing that decisions may be required despite uncertainty. Novel responses outside of traditional practices may be required, including significant interventions that involve proactive resource stewardship actions as well as divestment of activities that present unacceptable risk or are outside the feasible range of NPS management response. However, prior to applying novel approaches, NPS managers should conduct appropriate risk analyses, use best available science and Indigenous knowledge, consider the level of scientific uncertainty, consult with NPS leadership, Tribes, and appropriate stakeholders, and properly document analyses and decision rationales. For all adaptation actions, the NPS will assess effectiveness of the actions over time, and modify future actions as needed based on results and as new information becomes available. Where action is not feasible, the NPS will monitor, document, and communicate ongoing changes through its programs and activities.

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<sup>4</sup> See, [section 1.4.7.1](#), "Unacceptable Impacts," of *Management Policies*.

#### **4. Implementation Guidance and Tools**

Information to assist park managers in implementing the actions identified in this Memorandum are available at this [internal NPS site](#), which will continue to be updated with tools, guidance, and relevant case studies, and from park, regional, and program area subject matter experts and managers. In addition, a variety of training modules are available that support core competencies and development of specific skillsets applicable to the NPS climate change response responsibilities identified in this Memorandum.

#### **5. No Third-Party Enforceability**

This Memorandum is intended only to improve the internal management of the NPS and is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by a party against the United States, its departments, agencies, instrumentalities or entities, its officers or employees, or any other person.

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