

September 2009

NPS Natural Resource Condition Assessments (NRCAs)

Standards and Guidelines

What it is: A spatially explicit multi-disciplinary synthesis of existing scientific data and knowledge, from multiple sources, to help answer the question: what are current conditions for important park natural resources?

Expected Uses: NRCAs strive to provide a mix of new insights and useful scientific documentation about current resource conditions and some of the factors influencing those conditions (i.e., threats and stressors). A successful NRCA has practical value to park managers for their ongoing efforts to:

- 1) develop near-term strategies and priorities—given limited park staff and funding, what are some park areas and resources deserving their greatest attention right now;
- 2) engage in watershed or landscape scale resource partnerships and education efforts;
- 3) conduct formal planning to describe and quantify desired conditions for their most important resources, and to develop comprehensive strategies for how to best protect/restore those same resources;
- 4) report to “resource condition status” performance/accountability measures as instructed by the Department of Interior and the Office of Management and Budget

NRCA Standard Elements: All NRCAs share standard elements related to study design and reporting products. Within those general sideboards many important study details remain flexible, to be decided on a park by park (individual project) basis. Standard elements and project level flexibility are discussed elsewhere in greater detail. In summary, all NRCAs:

- *are multi-disciplinary (ecological) in scope*, though breadth and number of resources/indicators evaluated remains a project level decision
- *report on current conditions across the entire park*, though for practical reasons some park areas will be excluded from consideration
- *rely on existing data from NPS and other sources*, but field-based rapid assessment techniques can be used with prior approval
- *use hierarchical study frameworks* that include the following components: natural resource indicators; reference conditions; current condition reporting by indicators, by ecosystem characteristics, and by park areas
- *use the standard NRCA report outline* as the template to report key study findings
- *emphasize spatial analyses and reporting products* which are especially helpful for the primary types of expected uses (outlined above)

An NRCA Does:

- Deliver useful science-based information products into all levels of park planning (General Management Plans, Resource Stewardship Strategies, Implementation Plans)
- Highlight resource conditions and resource condition threat factors of likely interest or concern to park managers

An NRCA Does Not:

- Define a park's desired resource conditions
- Establish park resource management targets
- Recommend specific park management actions or strategies
- Give a single overall-condition score for park areas, unless a park requests this and it is part of the original project scoping and design
- Evaluate alternative futures (e.g., climate change scenario planning)
- Emphasize rigorous trend analysis, but less-formal trend estimation is appropriate (and desirable) to the extent it is supported by adequate data and credible study methods
- Report on conditions for lands and resources outside park boundaries, though they do consider regional/landscape resource condition influences on park-managed resources

Other NRCA Requirements:

- 1) Task agreements/contracts shall include standard "investigator shall" phrases that confirm a commitment to:
 - a) develop products that conform to NPS geospatial content/format standards;
 - b) prepare a report that conforms to NPS publication standards and follows the standard NRCA report outline.
- 2) Reports will be published in the national NRR publication series, but can optionally be published in a regional publication series if the regional guidelines match the national level guidelines.
- 3) An appropriate level of technical and administrative review is required before NRCA products are finalized. Region NRCA leads (or NPS staff designated by them) serve as Peer Review Manager to coordinate and oversee the peer review process, provide sign-off that peer review comments were adequately addressed, and prepare an archival file that documents important peer review activities and outcomes for a given NRCA project.
- 4) All NRCA study proposals, plans, and draft reports will be submitted for review and approval by both Region and WASO NRCA leads.