Contact Information
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The purpose of Assateague Island National Seashore is to preserve the outstanding Mid-Atlantic coastal resources of Assateague Island and its adjacent waters and the natural processes upon which they depend, and to provide high quality resource-compatible recreational opportunities.

Significance statements express why Assateague Island 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.

- The seashore is one of the largest and last surviving Mid-Atlantic barrier islands possessing a continuum of intact coastal habitats where the full range of natural processes occur with little or no human interference.

- The marine and estuarine waters within the seashore are a protected vestige of the high quality aquatic ecosystems that once were present throughout the Mid-Atlantic coastal region of the United States.

- The seashore’s habitats support a broad array of aquatic and terrestrial species, many of which are rare, uniquely adapted to life at the edge of the sea, and dependent on natural ecosystem processes undisturbed by humans.

- Amidst the highly developed Mid-Atlantic region, the seashore’s coastal resources provide unique opportunities for nature-based recreation, education, solitude, and inspiration.
Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values 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.

- Barrier Island Habitats and Species
- High Quality Waters
- Natural Coastal Processes
- Aquatic Habitats and Species
- Natural Coastal Environment
- Visitor Experiences at the Seashore

Assateague Island National Seashore contains 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.

- Horses
- Cultural Resources

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Island on the Move. Change is the only constant on Assateague Island as wind and water move and transform the land and its plant and animal communities. Adapting to change on a barrier island is the key to survival in this place where dynamic forces control the process of life.

- Aquatic Legacies. Assateague’s shoreline is a constantly shifting boundary between land and water where we connect with the rest of the world through a shared ocean resource that provides oxygen, food, habitat, livelihood, recreation, and glimpses of our past. There is just one intermingled and irreplaceable ocean that sustains these aspects of life on earth.

- People and Place. People have long relied on Assateague Island for survival, livelihood, community, and enjoyment. Those who have spent time on and around the island have changed it and been changed by it.

- Recreation and Stewardship. Assateague Island provides a diverse range of recreational opportunities that are compatible with the NPS dual mission of conservation and public access. Immersion in an unspoiled natural setting cultivates profound experiences and special memories, the foundation of a stewardship ethic.
Located along the Atlantic Ocean in Maryland and Virginia, Assateague Island is the largest natural barrier island ecosystem in the mid-Atlantic region that remains predominantly unaffected by human development. Within a three-hour drive of the Washington / Baltimore / Philadelphia metropolitan areas, the national seashore offers a setting in which visitors can experience a dynamic barrier island and pursue a multitude of recreational opportunities. The stated mission of the park is to preserve and protect “unique coastal resources and the natural ecosystem conditions and processes upon which they depend, provide high quality resource-based recreational opportunities compatible with resource protection, and educate the public as to the values and significance of the area.”

Assateague Island encompasses a 37-mile-long barrier island, adjacent marsh islands and waters in Maryland and Virginia, and the Barrier Island Visitor Center on the Maryland mainland. Approximately 50,000 acres of land and water are within the seashore’s boundaries. The island consists of three public areas: Assateague Island National Seashore (managed by the National Park Service), Assateague State Park (managed by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources) and Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

Assateague Island has been identified as one of the 25 national parks most at risk from the effects of global climate change. Accelerated sea level rise, more frequent and intense storms, rising temperatures, and changes in patterns of precipitation are all expected to drive significant ecological change. In 2017, the National Park Service completed a new general management plan for Assateague Island National Seashore that identifies how seashore resources and operations will be managed in concert with an increasingly dynamic barrier island landform.

Climate change adaptation is expected to play an increasingly important role in the future management of the seashore. Visitor use infrastructure will probably evolve to more sustainable designs and be relocated to more stable locations. Manipulations of the natural environment will be minimized to allow the island to continue to be shaped predominantly by natural coastal processes. Alternative transportation systems are planned to support and sustain recreational opportunities for park visitors. Collectively, these actions are expected to provide the highest degree of protection for barrier island resources, offer the greatest potential for enhanced coastal resiliency, and allow for sustained public use and enjoyment of seashore resources into the future.