



# Foundation Document Overview

## Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area

Kentucky and Tennessee



### Contact Information

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## Purpose



*The BIG SOUTH FORK NATIONAL RIVER AND RECREATION AREA was established to preserve the free-flowing condition of the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River and its tributaries, to enhance water quality, to provide diverse recreational opportunities, and to protect the unique scenic, natural, and cultural resources of the area, including the predominantly undeveloped and natural character of the gorge.*

## Significance

Significance statements express why Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area 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.

- Dramatic sandstone gorges, imposing bluff lines, some of the nation's largest water-crafted arches, rock shelters, and other notable geologic formations are found throughout Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.
- The Big South Fork, designated as Outstanding National Resource Water, is one of the largest remaining free-flowing rivers in the southeastern United States.
- Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area protects diverse aquatic and terrestrial habitats that represent the original components of the Cumberland Plateau ecosystem and support regionally and globally rare flora and fauna.
- The Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area contains numerous examples of human history in the Cumberland Plateau including thousands of rock shelters, settlements, farmsteads, mining sites, logging camps, and other resources representing the life and culture of the region.
- Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area offers exceptional public access to a broad range of land- and water-based recreational opportunities, providing a sense of discovery and adventure in a spectacular and scenic river gorge setting.



## 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.

- **The Big South Fork River System**
- **Geologic Features**
- **Scenic Gorge**
- **Recreational Opportunities**
- **Cultural Resources and History**
- **Biodiversity**



## 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.

- **Rocks and River.** Powerful geologic forces of sedimentation, uplifting, and erosion created features in the gorge through which the river flows, influencing the plants and animals that live there.
- **Preserving Diversity.** Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area contains unique natural resources that help tell the story of the area, and must be protected and preserved.
- **Land has Shaped the People; People have Shaped the Land.** Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area has a rich cultural history spanning approximately 10,000 years. The land of the Big South Fork region has influenced human activity, but has also been affected by human presence and use.
- **Recreate to Educate.** Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area offers diverse environmentally sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities for a diversity of people. Recreation and education are motivations for conservation.

## Description

Located in north central Tennessee and southeastern Kentucky, Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area encompasses just less than 125,000 acres of rugged terrain within the Cumberland Plateau. The area boasts 90 miles of scenic gorges and sandstone bluffs, is rich with natural and historic features and was established to provide visitors with a wide range of outdoor recreational activities. Together with the state and federal lands that share the north and western boundaries, the area offers a diversity of habitats in which plants and animals abound. Within the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area boundary, numerous pristine streams flow into the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River. Over time, this ceaseless moving water has carved the sandstones of the plateau into the impressive cliffs, arches, and chimneys found throughout the park. The Big South Fork of the Cumberland River (Big South Fork River) begins within the unit at the confluence of the New River and Clear Fork, and flows northward for approximately 49 miles. It is a free-flowing river for approximately 37 of the 49 miles, until it reaches Lake Cumberland.

The focal point of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area is the massive gorge, with its sheer bluffs at the gorge rim towering over wooded talus slopes and naturally fluctuating river (and its tributaries) below. The gorge, as defined by the enabling legislation, represents roughly one-half of the total acreage in the unit. The remaining acreage is considered the “adjacent area.” The landscape is dominated by upland and ravine forest communities, although a wide variety of specialized habitats are supported on floodplains, in protected coves and ravines, on moist, north-facing slopes, and on sandstone glades (sandstone caprock with dry, shallow soils).

Within the park, numerous creeks and streams join the erosive power of the Big South Fork River, resulting in deep ravines that have been carved into the surrounding sandstone.

This hydrology and other weathering processes have created an impressive array of cliff faces, arches, mesas, chimneys, and rock shelters throughout the park.

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area has a long human history spanning the last 10,000 years. From the prehistoric Paleo Indians to the coal miners of recent time, the park is an area with a rich cultural tapestry. Approximately 350,000 archeological artifacts have been found in the park, from American Indian projectile points to tools used by early European and American settlers. Both the Shawnee and Cherokee tribes have been historically associated with the Big South Fork area.

