Foundation Document Overview
Cumberland Island National Seashore
Georgia

Contact Information
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Significance statements express why Cumberland 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.

• Cumberland Island National Seashore is one of the Atlantic Coast’s most ecologically diverse barrier islands, where local variations in environmental conditions create extensive and unique communities across the island; from the beach and dune system on the east, through the interdune, freshwater wetland, and upland forest habitats in the interior, to the salt marsh on the west.

• Cumberland Island National Seashore contains a rich concentration of cultural resources that recount 4,000 years of human habitation and include a remarkable diversity of ethnic and social backgrounds. These pieces of the past—archaeological features, landscapes, architecture, artifact collections, people—cast a compelling backdrop to the island that draws visitors into the stories of this remote place.

• With almost 18 miles of pristine beach and one of the largest oak maritime forests remaining in the United States, Cumberland Island provides an unparalleled visitor experience.

• Cumberland Island National Seashore protects the largest designated wilderness area on an East Coast barrier island.

• Cumberland Island National Seashore’s physical isolation provides visitors opportunities to experience outdoor recreation in an uncrowded, undeveloped setting. Moreover, this isolation helps to preserve and protect the island’s fragile natural and cultural resources.
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.

- For 4,000 years, Cumberland Island’s landscapes and resources have attracted varied human groups, each of whom have shaped and influenced the island in different ways, leaving behind a complex array of historical and cultural legacies.

- Being an island of contrast that is both accessible and remote, and wild and manipulated; the seashore is one of the largest remaining intact barrier ecosystems on the east coast supporting a variety of fragile yet vibrant plant and animal communities that are always under siege from outside forces.

- Cumberland Island is a modern-day sanctuary for those seeking solitude, reflection, recreation, and inspiration.

- Since designation in 1972, the National Park Service has provided a vision for Cumberland Island National Seashore to preserve resources and serve the public while struggling to balance desires of various interest groups.

Interpretive Themes

- National register archeological districts and other significant archeological resources.
- National register historic districts and their contributing features.
- Intact barrier island system driven by coastal geological and biological processes.
- Live oak maritime forests.
- Pristine beach (scenic).
- Wilderness.
- Primitive and undeveloped character.
- An uncrowded setting that provides opportunities for both passive and active outdoor recreation.

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.

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Cumberland Island is approximately seven miles by boat from St. Marys, Georgia, and can only be reached by water transportation. Island visitation is serviced by a ferry that runs from the St. Marys visitor center to docks at Dungeness and Sea Camp on the island. The park’s general management plan limits visitation to approximately 300 people a day. Recreational opportunities at Cumberland Island include walking and hiking, camping, beachcombing, swimming, wildlife viewing, seeking solitute, and visiting the park’s historic sites. The Cumberland Island Wilderness Area encompasses most of the northern half of the island.

The national seashore has the greatest diversity of habitats and biotic communities of any of Georgia’s coastal islands. Extensive Spartina marshes and tidal creeks cover the western shoreline, providing highly productive estuarine nursery and feeding grounds for juvenile fish, shrimp, crabs, and other invertebrates. Upland forest communities comprise a large portion of the island. Oak and pine dominate most mature forests and saw palmetto is a common understory plant. Additionally, the island has a sizeable acreage of scrub/shrub habitat supporting a variety of plant species.

Cumberland Island’s historic and prehistoric sites reflect its 4,000 years of human habitation that include American Indian life, Spanish missions, colonial fortresses, agricultural plantations, military occupation, enslaved Africans, vacation retreats, African American communities, remote lifestyles, maritime endeavors, and grand estates. The national seashore has four historic districts and two archeological districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places. They are significant with respect to archeology, architecture, community planning, agriculture, landscape architecture, leisure/resorts, religion, and/or social/humanitarian history.