Foundation Document Overview
El Malpais National Monument
New Mexico

Contact Information
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Significance statements express why El Malpais National Monument 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.

- **Volcanic Processes**: El Malpais protects many lava flows, young and old, that are home to a rich diversity of associated volcanic geologic features including one of the longest lava tube systems in the world.

- **Caves**: El Malpais National Monument preserves a high density and diversity of ecologically significant lava tube caves, including the southernmost ice caves in the United States. Access to a number of these caves provides a rare self-guided recreational and educational experience.

- **Lava-influenced ecosystem**: Lava-influenced environmental conditions have produced uncommon vegetation associations, unusual growth forms, and plant communities sheltered from modern disturbances.

- **Lava-influenced cultural landscape**: El Malpais preserves and protects a cultural landscape influenced by volcanic landforms, including the Chacoan great house community of Las Ventanas, ancient and historic trail networks, basalt architecture, and ritual landscapes.

- **Wilderness**: The wilderness of El Malpais National Monument, a vast volcanic landscape, provides opportunities for inspiration and solitude, physical and navigational challenges, and scientific discovery.

**El Malpais National Monument** preserves, protects, and interprets natural and cultural resources that are an integral part of a volcanic wilderness that includes the Grants Lava Flow and the Chacoan great house community of Las Ventanas.
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.

- Lava surface features.
- Lava subsurface features.
- Unusual vegetation.
- Archeology and other heritage resources.

El Malpais National Monument 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.

- Wilderness character.
- Other heritage resources.
- Recreation and education.

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.

- The complex geologic history of volcanic activity at El Malpais National Monument has created an unusually diverse landscape with unique ecosystems.
- The lava tube caves of El Malpais have drawn people to them for millennia and today provide outstanding opportunities for recreation and exploration.
- The El Malpais area has a long history of occupation by more than one cultural group at a time; this history of interaction and adaptation has created, and continues to support, a rich cultural continuum.
- The many conditions and unusual environments of El Malpais National Monument have created a volcanic wilderness, providing varied opportunities for exploration, discovery, and solitude.
The primeval black basalt terrain of El Malpais was created by volcanic forces over the past million years. Eruptions of lava from dozens of shield volcanoes and cinder cones, as recently as 2,500 years ago, created a complex mosaic of lava flows, lava tube cave systems full of delicate minerals and perennial ice, and other notable geologic formations. The monument preserves volcanic geology and unique habitats such as pygmy pine forests, short-grass prairies and some of the oldest Douglas fir trees on the planet.

The weather at El Malpais is dynamic and changes greatly over the span of hours, weeks, and seasons. Daily temperatures swing roughly 30°F from night lows to afternoon highs. Spring is notoriously dry and windy, with gusts up to 60 miles per hour not uncommon. Summer is the hottest part of the year, before summer monsoon moisture arrives; high winds are less common, but heat builds quickly out on the black lava of the Malpais. The winter brings cold night lows sometimes reaching -20°F and highs usually above freezing.

People have interacted with the lava flow landscape of El Malpais for more than 10,000 years. From prehistory to the present, the rugged topography of El Malpais has dominated Indian, Spanish, and American activities. Despite cultural differences, common threads link, dominate, and dictate living patterns in El Malpais. Climatic conditions, vegetative covering, the boom-and-bust cycle of the mining, timber, and railroad industries have all influenced and molded the interaction of the Indian, the Hispanic, and European-American.

Enjoying vast panoramic views, standing on an ancient cinder cone, or exploring the depths of a lava tube cave brings an experience like no other. El Malpais offers recreational opportunities that range from scenic drives and self-guided trails to remote wilderness and underground exploration.