Great Smoky Mountains National Park is located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains and straddles the border between North Carolina and Tennessee. The park encompasses more than 800 square miles and is dominated by ancient mountains, with elevations ranging from 850 feet to 6,643 feet at Clingmans Dome. The park is world-renowned for the diversity of its plant and animal life, beautiful scenery, and the size and integrity of the wilderness sanctuary within its boundaries. More than 19,000 species have been documented in the park. No other area of equal size in a temperate climate can match the park’s diversity of plants, animals, and invertebrates. This is evident in the park’s status as the core unit of one of America’s few International Biosphere Reserves (1988) and its designation as a World Heritage Site (1983). The park also preserves one of the largest collections of historic Appalachian log structures, and maintains more than 800 miles of trails, including a section of the Appalachian Trail.

The park is situated within a day’s drive of more than half the population of the United States, and more than 9 million visitors come to the park annually to enjoy its resources. They come from local communities, the region, the nation, and from across the world, making the park one of the most visited national parks in the country. Hence, the park contributes to the economic vitality of the surrounding communities and the region. Throughout time, many people have maintained close connections to the Great Smoky Mountains. Private citizens, civic groups, and even school children, worked tirelessly to raise funds for land acquisition and establishment of the park. This grassroots dedication continues today—the park benefits from one of the largest volunteer cadres in the national park system. Volunteers and partnerships with public, private, and nonprofit groups for education, scientific research, and stewardship of park resources are integral to achieving the purpose of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

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**Significance**

Significance statements express why Great Smoky Mountains National Park 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.

**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.

- **Air and Water – Sustaining the Health of the Smokies**
- **A Living Laboratory and Outdoor Classroom**
- **Ancient Mountain Ecosystems**
- **Backcountry and Wilderness Experiences**
- **Biodiversity – Wondrous Variety of Life**
- **Connections**
- **Enduring Cultural Ties to the Land**
- **Journeys**
- **Partnerships, Volunteerism, and Stewardship**
- **Scenic Beauty**

**Great Smoky Mountain National Park**

Preserves a vast expanse of the southern Appalachian Mountains ecosystem including its scenic beauty, extraordinary diversity of natural resources, and rich human history, and provides opportunities for the enjoyment and inspiration of present and future generations.

**Significance Purpose**

Great Smoky Mountains National Park preserves a vast expanse of the southern Appalachian Mountains ecosystem including its scenic beauty, extraordinary diversity of natural resources, and rich human history, and provides opportunities for the enjoyment and inspiration of present and future generations.

**Biodiversity and Science.** The Great Smoky Mountains are world-renowned for the diversity of plant and animal species found in the park due to the variety of elevations, landforms, climates, and vegetation communities—representing forest types such as those that exist from North Georgia to Maine. Old growth, ancient forests, outstanding natural waters, and rare species found only in the park are some of the unique natural attributes of the park. This makes it an exemplary outdoor laboratory for the study of and education about the ecosystem processes of the southern Appalachian Mountains. And consequently, the park is one of the most researched in the national park system.

**Vestiges of Human History.** Humans have lived in and around the park for more than 9,000 years. The park preserves a significant number of archeological sites, historic structures, and other vestiges of human interaction with the land. The time periods represented by these resources include American Indian, Appalachian mountain settlement, and early National Park Service / Civillian Conservation Corps (CCC) eras.

**Philanthropy and Stewardship.** The park was established through the efforts of private philanthropists, local residents, and community leaders. The park was stitched together through the sacrifices of families from North Carolina and Tennessee whose private lands were acquired to create a new kind of “National Park in the East.” Their connections to the land endure and are demonstrated by strong advocacy and stewardship of the park today.

**Close to Home.** Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the largest mountainous park east of the Mississippi River and is one of the most visited national park units. The park lies within a day’s drive of more than half the U.S. population and thus offers the opportunity for tens of millions of people to have a national park experience close to home while also drawing visitors from around the world.

**Scenic Qualities.** The Great Smoky Mountains exhibit the finest example of the ruggedness, magnitude, height, and scenic grandeur of the southern Appalachian Mountains, including 16 peaks over 6,000 feet. Visitors are drawn to a variety of park features, including waterfalls, historic landscapes, panoramic mountain vistas, and the changing of the seasons.