Foundation Document Overview
Joshua Tree National Park
California

Contact Information
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Significance statements express why Joshua Tree 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.

The following significance statements have been identified for Joshua Tree National Park. (Please note that the sequence of the statements does not reflect the level of significance.)


2. Outstanding examples of Mojave and Colorado Desert landscapes that converge at Joshua Tree National Park create a biologically rich system of plant and animal life characterized by iconic Joshua tree woodlands, native palm oases, and vast expanses of creosote scrub that are uniquely adapted to desert conditions. The park also contributes significantly to the connectivity of open lands and large protected areas across the California desert.

3. Joshua Tree National Park provides accessible and diverse opportunities in a remote desert to large and burgeoning urban populations.

4. Joshua Tree National Park preserves a rich array of prehistoric, historic, and contemporary resources that demonstrate the integral connection between desert ecosystems, land use, and human cultures.

5. Joshua Tree National Park lies along one of the world’s most active earthquake faults, the San Andreas Fault. Geologic processes, including tectonic activity, have played and continue to play a major role in shaping the mountains, valleys, and basins of the park.

6. Joshua Tree National Park offers unparalleled opportunities for research of arid land ecosystems and processes, adaptations of and to desert life, sustainability, and indications of climate change. The proximity of the park to urban regions of Southern California and Nevada enhances its value for scientific research and education.

7. Huge, eroded monzogranite boulder formations are world-renowned natural features that provide unique aesthetic, educational, and recreational opportunities for Joshua Tree National Park visitors.

8. Geologic, climatic, and ecological processes create scenic landscapes unique to deserts and fundamental to the character of Joshua Tree National Park.

**Joshua Tree National Park preserves and protects the scenic, natural, and cultural resources representative of the Colorado and Mojave deserts’ rich biological and geological diversity, cultural history, wilderness, recreational values, and outstanding opportunities for education and scientific study.**
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 following fundamental resources and values have been identified for Joshua Tree National Park:

- Oases and other riparian areas
- Habitat for the desert tortoise
- Interconnectivity of California desert lands
- Biological diversity and healthy ecosystem function
- Wilderness values and wilderness accessibility
- Recreational opportunities and values
- Night sky
- Clean and breathable air
- Natural quiet (soundscape)
- Prehistoric sites and ethnographic resources relating to American Indian inhabitants, including the type site for Early Pinto culture
- Historic and ethnographic resources related to European American inhabitants
- History of the desert preservation movement
- Museum collections of archives, natural history specimens, and archaeological artifacts, including the Campbell Collection
- Geological resources
- Hydrological resources
- Desert landforms
- Ever-expanding knowledge base
- Opportunity to understand, apply, and share this knowledge to benefit the park and beyond
- Recreational activities centered around the boulders and rock formations
- Viewsheds
- Access to scenic vistas
- Visibility

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.

The following interpretive themes have been identified for Joshua Tree National Park:

- Joshua Tree National Park encompasses two desert ecosystems within its boundaries; the higher, cooler Mojave Desert in the northwestern portion of the park merges with the Colorado Desert, a region of the lower, warmer Sonora Desert, creating an unusual ecological transition zone rich in desert biodiversity.
- The Joshua tree, with its iconic shape and adaptations, is a perfect species to help us understand the interdependence of organisms living in the desert; it is an important symbol and indicator species of the Mojave Desert. Other desert plants and animals, such as the desert tortoise, creosote bush, and kangaroo rat, demonstrate creative solutions to the problems of desert survival.
- The park area has been occupied since the early Holocene period by Native American groups. Habitation and ceremonial sites, petroglyphs, and bedrock mortars remind us that human cultures can adapt successfully to life in a desert environment.
- Historic properties from the late 1800s through the 1960s offer evidence for the era of prospectors, miners, cattle ranchers, and homesteaders. These popular visitor destinations help depict the challenges of rural life in an arid environment. The industry and resourcefulness of desert homesteaders, such as the William F. Keys family, in this challenging desert environment provide a compelling view of the desert’s past.
- Mountain ranges, desert basins, and massive rock outcrops were created by dynamic processes such as plate tectonics, volcanism, earthquakes, and erosion.
Joshua Tree National Park lies along the east-west transverse ranges of the Little San Bernardino Mountains in southern California. The southern boundary of the park follows the base of these mountains along the northern edge of the Coachella Valley; the northern boundary is defined by the Morongo Basin. Ecologically, Joshua Tree National Park lies at the convergence of two deserts—two large ecosystems whose characteristics are determined primarily by elevation. Below 3,000 feet, the Colorado Desert encompasses the eastern part of the park and features natural gardens of creosote bush, ocotillo, and cholla cactus. The special habitat of the Joshua tree is found in the higher, more moist, and slightly cooler Mojave Desert. In addition to Joshua tree forests, the western part of the park also includes some of the most interesting geologic displays found in California’s deserts.

Given its location along a transition line between two desert ecosystems, the park is home to a fascinating diversity of desert plants and animals. There are more than 900 species of flowering plants. The park includes five fan palm oases, which are the few areas where surface water occurs naturally. The oases also support vegetation and wildlife distinct from other species found in the park. Highly diverse fauna, including 250 species of birds, have been recorded at the park, as have many unique species of reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and invertebrates. Some examples include the desert tortoise, the California tree frog, the desert bighorn sheep, and a species of tarantula that is found only in the Joshua tree plant community.

The park includes a rich and diverse cultural history. Human occupation dates to the early Holocene period, with what is known as Pinto culture; human occupation continues throughout the historical era with tribes known today as Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, Mojave, and Serrano. The park preserves sites and materials associated with these four overlapping ethnographic native cultures. In the late 19th century, European American surveyors, cattlemen, miners, and homesteaders began to arrive and, alongside native peoples, created a set of enduring social and cultural legacies for these lands. Historic sites preserve information on the history of the processing of gold ore, cattle ranching, rustling, and homesteading of the southwestern deserts.

In 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established Joshua Tree National Monument as a unit of the national park system. Congress designated 429,690 acres of the monument as wilderness and 37,550 acres as potential wilderness in 1976. Then, in 1984, the monument was designated as part of a biosphere reserve system. In 1994, the California Desert Protection Act added 234,000 acres (including 163,000 acres of new wilderness) to the park, and redesignated the area as Joshua Tree National Park. The park boundary currently contains over 770,000 acres in federal ownership and approximately 20,000 acres of nonfederal lands.

The park lies within both San Bernardino and Riverside counties, approximately 100 miles from the Los Angeles metropolitan area—more than 18 million people live within a three-hour drive of the park. The natural desert expanse of the park provides ideal conditions for campers, photographers, star gazers, naturalists, as well as anyone seeking space for quiet introspection, exploration, or outdoor learning. The extensive granite rock outcrops, boulder piles, desert mountain ranges, and canyons create a world-class destination for rock climbers, as well as hundreds of miles of scenic trails for hikers and equestrians.