



# Foundation Document Overview

## Rocky Mountain National Park

Colorado

May 2013



### Contact Information

For more information about the Rocky Mountain National Park Foundation Document,  
Contact: [romo\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:romo_superintendent@nps.gov) or 970-586-1200

Or write to: Superintendent, Rocky Mountain National Park, 1000 Highway 36, Estes Park, CO 80517-8397

## Purpose



*The purpose of ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK is to preserve the high-elevation ecosystems and wilderness character of the southern Rocky Mountains within its borders and to provide the freest recreational use of and access to the park's scenic beauties, wildlife, natural features and processes, and cultural objects.*

## Significance

Significance statements express why Rocky Mountain 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.



- Rocky Mountain National Park provides exceptional access to wild places for visitors to recreate and experience solitude and outstanding scenic beauty. Trail Ridge Road, the highest continuous paved road in the United States, and the extensive trail system bring visitors to the doorstep of a variety of wilderness-based recreational opportunities.
- Fragile alpine tundra encompasses one-third of Rocky Mountain National Park, one of the largest examples of alpine tundra ecosystems protected in the contiguous United States.
- Glaciers and flowing fresh water carved the landscapes of Rocky Mountain National Park. The park is the source of several river systems, including the Colorado River and the Cache la Poudre, Colorado's first and only designated wild and scenic river.
- The dramatic elevation range within the park boundary, which spans from 7,600 feet to 14,259 feet and straddles the Continental Divide, allows for diverse terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, varied plant and animal communities and a variety of ecological processes. The park is designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural (UNESCO) international biosphere reserve and globally important bird area, with portions of the park's montane, subalpine, and alpine ecosystems managed as research natural areas for scientific and educational purposes.
- The mountainous landscape of Rocky Mountain National Park has drawn people to the area for thousands of years. Visitors can see remnants of the different ways people have used this land over time, ranging from prehistoric big game drives to dude ranching to recreational tourism.

## 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 fundamental resources and values for Rocky Mountain National Park are:

- **Access to wild places** — The exceptional access to wild places available in Rocky Mountain National Park increases the relevancy of the park and fosters stewardship by providing urban escape, recreational opportunities, and linking visitors back to nature. The park's high-quality roads, trails, and shuttle systems bring visitors to the doorstep of wilderness and help support a high quality visitor experience.
- **High-elevation Ecosystems** — The high-elevation ecosystems of Rocky Mountain National Park represent a dynamic interaction of southern Rocky Mountain landscapes. The park's alpine tundra, a component of this confluence, is iconic throughout the Intermountain West and holds international significance.
- **Wilderness character** — Ninety-five percent of Rocky Mountain National Park is designated as wilderness, and this vast and steep landscape strongly exemplifies the qualities that comprise wilderness character. The largely pristine and primitive landscape provides opportunities for personal challenge and a natural haven for flora and fauna to thrive.
- **Headwaters of the Continental Divide** — Headwaters provide a source of clean fresh water to four major river systems, including a 14-mile wild segment of the Cache la Poudre Wild and Scenic River, the Big Thompson River, and the iconic Colorado River. Water has defined the landscapes of the park and is integral to the three major ecosystems (alpine, subalpine, and montane) and some of the park's rarest habitats (alpine lakes, fens, bogs, riparian willow and aspen communities). Headwaters lakes and streams support unique communities of aquatic, riparian, and terrestrial species.

## Fundamental Resources and Values

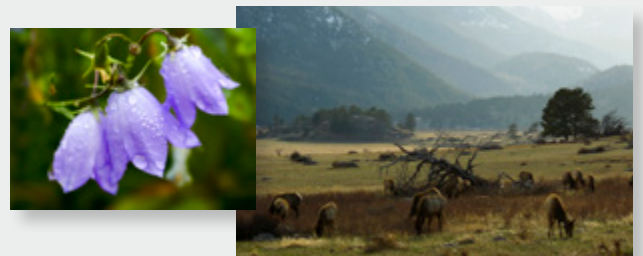
*(continued)*

- **Ability to experience a wide variety of recreational opportunities** — Rocky Mountain National Park is a premier Colorado destination that provides an exceptionally wide range of recreational experiences for a diverse group of users. Diverse visitor opportunities can include high elevation experiences along the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, strolls around Bear Lake, climbs up lofty Longs Peak, and wildlife viewing and scenic driving along Trail Ridge Road.
- **Traces of human footprints on the landscape** — Rocky Mountain National Park's landscape has been a magnet for people through time. Visitors can still experience the remnants of these peoples' diverse uses, ranging from Paleo-Indian big game drives, to extractive activities and dude ranching, to early tourism and recreational activities that led to the popular support for the area's designation as a national park.

## Other Important Resources and Values

Rocky Mountain National Park 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.

- **Beaver Meadows Visitor Center** — Beaver Meadows is considered one of the four most significant visitor centers produced during the Mission 66 era and was designated a national historic landmark in 2001. The building was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright's studio, Taliesin Associated Architects, during the critical time following Wright's death in 1959. The 1967 visitor center expresses Wright's blending of modern architecture and modern construction materials with the surrounding environment and use of indigenous natural materials.



# Description

Established by Congress on January 26, 1915, Rocky Mountain National Park encompasses 265,761 acres or 415 square miles of the scenic southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Nearly one-third of the park is above treeline, or higher than 11,400 feet in elevation. Seventy-two named peaks rise above 12,000 feet, with the high point being the expansive summit of Longs Peak at 14,259 feet.

The mountains provide Rocky Mountain National Park with its sense of wonder and inspiration, and support a diversity of ecosystems, including montane, subalpine, and alpine biological communities. Rocky Mountain National Park ranks as one of America's premier wildlife watching destinations, showcasing elk, bighorn sheep, mule deer, moose, black bears, coyotes, cougars, eagles, hawks, ptarmigan, and scores of smaller animals.



The lands now known as Rocky Mountain National Park have been home to humans for at least 10,000 years. The park's archeology and historic structures environment illustrates the history of the park from American Indian use, to homesteader ranches, to its growth through the rustic phase which includes work by the Civilian Conservation Corps, and up to the Mission 66 period when parks were being updated to keep up with the burgeoning tourism industry that arrived after World War II ended.

In 1986, 75 miles of the Cache la Poudre River were designated as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. In 2009, Congress designated the Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness Area, covering about 252,085 acres, or 95% of the park.

Rocky Mountain National Park's wide range of elevations and habitats offer a wide variety of opportunities for visitors, including hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, frontcountry and backcountry camping, mountain climbing, angling, bird-watching, photography, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. Visitors can also drive Trail Ridge Road, which topping out at 12,183 feet is the highest, continuous, paved road in the United States. In 2012, a total of 3,394,326 recreational visits were recorded in the park, making Rocky Mountain National Park the 23rd most visited park unit, and the 5th most visited national park in the national park system.

