

National Parks and Airports

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Who is the National Park Service?

- There are 378 units in the National Park System, in every state of the nation, including about twenty different designations from National Historic Sites to National Battlefields to National Recreation Areas to National Monuments to National Parks. All units are informally referred to as "parks" and are governed by the same laws and policies, unless specifically provided otherwise by law.
- All units have the word "National" in their title to emphasize the **national significance** of each site individually, and as part of the National Park System.
- The mission of the National Park Service is: *"to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."* (Title 16 US Code Section 1 *et seq.*) Preventing impairment or derogation of park resources and values takes precedence over providing for visitor use and enjoyment if conflicts arise.
- Parks are special places, often referred to as "national treasures" and "the nation's natural and cultural heritage." As such, there are levels of protection for parks that may place more restrictions on people and their use of the parks than for other places. Natural sounds, peace, solitude, and tranquility are important parts of what the parks seek to preserve.

What is the Interest of the National Park Service in Aviation and Airports?

- The National Park Service uses aviation for essential mission-related management needs, such as search and rescue, firefighting, research, resource management, and maintenance. The National Park Service employs pilots, helitack crews, and other aviation personnel. National Park Service aviation operations follow agency guidelines and approval processes designed to minimize impacts on park resources and visitors.
- The history and heritage of American aviation are preserved, protected and promoted by the National Park Service at a variety of sites such as Wright Brothers National Historic Park, Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historic Site, Indian Dunes National

Lakeshore, and a new site honoring the Tuskegee Airmen.

- Airports are located within or adjacent to many National Park units (for example, Grand Teton, Denali, Fort Vancouver, Glen Canyon, Everglades, Grand Canyon).
- Air tours and other sightseeing flights can provide appropriate access or vantage points to certain areas of some National Park units. However, there is no activity or visitor use of parks that is appropriate in all areas under all circumstances. All park activities and visitor uses are restricted in some way to preserve the park's resources and values *unimpaired*.
- The National Park System includes some of the quietest places on earth, and the **natural soundscape** is an important resource in some park units. If not properly managed, aviation use can adversely impact park soundscapes and the opportunity for visitors to experience natural sounds in an unimpaired condition.
- Aviation is only one source of noise in parks. The National Park Service is taking steps to address all sources of noise in parks to help to preserve or restore park soundscapes. Other noise sources include automobiles, buses, watercraft, snowmobiles, generators, audio devices, and National Park Service equipment.
- FAA Advisory Circular 91-36c requests all pilots to maintain an altitude of at least 2,000 feet above ground level over national parks and other noise sensitive areas. Also, parts of parks or entire parks are congested areas with large numbers of visitors that may not be readily visible from the air (Federal Aviation Regulation 91.119(b)).

What is "Natural Quiet" and How Does It Relate to Aviation?

- "Natural quiet" is defined as the *natural ambient sound conditions* found in national parks. It is also referred to as the **natural soundscape**, because, although it can include silence, solitude, and tranquility, it also includes the entire symphony of natural sounds in a park, such as the roaring of waterfalls, the chirping of birds, the howl of a distant wolf, the rustle of wind in trees, and the buzzing of insects. Natural quiet does not, however, include human-produced sounds (unless those sounds are integral to the purpose of a specific park, such as historical sounds of battle at a civil war battlefield).
- **Executive Memorandum, April 22, 1996, President William J. Clinton:** *"Aircraft flying at low altitudes over national parks can, if not properly managed, mar the natural beauty of the parks and create significant noise problems as well. The intrusion of such aircraft can interfere with...visitors' enjoyment of parks, including the ability to experience natural sounds without interruption from mechanical noise. ...It is important to the future of parks to address these problems quickly and in a fair and reasonable manner. ... Therefore, to the extent permitted by law, I hereby direct the Secretary of Transportation in consultation with the heads of relevant departments and agencies to continue the ongoing development of rules as set out below to address*

overflights of the National Parks: ... 4. Develop appropriate educational and other materials for the public at large and all aviation interests that describe the importance of natural quiet to park visitors and the need for cooperation from the aviation community. This guidance shall also recognize that in some parks, air tours provide important access to approved areas in those parks, especially with regard to the disabled communities."

What Are National Park Service Concerns Regarding Airports?

- Approach and departure patterns, and increases in other air traffic, including air tours, that may be associated with the airport. Depending upon the specific airport, aircraft, and park, increased overflights and noise may occur at parks at considerable distances from the airport.
- Airport lighting and other aspects of airport operations that may be visible, or even distracting, from park viewpoints.
- Airport growth that may affect park visitation in terms of numbers of people, modes of transportation, timing of visitation, and crowding.
- Impacts and safety concerns regarding wildlife (especially birds), and air and water pollution.
- Pilot education about noise and safety.

National Park Service Assistance on Airport Environmental Issues

- The National Park Service has a responsibility under the National Environmental Policy Act to raise its concerns early in the planning process for airports and other actions, when it is easiest and most effective to make changes.
- The National Park Service offers its special expertise and jurisdiction to assess the impacts of proposals and alternatives on park resources and visitors.
- The National Park Service also offers the services of experts under contract to assist airport proponents in planning and designing airports and associated operations to prevent or mitigate impacts on park resources and visitors.
- The National Park Service offers assistance with appropriate noise monitoring.
- The National Park Service offers a wide array of educational materials and services concerning the parks in the airport vicinity, as well as educational information for pilots to aid in mitigating impacts as well as increasing appreciation of the park from the air, as appropriate.