



Foundation Document Overview

Gulf Islands National Seashore

Florida/Mississippi



Contact Information

For more information about the *Gulf Islands National Seashore Foundation Document*, contact: guis_superintendent@nps.gov or (850) 934-2600 or write to:
Superintendent, Gulf Islands National Seashore, 1801 Gulf Breeze Parkway, Gulf Breeze, FL 32563

Purpose



GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE preserves and interprets an interconnected system of coastal defense fortifications, barrier islands, wilderness, and coastal and marine ecosystems in Mississippi and northwest Florida, while providing for public use and enjoyment.



Significance

Significance statements express why Gulf Islands National Seashore 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.

- Gulf Islands National Seashore possesses dynamic beach ecosystems, a diversity of wildlife, and scenic character that are publicly accessible and provide a striking contrast to the surrounding urban development of the northern Gulf Coast.
- Gulf Islands National Seashore exhibits the natural biologic and geologic processes of the dynamic and rapidly changing barrier islands, which are interconnected along 160 miles of the northern Gulf Coast.
- Horn and Petit Bois Islands, the only nationally designated barrier island wilderness areas on the Gulf Coast protected by the National Park Service, provide opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation.
- Gulf Islands National Seashore contains one of the most complete collections of forts and structures relating to the evolution of seacoast defense in the United States. Publicly accessible sites represent a continuum of development from the Spanish colonization of the 18th century through World War II.
- Gulf Islands National Seashore contains more than 120,000 acres of submerged land and open water, protects marine processes and ecosystems, and provides opportunities for water-based recreation.



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.

- **Terrestrial and Marine Ecosystems.** Terrestrial and marine ecosystems in Gulf Islands National Seashore are extremely diverse. More than 80% of the national seashore is marine or open-water habitat, including seagrass beds, tidal salt marshes, bayous, and deeper open-water areas. The seashore supports habitat for more than 400 fish species and provides essential fish habitat and important nursery habitat. Terrestrial habitats include newly formed and relict sand dunes, live oak forests, wet pine flatwoods, and maritime forests. More than a dozen federally listed threatened and endangered species are present in the national seashore. Wildlife species of special concern include four sea turtles, the Gulf sturgeon, the eastern indigo snake, the piping plover, the red knot, the Perdido Key beach mouse, and the West Indian manatee. State-listed species include the diamondback terrapin in Mississippi and the snowy plover and least tern in Florida.
- **Coastal Fortifications.** The coastal fortifications in Gulf Islands National Seashore represent a continuum of seacoast defense systems that span almost 150 years from the Spanish colonial era through World War II. Fort Pickens, Fort Barrancas, Advanced Redoubt, Fort McRee, Fort Massachusetts, 13 concrete gun batteries and numerous barracks, support structures, and ruins at Fort McRee and Fort Pickens illustrate the evolution of harbor defenses in response to changes in weapons technology. The national seashore also maintains collections of artifacts, documents, and archives associated with the fortifications' architecture, weaponry, and histories.



- **Barrier Islands.** The barrier islands of the national seashore extend for 160 miles along the northern Gulf Coast and include Santa Rosa Island and Perdido Key in Florida and Petit Bois, West Petit Bois, Horn, East and West Ship, and Cat Islands in Mississippi. The natural processes of waves, sand deposition, storms, and currents are still evident in the migration of these islands. The islands support a range of visitor opportunities and amenities from isolated backcountry locations to popular traditional beach activities.
- **Visitor Opportunities.** Gulf Islands National Seashore supports a wide variety of recreational, educational, and scenic opportunities for visitor enjoyment, including both land-based and water-based activities. Opportunities include water sports, visiting historic sites, wildlife viewing, boating, hunting and fishing, and traditional recreational activities on pristine white sand beaches. The seashore invites visitors to enjoy themselves on isolated wilderness islands or popular white sand beaches near Pensacola and Navarre.
- **Gulf Islands Wilderness.** The Gulf Islands Wilderness was established as a component of the National Wilderness Preservation System by the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978, Public Law (PL) 95-625, on November 10, 1978. This legislation designated approximately 1,800 acres of the seashore as wilderness and an additional 2,800 acres as potential wilderness, for a total of approximately 4,600 acres. The Gulf Islands Wilderness consists of lands on Horn and Petit Bois Islands off the coast of Mississippi; it is the only designated wilderness area on the Gulf Coast protected by the National Park Service. The wilderness boundary includes all of Petit Bois Island and most of Horn Island. Scenic views, night skies, and natural sounds are important components of the wilderness character.



Description

Gulf Islands National Seashore was established by the U.S. Congress on January 8, 1971. The national seashore encompasses barrier islands, coastal mainlands, and surrounding waters in Mississippi and Florida and extends for 160 miles from Cat Island in Mississippi to the eastern end of Santa Rosa Island in the northwest section of Florida's panhandle. The national seashore was set aside for the purpose of preserving areas possessing outstanding natural, historic, and recreational values for public use and enjoyment. The current authorized acreage of the national seashore is 139,175 acres. From 2011 to 2014, annual average visitation was almost 5 million visitors.

The resources of the seashore range from remote wilderness islands with few visitors to publicly accessible white sand beaches and historic sites visited by several million people each year. It also includes bayous, salt marshes, live oaks, maritime forests, and 120,000 acres of marine habitat. The natural environment provides support for complex plant and animal communities, both terrestrial and aquatic, that characterize the northern Gulf Coast. More than 80% of Gulf Islands National Seashore is marine habitat and open water. Hurricanes, tropical storms, sea level rise, climate change, and natural sand transport caused by current and winds are important drivers of change at the national seashore. Both Horn and Petit Bois Islands in Mississippi are federally designated wilderness areas.

Gulf Islands National Seashore contains a number of 19th century forts built as part of the "Third System" of national defense. Construction of Fort Pickens, the largest, was initiated in 1829 and completed in 1834. Two forts on the mainland, Fort Barrancas and Advanced Redoubt, are on Naval Air Station Pensacola. Fort Barrancas includes the 18th century Spanish Bateria de San Antonio, a national historic landmark. Other Third System forts include Fort McRee in Florida, which is now an archeological site, and Fort Massachusetts in Mississippi on the northwestern shore of West Ship Island. These forts were built as part of a fortification effort to protect all major U.S. harbors after the War of 1812. Many of the extant cultural resources on Santa Rosa Island were part of the 13th Coast Artillery Regiment of the U.S. Army Coast Artillery Corps. In addition to the coastal defense forts, numerous artillery batteries can be found that span the time from the Civil War to the end of World War II.

