

Identifying Important Scenic Views: Where They are and Why They are Important

Mark E. Meyer, Visual Resource Specialist, Air Resources Division, National Park Service, 12795 W. Alameda Parkway, Lakewood, CO 80228; mark_e_meyer@nps.gov

In many national parks, monuments and other specially designated areas, visitors anticipate taking in views of iconic landscape features, historic settings and other visible features—things that may be within or beyond park boundaries. Through the law that established the National Park Service (NPS)—its “Organic Act”—and subsequent management policies, NPS is charged with protecting these visual or scenic resources. The first step in protecting them is understanding and describing what the resources are. With the inventory of the resources in hand, parks can then turn to determining why they are important and how they are at risk at risk. Though directed to protect them, NPS has not had a systematic approach to the inventory and evaluation of scenic views. Through the development of a visual resources program, NPS has developed a methodology for this inventory as well as strategies for incorporating protection of scenic views into park planning documents. This paper provides an overview of the inventory methodology, along with a brief background on visual resource management in other agencies, previous NPS efforts at protection of scenery, and some of the landscape changes that threaten important scenic views.

Simply put, visual resources are the physical features of the landscape such the land, water, vegetation and structures. The meaning and value of those features to viewers, such as for their aesthetics, or historic or cultural context, make the resources important to the visual experience. A compilation study of surveys taken at parks from 1998 to 2011 shows that 90 percent of visitors consider scenic views to be extremely important or very important (Kulesza, Le, and Hollenhorst 2013).

The Organic Act states that the purpose of establishing the NPS is to “...conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life 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.” With this central mission the NPS has been entrusted with some of the most spectacular and historically significant landscapes throughout the country. Each area in the national park system has special visual characteristics that are often central to the park area’s management and visitor experience.

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2016. *Engagement, Education, and Expectations—The Future of Parks and Protected Areas: Proceedings of the 2015 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*.

Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

© 2016 George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to info@georgewright.org.

To meet this mission, individual park units have developed approaches to protecting scenic views that are often part of the reason for establishing the unit in the first place. Blue Ridge Parkway has a sophisticated method for viewshed analysis and works extensively with local communities and land managers to retaining the visual experience of traveling the parkway. Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site successfully obtained a conservation easement on private land to protect the historic viewshed of the ranch. In these and other cases, while NPS has been successful in protecting important scenic views, each unit had to develop its own methodology to assess the visual resources and communicate their importance to stakeholders and partners.

The concept of visual landscape inventory and evaluation—and subsequent management as a resource—has been in place since the 1970s. The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are the primary agencies that developed visual resource programs for managing the scenic values of the large areas of lands they manage (USFS 1974, 1995; BLM 1976). Other agencies, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, also have their own systems for assessing the value of the visual landscape. In each case, the systems were developed to meet the management needs of their respective agency missions.

Recent years have seen the rapid development of energy facilities, especially utility-scale renewable energy projects and associated electric transmission, adjacent to or crossing parks and national trails. The development of communities is likewise pushing ever closer to NPS-administered lands and waters. These developments are changing sometimes previously undisturbed views from park areas. NPS recognized the need to develop a comprehensive approach for assessing the visual landscape qualities in and near park areas and understanding how best to protect them as a resource for future generations.

The NPS process provides a consistent methodology for the inventory of scenic resources across the NPS to advance protection of important scenic views. It also facilitates working with other agencies and community partners to protect scenic views near park areas, and is a tool that can be used to assess the values of internal park views to inform management and activities within the park.

The NPS process capitalizes on elements of existing visual resource inventory and management systems, but sets forth guiding principles to meet the unique mission of the NPS. Among these principles are that human-influenced landscapes can have as much scenic importance as natural landscapes; NPS scenery often has historic or cultural values in addition to its scenic value; and that evaluations should be made in the context of the park, not compare one park or landscape to another.

Rather than a specific portion of the landscape, the unit of inventory in the NPS process is a view as seen from the visitor perspective. The inventory identifies key information about the view including a description of the visible components of the viewed landscape, its aesthetic values or scenic quality, and the importance of the view to NPS and its visitors. The inventory process leads to the determination of scenic inventory values that are a useful tool for developing protection strategies. The scenic quality and importance values have equal weight in determining the overall inventory value of a view. The sections below briefly describe these two primary components.

Landscape description and scenic quality assessment

The SCP evaluation and planning processes include a field-based description of the visual elements in the viewed landscape, and an assessment of scenic quality of the composition of the elements in the view. The landscape description part of the process records basic data about the viewpoint and observation for future reference updates. The data are descriptive, not evaluative. The scenic quality assessment is conducted as a group discussion and consensus exercise by

the field team that assigns a single scenic quality value for the view. Data collected as part of the landscape description process may include date, viewpoint coordinates, the direction and width of the view, and the names of the evaluating team members. Landscape description data include view type (e.g., panorama, framed, focal); landscape character (e.g., natural, rural, agricultural); and other key descriptive elements of the viewed landscape, such as landforms and land use, as well as prominent forms, lines, colors, and textures.

Scenic quality is the value of the viewed landscape based on its perceived visual attractiveness, as determined by the aesthetic composition of the visual elements. Scenic quality is a primary reason (but not the sole reason) for conserving scenic values in a viewed landscape, as it is well established that high quality scenery attracts NPS visitors and enhances the visitor experience. Assessing scenic quality involves field-based assessments of landscape character integrity, vividness and visual harmony. Each factor is assessed while viewing the landscape from the viewpoint, and the assessment requires that the group evaluate three equally weighted components for each factor. Landscape character integrity indicates the degree of intactness and wholeness of the landscape character identified in the landscape description section. The highest integrity ratings are given to those landscapes which have little or no deviation from the identified landscape character type. Vividness is the degree to which landscape elements are distinctive or striking enough to make a view memorable, such as dominant focal points, or bold forms and colors. Visual harmony is the extent to which there is a pleasing array of visual elements in a landscape, usually as a result of a sense of visual order, compatibility, and completeness between and among the land forms, water forms, vegetation, or built elements visible in the landscape.

View importance

As noted earlier, the unit of inventory in the NPS process is a view consisting of a viewpoint, viewed landscape and the viewers. As part of the process, key descriptive information about the viewpoint and viewed landscape is gathered that helps inform the rating process.

Information collected about the viewpoint identifies whether the location is associated with designated scenic or historic cultural features or locations, such as national scenic or historic trails, designated scenic overlooks, historic properties, cultural landscapes, or other specially designated areas. Similar information about the viewed landscape is identified so that it is clear whether landscape in the view—whether inside or outside the park—includes special features or designations that are important to the park and its visitors.

The view importance rating identifies NPS and visitor values for each of these factors of the view. Similar to the scenic quality rating, the view importance assessment rates three equally weighted factors: viewpoint importance, viewed landscape importance, and viewer concern. Viewpoint importance assesses the extent to which the viewpoint is publicized and managed for visitors, such as development of parking lots, restrooms, or other facilities, and used for interpretive services. Viewed landscape importance assesses the extent to which the elements in the viewed landscape are publicized and used for interpretation. The assessment also evaluates how important special designations, such as wilderness or historic sites, are within the view. Viewer concern indicates the potential level of sensitivity that viewers might express to changes in the view. The evaluation is based on how many visitors take in a view, the duration of a visit and the activities of viewers. The ratings rely primarily on the knowledge and professional judgment of NPS staff, as well as background research that can provide information about publicity in outside media.

The final step in the inventory of a specific view is the determination of the scenic inventory value (SIV). This value combines the scenic quality and view importance ratings into a single measure, and is derived using a matrix (Table 1). The SIV represents a scenic inventory value for

Scenic Inventory Value Matrix						
		View Importance Rating				
		1	2	3	4	5
Scenic Quality	A	VH	VH	VH	H	M
	B	VH	VH	H	M	L
	C	H	H	M	L	L
	D	H	M	L	VL	VL
	E	M	L	VL	VL	VL

Figure 1. Scenic Inventory Value Matrix.

each view relative to other inventoried views. The scenic inventory value is the final value that is recorded for a view and is what will be used for further analysis and interpretation by the park for engaging with stakeholders and partners for protecting scenic views.

The NPS visual resource inventory process presents a systematic approach to identifying the values of scenic views to NPS and its visitors. The process capitalizes on elements of existing visual resource inventory and management systems but is designed specifically for the NPS mission of conserving resources for current and future generations. The inventory is considered in the context of the park, and one landscape is not compared to another. It also recognizes that human-influenced landscapes can be just as important (because of their historic or cultural values) as dramatic scenic views of natural landscapes. The inventory process is one component of an overall visual resource program in the NPS, and will provide valuable information for park planning efforts as well as engagement with stakeholders and partners in the protection of important scenic views.

References

- BLM [Bureau of Land Management]. 1976. *Manual 8400: Visual resource management*. Washington, DC: BLM.
- Kulesza, C., Y. Le, and S.J. Hollenhorst. 2013. National Park Service visitor perceptions and values of clean air, scenic views and dark night skies, 1998–2011. Natural Resource Report NPS/NRSS/ARD/MRR 2013-632. Ft. Collins, CO: NPS.
- USFS [U.S. Forest Service]. 1974. *The visual management system*. Landscape Management, vol. 2, ch. 1. Washington, DC: USFS.
- . 1995. *Landscape aesthetics: A handbook for scenery management*. Agriculture Handbook 701. Washington, DC: USFS.