Program Brief

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resources Stewardship & Science
Water Resources Division

Wetlands Program

Halstead Meadow restoration at Sequoia National Park (California). NPS/JOEL WAGNER

Background

The National Park Service manages over 16 million acres of wetlands, including salt and freshwater marshes, swamps, peatlands, mudflats, intertidal zones, and similar aquatic areas. These highly productive and biologically diverse systems enhance water quality, control erosion, maintain stream flows, sequester carbon, and harbor at least 35 percent of threatened and endangered species. Their aesthetic appeal, diverse recreational opportunities, and important cultural landscape contributions make wetlands an integral part of the park visitor experience.

Unfortunately, wetlands are threatened on a national scale. Less than half of the wetland acreage that existed in the lower 48 states at the time of European settlement remains today. Although many wetlands in the National Park System remain largely unaltered, many others have been damaged by drainage, road-building, agriculture, mining, oil and gas development, and many other activities.

In response to this resource degradation and loss, the NPS has established strong service-wide wetland protection policies and procedures, is acquiring baseline wetland inventory data, and is actively restoring degraded and lost wetlands. The Water Resources Division's Wetlands Program plays important roles in each of these activities.

Wetlands Protection Policy and Procedures

The Wetlands Program is responsible for developing the NPS wetland protection policies and procedures found in Director's Order #77-1: Wetland Protection (2002), Procedural Manual #77-1 (2012), and NPS Management Policies (2006), available at www.nature.nps.gov/policiesguidance/index.cfm. They establish a "no-net-loss of wetlands" policy for the NPS, which requires avoiding, minimizing, and compensating for adverse impacts on wetlands. If a proposed action will have such impacts, then compliance with these policies and procedures must be recorded in a Wetland Statement of Findings (WSOF).

One of the most important program functions is review and certification of WSOFs. During this process, program staff frequently advise parks on ways to avoid or minimize wetland loss, and help identify opportunities for wetland compensation. For 70 WSOFs that WRD has certified since 2001, wetland impacts were limited to 213 acres and commitments to restore damaged or lost wetlands as compensation exceeded 425 acres. This 2:1 compensation ratio helps ensure consistency with the NPS no-net-loss of wetlands policy. Other related program activities include development of NPS wetland mitigation banks, review and comment on proposed federal wetland laws, policies and regulations, and participation on interagency committees charged with coordinating wetland technical and policy issues.

Wetlands Inventories

Wetlands inventories are critical for resource protection and management, yet many parks operate without them. To speed the acquisition of data on locations and types of wetlands, WRD has provided over $1.5 million (including matching money) for National Wetlands Inventory mapping at 23 parks, including Acadia National Park, Blue Ridge Parkway, Glacier National Park, and Lake Clark National Park & Preserve. WRD has also provided over $800,000 for higher resolution or "enhanced" wetland inventories tailored to specific needs of parks, including Ozark National Scenic River, George Washington Memorial Parkway, and Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve.

Wetlands Program staff members provide project coordination and technical assistance for these inventory activities and continue to seek funding for additional projects.

Wetland-Riparian Restoration and Management

Restoring wetland-riparian area health is a cornerstone of the Wetlands Program. Program staff provide technical assistance in all phases of restoration including condition assessments, hydrologic evaluations, planning and design, project implementation, and post-project monitoring. Since 2000 program staff have provided restoration assistance to more than 80 NPS units. Highlights include:

John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway Reclaimed an abandoned gravel mine on the Snake River floodplain to over 60 acres of sedge meadows, willow flats, stream channels, oxbow ponds, and uplands.
Moores Creek National Battlefield Restored a rare wet pine savanna complex significant to a Revolutionary War battle.
Sequoia National Park Reestablished sheet-flow hydrology and restored 10 acres of native montane wetland at Halstead Meadow.
Channel Islands National Park Restored three acres of rare coastal wetland and riparian habitat at Prisoners Harbor.
Pecos National Historical Park Restored an abandoned and deteriorating reservoir system on the lower Glorieta Creek floodplain to five acres of wetland-riparian habitat.
Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park Developed a restoration plan for 80 acres of degraded oxbow wetlands and wet prairie habitat and obtained funding and partnerships for implementing the restoration.

Program staff continue to seek new funding sources for wetland and riparian restoration. In 2007 we received approval for $1.5 million in Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act funding for coastal wetland restoration projects at Fire Island National Seashore, Lewis and Clark National Historical Park, Point Reyes National Seashore, and other parks.

Lower Glorieta Creek wetland-riparian restoration at Pecos National Historical Park (New Mexico), before and six years after. NPS/JOEL WAGNER

More Information

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