



# Niobrara National Scenic River

## Long-Range Interpretive Plan



*The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and intrinsic values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.*

—NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
MISSION STATEMENT

Front cover: Canoeists enjoy the serenity of the Niobrara River between Berry Falls and Smith Falls.

Inside front cover: Arrowhead Falls is one of over 230 waterfalls that have been recorded along the Niobrara.



# **Niobrara National Scenic River Long-Range Interpretive Plan**

2010

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U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC



## Introduction

*The Niobrara River is swift and shallow over much of its length, cutting through bedrock and forming riffles and rapids in its middle reach. Recognized as one of this country's outstanding canoeing rivers, the Niobrara flows past hundreds of waterfalls, forest communities, and locally owned ranches.*

The 76-mile reach of the Niobrara River in north-central Nebraska, a portion of which flows through a federally designated wilderness, was added to the nation's Wild and Scenic River System in 1991. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is charged with management of the approximately nine-mile segment that flows through the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, with the National Park Service managing the remaining 71 miles.

Niobrara, or *Ni obhatha ke*, means “spreading waters” in the language of the Omaha and Ponca tribes whose ancestors left their stone tools and pottery in the river valley some 7,500 years ago. Flowing toward the Missouri River, the Niobrara River has been called a “time machine running in reverse,” revealing plant and animal life that lived on the plains even before the last glaciers receded. The Niobrara's banks harbor unusual and grand plant communities of paper birch, ponderosa pine, and hybrid aspen, remnants of their ancient ancestors of the Pleistocene Epoch when boreal forests and northern tundra scratched for survival along the glacial margins. Such plant species once shared habitat with musk oxen, dire wolves, and even the woolly mammoth. Within the river's sandstone bluffs, numerous fossil beds reveal the bones and fossils of even earlier creatures: three-toed horses, rhinoceros, and mastodons.

The Niobrara is also known for its high water quality, relatively free-flowing character, and lack of development along its banks. The legacy of large tracts of land necessary for ranching, past and present, has contributed to these attributes.

The scenic river preserves a superb example of a Great Plains river and protects a unique ecological crossroads where six distinct ecosystems and their associated flora and fauna mix, some at or beyond their normal geographic limit. Wildlife abounds: animals such as white-tailed deer, coyote, beaver, mink, bull snakes, soft-shelled turtles, turkeys, herons, and sandpipers are commonly sighted. Floating on the Niobrara, through this landscape abounding with traces of the past and signs of present life, remains a great American experience.

*“This is a beautiful natural river valley that magically pops up in the middle of the Sandhills. It's a great place for family and friends to camp, canoe, and enjoy the scenery.”*

—PARK VISITOR  
NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER

Opposite: Most visitors come to the Niobrara to float the river by canoe, tube, kayak or raft.

# Long-Range Interpretive Plan

Interpretation and education are primary duties of the National Park Service (NPS), essential to achieving our mission of protecting and preserving our nation's natural and cultural resources. Niobrara National Scenic River is part of a National Park System where people and organizations collaborate on teaching and learning about the interconnections of human culture and nature, natural systems, the values of America's diverse heritage, and the principles of democracy. Parks provide unique and powerful individual experiences that help shape understanding and inspire personal values.

This long-range interpretive plan (LRIP) for Niobrara National Scenic River was created in 2010 with input from a variety of park partners. It describes visitor experience goals and recommends ways to achieve those goals through interpretive media, education programs, and personal services.

Niobrara National Scenic River produced a Final general management plan/environmental impact statement in 2006. Within the National Park Service planning hierarchy, a park's general management plan (GMP) guides park management decisions over a 20-year period. This long-range interpretive plan is one of a handful of strategic plans that will help fulfill the goals of the GMP.

The LRIP is the keystone of the Comprehensive Interpretive Planning (CIP) process and provides a foundation upon which interpretive services are based to ensure progress towards overall site and agency goals for mission achievement. Once approved, the park staff should pursue implementation of the LRIP through a series of Annual Implementation Plans (AIPs). Throughout the CIP process, the park staff should also compile and maintain the park's Interpretive Database (ID), a collection of reference materials that are used to inform, create, and present interpretive services.



The eastern portion of Niobrara NSR hosts a broad, meandering river course with sandbars and a more open valley.

## Executive Summary

Niobrara National Scenic River (NSR) is located in north-central Nebraska, with its headquarters located in Valentine. In 2006 Niobrara National Scenic River (NIOB) completed its *Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. The document identified the need to make a cohesive effort to orient the public generally to scenic river services, opportunities, and responsibilities, and to make a concerted effort to develop greater public understanding and appreciation of the unit's stellar natural and cultural resources.

The National Park Service currently owns no land within the boundaries of Niobrara National Scenic River (NSR). The park is managed through partnerships with the Niobrara Council, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, The Nature Conservancy, and local landowners.



Fall brings cool temperatures, brilliant leaf colors, and clear water to the Niobrara River.



*The National Park Service  
cares for special places  
saved by the American  
people so that all may  
experience our heritage.*

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Opposite: Fort Falls is accessible by trail from either the river, or the Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge and is just one example of the spring branch canyons found on the south side of the Niobrara.



The view from Berry Bridge Road reveals lush vegetation and soaring sandstone cliffs.



Fall colors along Fort Falls Rapid add to the quiet, solitary beauty of the river for a lone canoeist.

## Part 1: Foundations

*Rivers run through our history and folklore, and link us as a people. They nourish and refresh us and provide a home for dazzling varieties of fish and wildlife and trees and plants of every sort. We are a nation rich in rivers.*

—CHARLES KURALT  
ON THE ROAD WITH CHARLES KURALT

# Legislative Background

Public Law 102-50, the Niobrara Scenic River Designation Act of 1991, amended section 3(a) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 to designate portions of the Niobrara River in north central Nebraska as a unit of the national Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The purpose of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is to protect selected American rivers and their immediate environments for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Congress declared this national policy of preserving selected rivers in their free-flowing condition as a complement to dams and other diversions that were built on many American rivers. To qualify for this protection, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires that rivers be free-flowing, relatively undeveloped, and possess one or more “outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values.”

The 1991 Niobrara Act stated that the scenic river would be administered by the Secretary of the Interior. It specifically directed that the segment of designated river located within the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge would continue to be managed by the secretary through the director of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. General planning for the unit and operation of the designated reach beyond the refuge was delegated by the secretary to the director of the National Park Service. Accordingly, the designated river has become a unit of the National Park System.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act directs the administering agency to prepare a management plan and establish final boundaries for protection of the river’s outstandingly remarkable values. The act requires the managing agency (agencies in this specific instance) to emphasize the protection of scenic, historic, archaeological, and scientific features. It states that recreational use may be permitted so long as those resource values are not jeopardized.

A general management plan for the park was completed in 2006 that established final boundaries and prescribes a mix of National Park Service independent action with an array of task-oriented partnerships. The primary management partner for the NPS is a Nebraska state-chartered local board known as the Niobrara Council. This organization works in concert with the NPS to provide a local voice in river management and to assist the agency in its mission to preserve and protect the outstanding values of the Niobrara NSR.

## PURPOSE

The basic purposes of the Niobrara National Scenic River designation were identified in the 2006 *General Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* and are reaffirmed here. These purposes reflect extensive planning team analysis of the 1991 Niobrara Act and legislative history, public comments received in scoping, and advisory commission recommendations. Also, general direction of the park’s purpose comes from the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 which states that the purpose of the NPS 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.”

Niobrara National Scenic River designation identified the following purposes:

- (1) Preserve the river in a free-flowing condition (existence of low-head dams at the time of designation does not preclude a river from being included in the national wild and scenic rivers system).
- (2) Preserve the significant scenic, geological, biological, historic, and prehistoric resources of the Niobrara River Valley in concert with local custom and culture.
- (3) Provide for only that resource-based recreation use that is compatible with protection of the significant resources.



Beautiful scenery, amazing recreational opportunities, unique geology and fossils, great water quality and flow, as well as a vast diversity of plant and animal life combine to set the Niobrara River apart from all others.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Nine statements of significance reflect the ways in which park resources can be assessed as potentially “outstandingly remarkable values,” and which qualify Niobrara as a national scenic river. Following each statement is a narrative from the park’s 2006 GMP which describes how Niobrara NSR meets the criteria of a wild and scenic river. These statements should inform interpretation and education services and programs provided by National Park Service staff:

- The Niobrara Valley contains a large concentration of scenic river cliffs and waterfalls that are rare on the Great Plains.
- The high bluffs along the river provide scenic vistas of the Niobrara River Valley and its many ecosystems. Distant views of the Sandhills prairie to the south are unusual in the Great Plains states. The river valley itself provides scenic views.

## Scenic Value

This 76-mile reach of the Niobrara River retains a timeless natural character with a splendid and nationally recognized mixing of distinct ecosystems, some at their farthest continental range. Waterfalls add an additional, exhilarating dimension and combine to make the scenery highly diverse. This unique natural condition contributes directly to other values, particularly geology and fish and wildlife discussed below. Despite pressures to expand recreational offerings and develop seasonal and permanent homesteads, the valley remains largely undeveloped. Roads are few, and power lines and smokestacks do not mar the vistas. The scenic quality of the Niobrara River is found to be an outstandingly remarkable value.

## Geologic Value

The dynamic and evolved geology of the Niobrara Valley is a delicate mix of well-watered, shady, and cool north-facing gradients; wider, sun-drenched south facing slopes; the diversity of a riverbed flowing variously over rock and sand substrate; and the tumble of water over hard rock. In their abundance and unexpected variety, the waterfalls of the Niobrara alone are unique to both Nebraska and the Great Plains. This multifaceted geology, in turn, supports incredibly diverse and rich biota as the inherent quality in the scenic value statement, and the diversity of the river’s fish and wildlife and remarkable paleontology detailed in respective value discussions that follow. Because of its uniqueness and inextricable links to the

river's flora, fauna, and paleontology, the Niobrara's geology is found to be an outstandingly remarkable value.

- The Niobrara River is an outstanding example of a largely free-flowing Great Plains river.
- The Sandhills near the river act as both a filter and reservoir of high quality water to sustain spring seeps, unusual plants, aquatic life forms, river flow, and scenic waterfalls.

#### **Fish and Wildlife Value**

The importance of native habitat in the 76-mile-long Niobrara National Scenic River is a value closely associated with the diverse and rich biota referenced here that comprises a core quality in the scenic value statement. By themselves any of the valley's animals can seem insignificant. But when examined within the context of traditional ranges and the unique diversity and intermingling of ecosystems, the profusion of habitats and animal species become an outstanding example of Great Plains biological diversity. The scenic river is doubly unique in that it serves as an ecological crossroads for several species of fish, birds, mammals, reptiles, and invertebrates, and a major area for hybridization and evolution. In addition, portions of the scenic river are important as potential critical habitat for several threatened or endangered species. Accordingly, fish and wildlife and corresponding habitats are found to be an outstandingly remarkable value found from rim top to rim top and throughout the 76-mile length of the scenic river.

- The braided lower river provides important nesting habitat for the endangered interior least tern and threatened piping plover. The river also provides important migratory habitat for endangered whooping cranes, threatened bald eagles, and the recently delisted peregrine falcon.
- The Niobrara Valley supports exceptional biological diversity within its narrow confines, where elements of the following ecosystems exist in the

same area or very close to each other: northern (boreal) forest, ponderosa pine forest and savanna, eastern deciduous forest, tallgrass prairie, mixed-grass prairie, and Sandhills prairie. Approximately 160 species of plants and animals found in the Niobrara Valley are at the edge of their range. The number of plant species at or beyond their normal geographic range, the wide variety of plants, and the number of distinctly different plant ecosystems found close together is very unusual. Some plant and animal species are state or federally listed as rare, threatened, endangered, or candidate species.

#### **Other Similar Values**

The designated reach of the Niobrara River is internationally renowned for the multiplicity of known species and type localities associated with the study of mammal evolution in North America. These paleontological resources have been studied by scientists for more than 125 years, and vigorous research continues. The paleontological resources of the Niobrara Valley are found to be an outstandingly remarkable value.

- The area contains scientifically important deposits of mid-Tertiary and Pleistocene fossils. These are important to our knowledge of past life forms.

#### **Recreational Value**

Lured by dramatic, untrammelled scenery and friendly water, canoeing and tubing the Niobrara River are stellar activities with enthusiastic and loyal followings. With the addition of camping and sightseeing at places like Smith Falls State Park and the Fred Thomas Wildlife Management Area complementing long-available opportunities at the Fort Niobrara Refuge, recreational use of the Niobrara National Scenic River is a growth industry drawing regional and national audiences. The recreational attributes of the Niobrara Valley are found to comprise an outstandingly remarkable value.

- The western portion of the designated Niobrara River offers high quality and relatively safe river recreation for people of differing skill levels.



Critical sandbar nesting habitat for the endangered piping plover is protected along the eastern reaches of the Niobrara River.

- The river valley provides a high quality setting for a wide variety of resource-based recreation.

Two statements of significance describe historic and cultural values, including the critical support that local families and private lands contribute to the continued preservation of the Niobrara River as a national treasure. National Park Service staff should support park neighbors, partners, and local historical societies in promoting the following statements of significance:

#### Historic Value

The historic uses of the Niobrara River corridor for seasonal camping, as the site of a military post overseeing an Indian agency, and associated with community development or homesteading are typical of river settings in the region. While several sites and structures are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, none are unusual within the region of comparison. History, therefore, is not considered an outstandingly remarkable value for the Niobrara National Scenic River.

- Fort Niobrara played an important role as a frontier army post, and then as an

early national wildlife refuge preserving bison, elk, and native birds.

#### Cultural Value

The saga of cattle ranching in the Niobrara Valley is a legacy worthy of specific study, for its perpetuation of a western cultural institution and its direct preservation of the natural character of the landscape. However, the cattlemen's legacy in the Niobrara has many parallels on other riverscapes within the region. In fact, careful land stewardship generally associated with cattle ranching is a renowned tradition in Nebraska and across the Great Plains, rather than a localized attribute. As such, the cultural resources of the Niobrara River are not found to be an outstandingly remarkable value when compared with other rivers in the region.

- The Niobrara River Valley is an excellent example of a rural cultural landscape that contains ranches, limited development, and scenic vistas. Ranches are an important and integral part of the historic landscape and can be of intrinsic value. The existence of farms and ranches contributes greatly to the maintenance and preservation of the valley.

# Goals

## GPRA

The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, often called GPRA, requires federal agencies to develop strategic plans, performance measures, annual performance plans, and performance reporting. This reporting is available to Congress to illustrate the effectiveness of federal agencies and programs. The specific goals to which Niobrara National Scenic River reports, dealing with interpretation and visitor experience are:

**Mission Goal IIa:** Visitors at Niobrara NSR safely enjoy and are satisfied with the availability, accessibility, diversity, and quality of park facilities, services, and appropriate recreational opportunities. Under this mission goal, the long-term goal for Visitor Satisfaction is: *By September 30, 2012, 87 percent of park visitors are satisfied with appropriate park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities.*

**Mission Goal IIb:** Park visitors and the general public understand and appreciate the preservation of Niobrara NSR and its resources for this and future generations. Under this mission goal, the long-term goal for Visitor Understanding is: *By September 30, 2012, 85 percent of visitors understand and appreciate the significance of the park they are visiting.*

**Mission Goal IVb:** Park visitors and the general public have the opportunity to come to value their national parks by attending a variety of interpretive programs. Under this mission goal, the long-term goal for Visitor Served by Facilitated Program is: *By September 30, 2012, attendance at facilitated programs will rise to 10,381 (from 583 in 2006).*

## MANAGEMENT GOALS

The mission of Niobrara National Scenic River is to preserve, protect and restore the outstandingly remarkable values associated with the Niobrara National Scenic River for current and future generations through effective partnerships with the local

community, state and other stakeholders. Park management seeks:

- To preserve or restore where reasonable the Niobrara River in its free-flowing condition;
- To preserve the river's outstandingly remarkable values (scenic, recreational, geologic, wildlife, paleontological);
- To work cooperatively with landowners, agencies, and others to manage the private and public lands within the Niobrara River Valley;
- To provide for safe public enjoyment of the river by offering a variety of recreational opportunities that do not unfavorably affect the river's resources;
- To interpret the natural and cultural resources and values of the Niobrara River Valley.

## RENAISSANCE FOR INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

The 2006 *Renaissance for Interpretation and Education* is a national initiative to increase the effectiveness of interpretation and is tied to the NPS Centennial Program. The associated action plan features five pillars. Each of these will be acted upon within Niobrara's Interpretation program to the degree possible with available staffing and funding.

### Engage All Americans

- Work in partnership with others to tell inclusive stories relevant to all members of society.
- Increase skills and abilities of parks to reach underserved or new audiences.
- Engage in ongoing dialog with the public demonstrating openness, sensitivity, and honesty.

### Use Appropriate New Technologies

- Establish a Technology Innovation Fund for park pilot projects.
- Enhance and expand *Web Rangers*, the on-line *Junior Ranger* program.

### Embrace Partners

- Leverage our skills and standards through others.



Scheduled ranger-led programs were begun in 2009, with the creation of a Division of Interpretation and Education at Niobrara NSR.

- Enhance our skills and abilities in leadership, coaching, training, facilitation, and partnership.
- Practice true collaboration.

#### Professional Standards

- Develop core operating standards and measures for delivering quality interpretation and education programs.
- Develop core function statements for a healthy and effective interpretation operation.
- Develop a multi-year national financial program to restore and sustain seasonal and permanent positions for interpretation and education.

#### Integrate Evaluation

- Achieve greater accountability and confirmation of success.
- Conduct an evaluation summit.
- Conduct pilot evaluation projects.
- Use evaluation to learn what underserved and new park audiences expect and desire.

#### VISION AND DESIRED VISITOR EXPERIENCE GOALS

At the September 2009 long-range interpretive plan workshop in Valentine, Nebraska, the following three visions and eleven Desired Visitor Experience goals for

the Niobrara National Scenic River Division of Interpretation and Education were identified:

**By 2019 the river will be widely recognized as a national treasure, cared for and respected by the local community and visitors alike.**

**Goal 1:** Visitors and other stakeholders will understand and appreciate the outstandingly remarkable values of the National Scenic River, and the river's place in the Wild and Scenic River and National Park systems.

**Goal 2:** Visitors and other stakeholders will recognize the dependence of the Niobrara River's health on its "host" partners.

**Goal 3:** Visitors and other stakeholders will demonstrate stewardship by respecting the park's natural resources, agency regulations, and landowners' property rights.

**By 2019 the river will be a premier destination for outdoor recreation, meeting the spectrum of needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders.**

**Goal 4:** Visitors will use the river safely and responsibly to ensure safety and a sense



Reaching children through activity-based programs, such as the Niobrara Day Camp can be a very effective way to familiarize them with nature and outdoor skills.

of security for themselves, their family, landowners, and other visitors.

**Goal 5:** Visitors will have the opportunity to enjoy a variety of recreational activities, regardless of ability level, that do not interfere with other people and do not adversely impact the river resources.

**Goal 6:** Visitors will be provided with opportunities to experience solitude and discover nature in the company of friends and family.

**Goal 7:** Visitors will experience the natural landscapes of the Niobrara River Valley through sight (scenery, clear night skies, wildlife), smells (campfires, nature), hearing (friends, water, wind, night sounds), touch (water in falls vs. river, heat of sun), and taste (campfire cooking, local produce).

**Goal 8:** Visitors will easily obtain accurate information about wayfinding, resources, river access points, accommodations, and other basic needs.

**By 2019 there will be a wide range of learning opportunities available to the public throughout the year.**

**Goal 9:** Visitors will have the opportunity to purchase publications, maps, and other educational materials that will enhance their river experience. *(Due to ethics concerns, federal employee time and equipment cannot be used to develop copyrighted material, only for the public domain. We cannot design and produce materials for sale by private vendors at the taxpayers' expense. However, we are able to provide some planning and project review assistance on publications and materials developed for sale by others.)*

**Goal 10:** Through effective personal and non-personal interpretation, visitors will discover personal meaning in Niobrara resources.

**Goal 11:** Through outreach efforts and educational programs, the public will have opportunities to learn about the mission and resources of Niobrara NSR.

# Evaluation

## GPRA VISITOR SURVEY CARDS

Each July Niobrara National Scenic River participates in a National Park Service survey through the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit. Visitor survey cards are distributed to park visitors, with questions designed to measure visitor satisfaction, and visitor understanding and appreciation (GPRA Goals IIa1 and IIb1). For detailed information on the survey process and results, refer to [www.psu.uidaho.edu/vsp.htm](http://www.psu.uidaho.edu/vsp.htm).

In reviewing the results below, it must be remembered that the park has no visitor center, restroom, campgrounds, picnic areas, exhibits, walkways, or trails. The results reflect visitor satisfaction with facilities owned by entities other than the NPS.

In Fiscal Year 2008 the percentage of park visitors satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services, and recreational opportunities was 89 percent. This percentage is an average score of the following satisfaction measures:

Fiscal Year 2008 Specific Ratings of Facilities, Services, and Recreational Opportunities	
Category	Visitor Satisfaction Level
<b>Park Facilities *</b>	
Visitor Center	81%
Campgrounds and/or Picnic Areas	73%
Exhibits	68%
Restrooms	46%
Walkways, Trails, Roads	72%
<i>* These facilities on the Niobrara National Scenic River are neither owned nor operated by the NPS.</i>	
<b>Visitor Services</b>	
Assistance from Park Employees	93%
Learning about Nature, History, or Culture	72%
Park Map or Brochure	97%
Ranger Programs	100%
<b>Recreation</b>	
Outdoor Recreation	93%

## PROGRAM REVIEWS

Interpretive programs presented for the Niobrara National Scenic River will be evaluated using the National Park Service National Standards for Interpretation as defined through the Interpretive Development Program. Interpretive programs and services demonstrate success when they provide opportunities for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings and significance and arrange those opportunities to provide a clear focus for visitor understanding of meanings. Interpretive training will be provided to teach knowledge, develop skills, and promote the ability to develop and present original interpretive programs that meet national standards for interpretive success. Using standardized audit forms developed through the Eppley/NPS Interpretation Training curriculum, the supervisor will observe and provide constructive feedback on at least one of each type of interpretive program an employee presents. Specific types of programs include: interpretive talk; illustrated program or demonstration; conducted activity; presenting a curriculum-based program. From these program reviews individual interpretive program success can be assessed and information gathered reflecting overall interpretive program success.

## Interpretive Themes

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act defines designated units as needing to possess one or more “outstandingly remarkable values,” sometimes abbreviated ORVs. The following ORVs are noted in the 2006 general management plan for the Niobrara National Scenic River.

Interpretation should flow from one of the primary themes of the Niobrara NSR and all themes should be represented in both personal and non-personal services provided by the NPS.

Niobrara National Scenic River Values, Catch-Phrases, and Interpretive Themes		
Outstandingly Remarkable Value	Catch-Phrase	Primary Theme
Biological	“Ecological Crossroads”	Six distinct ecosystems converge along the Niobrara River valley, creating exceptional biological diversity of over 160 plants and many animals that survive at the extreme edge of their normal range and respond easily to disruptions including threatened and endangered species.
Landscapes	“Timeless Vistas”	The unique geography of the Niobrara River Valley along with its pattern of settlement and use provides for exceptionally serene and beautiful vistas and a relatively undeveloped view from the river.
Geological	“Rock of Ages”	The Niobrara River and its spring branch canyon creeks carve through layers of geologic time, exposing the primeval history of the area, illuminating its influence on the diversity of life in the valley and creating over 200 waterfalls.
Paleontological	“Stones and Bones”	Hills, cliffs, and stream banks within the Niobrara River valley reveal abundant fossil evidence of an ancient world vastly different from today, with ancestors of species familiar and exotic, living and extinct preserved over time in the rock.
Recreational	“Outdoor Fun”	A variety of high-quality recreational experiences in the Niobrara corridor can offer relaxation, discovery, challenge and fun in the escape from the everyday routine of today’s life.
Water Quality	“Essential Fluid”	The free-flowing high water quality character of the Niobrara River is extremely rare for a Great Plains river and in jeopardy from many threats including non-point pollution, and subsurface and river channel water withdrawal.
National Parks	“America’s Best Idea”	The Niobrara is protected by the National Park Service for all Americans so that all may enjoy this scenic river heritage.

*“The park is a tool to teach our children the importance and value of nature and their responsibility for it.”*

—PARK VISITOR  
NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER

## BIOLOGY

**Primary Theme: The Niobrara River Valley flora and fauna represent an ecological crossroads of unique and potentially fragile diversity.**

**Supporting Facts:** Six distinct ecosystems converge in an ecological crossroads along the Niobrara River Valley, creating a diversity of over 160 plants and many animals that live at the extreme edge of their normal range and respond easily to disruptions.

**Intangible Meanings:** Survival, rarity, adaptation, natural change, human-caused change, interdependence, cause/effect, threat, abundance, relicts, patterns, time, history, migration, home, community, disturbance, sex (breeding, species interbreeding), and food.

### Subthemes:

- Fascinatingly unique hybridization (adaptation for survival) of plants and birds occurs in and around the Niobrara River Valley due to the convergence of six ecosystems. (Indigo and lazuli buntings, yellow-shafted and red-shafted flickers, Baltimore and Bullock's orioles, big-toothed and quaking aspen).
- Threatened and Endangered species such as migrating whooping cranes as well as Interior least terns and piping plovers depend upon the lack of human disturbance and the sandbar habitat of the Niobrara NSR for their survival.
- Global climate change and the resulting changing weather patterns will have significant impact on the long-term survival of plants and animals of the Niobrara that are at the extreme edges of their ranges or dependent upon unique canyon microclimates.
- The Niobrara River is home to the largest number of fish species occurring in Nebraska, including ancient species that represent glacial relict populations (pearl dace and blacknose shiner).
- An amazing array of Great Plains mammals survive and thrive in the

Niobrara River Valley, both free-ranging and in fenced enclosures.

- Several mammal species are uniquely associated with the Niobrara River Valley and make their home here (Bailey's eastern wood rat, olive-backed pocket mouse, southern bog lemming, Keen's bat, and the Brazilian free-tailed bat).
- Invasive species aggressively displace native species in a competition for habitat along the Niobrara River Valley, reducing the diversity of life for which the river is noted.
- Several significant but often overlooked species add greatly to the biodiversity of the Niobrara National Scenic River (92 species of butterfly with 16 at the edge of their range, and hybridization of red-spotted purple, Weidemeyer's admiral, eastern viceroys).

## LANDSCAPES

**Primary Theme: The timeless beauty and serenity of the Niobrara River Valley is made possible by not only the unique landforms but also by the legacy of human use.**

**Supporting Facts:** The unique geography of the Niobrara River Valley along with its pattern of settlement and use provides for exceptionally serene and beautiful vistas and a relatively undeveloped view from the river.

**Intangible Meanings:** Beauty, pleasure, loneliness, serenity, solace, solitude, heritage, ancestors, survival, hardship, tenacity, change, economy (economics), and adventure.

### Subthemes:

- The Niobrara River retains a timeless natural character and aesthetically pleasing landscape resulting from the diversity of plant species, which is widely held as comprising its scenic wonder.
- Modern developments are uncommon in the area with dispersed ranches, home sites, and recreation development that shape a cultural landscape many generations old.

- The relatively undeveloped character that the Niobrara corridor retains is due to the pattern of private land ownership for ranching since 1883.
- The human history of the Niobrara corridor is typical of river settings in the region and is not unusual or unique. While local history is very relevant to local communities and stakeholders, it is not of national significance. Therefore, it is not considered to be a primary theme, but a sub-theme under the above primary theme.
- The constrained bedrock channel of the Rosebud formation in the western reaches of the national scenic river provides increased river velocity, frequent stretches of rapids, riffles, and surge flows that make for appealing canoeing conditions.
- The Ogallala aquifer underlying the Sandhills is the origin of cool spring water that comes to the surface along the top of the Rosebud formation on southern slopes of the river to emerge in “spring branch” canyons.

## **GEOLOGY**

**Primary Theme: Layers of shale, sandstone, volcanic ash and soil reveal intriguing and unique stories of a changing climate and the impact of change not only on the landscape, but also on the life dependent on it for survival.**

**Supporting Facts:** The Niobrara River and its spring branch canyon creeks carve through layers of geologic time, exposing the primeval history of the area, illuminating its influence on the diversity of life in the valley and creating over 200 waterfalls.

**Intangible Meanings:** Time, history, age, change, wonder, beauty, mystery, death, preservation, evolution, violence, origins, discovery, destruction, creation, rarity, community, cause/effect, and mystery.

### **Subthemes:**

- The Ash Hollow formation has its origins in the past cataclysmic volcanic super-volcano explosions of the Snake River Plain in Idaho. The terminus of the Snake River Plain is currently in Yellowstone National Park.
- The Niobrara River carves through layers of geologic time, exposing the primeval history of the area and relating tales of ancient volcanoes, vast savannas, wind-blown dunes and the prehistoric animals who lived and died here.
- Niobrara NSR has more waterfalls (over 200) than the rest of Nebraska because of its unique geology and hydrology.

- Waterfalls on the Niobrara, in addition to being unique to both Nebraska and the Great Plains, are abundant and in great variety because of the underlying geologic formations.
- The geology of the Niobrara is inextricably linked to the diversity of fish, flora and fauna, remarkable paleontology, and incredible scenery; in addition to being outstanding is its own right.

## **PALEONTOLOGY**

**Primary Theme: The Niobrara River Valley is home to an amazing array of mammal life frozen in stone from thousands of years ago showing how mammals have evolved in the Great Plains over time.**

**Supporting Facts:** Hills, cliffs, and stream banks within the Niobrara River Valley reveal abundant fossil evidence of an ancient world vastly different from today, with ancestors of species familiar and exotic, living and extinct preserved over time in the rock.

**Intangible Meanings:** Survival, change, death, wonder, discovery, evolution, preservation, conservation, time, home, family, heritage, legacy, cause/effect, history, and mystery.

### **Subthemes:**

- The Niobrara has been considered “the best bone hunter’s river in the world” and is extremely rich in documented fossil sites that have been studied for over 125 years.

- The rich diversity of ancient fossil species resulted in 26 sites (type localities) where a previously unknown species was first discovered in the Niobrara Valley.
- One fossil quarry yielded 146 vertebrate species and is renowned as the best of its type in North America.
- The only known remains of several species of late-Pleistocene northern forest mammals on the Great Plains are found in the Niobrara corridor.
- The age of mammals is richly represented in the fossil record of the Niobrara, with one site yielding 89 species, more than any other fossil site in the world.

#### RECREATION

**Primary Theme:** Experiencing and exploring the many wonders of the Niobrara NSR can be easy, fun, and invigorating.

**Supporting Facts:** A variety of recreational experiences are readily available in the Niobrara River Valley, including paddling, hiking, wildlife watching, camping, and photography.

**Intangible Meanings:** Family, friends, escape, relaxation, enjoyment, recreation, sport, challenge, serenity, peace, fellowship, beauty, ethics, appreciation, care, and safety.

#### Subthemes:

- Camping is a traditional social and family activity along the Niobrara that goes back centuries and can be enhanced by following today's *Leave-No-Trace* camping principles.
- The Niobrara River has gained national attention in 1988 as one of Backpacker magazine's "10 Best paddling rivers," and in 2000, as a one of America's "100 best outdoor adventures" by *National Geographic Adventure* magazine. It is also one of only three Nebraska sites listed in 1,000 Places to See Before You Die in the United States and Canada.
- Hunting is a traditional activity with enduring appeal in the Niobrara Valley

and necessary for wildlife management in the absence of natural large predators.

- Lured by untrammeled scenery and friendly water, canoeing and tubing the Niobrara are stellar activities with enthusiastic and loyal followings.
- The Niobrara River can provide quality birding as it attracts and sustains resident and migrating bird species with its rich and diverse habitat.

#### WATER QUALITY

**Primary Theme:** The free-flowing high water quality character of the Niobrara River is extremely rare for a Great Plains river and in jeopardy from many threats including non-point pollution, and subsurface and river channel water withdrawal.

**Supporting Facts:** The Upper and Middle Niobrara (including the NSR portion) have both been declared "Fully Appropriated," and a moratorium on permits for water use is in effect until a water management plan is implemented by the area Natural Resources District.

**Intangible Meanings:** Origins/source, cause/effect, danger, loss, damage, consequences, beauty, nourishment, pollution, quality, home, dependence, wonder, responsibility, care-taking, and stewardship.

#### Subthemes:

- The continued high water quality of the Niobrara is based on the lack of intensive human development in the watershed, yet is in danger from non-point pollution such as agricultural runoff.
- Competing human uses of water are causing conflict over the priorities for Niobrara River water appropriations.
- Continued withdrawal that exceeds recharge of the Ogallala aquifer impacts the Niobrara as the aquifer is one of the river's subsurface sources.
- The Upper and Middle Niobrara are determined to be "Fully Appropriated"

*“It’s nice to visit a place where nature is the main attraction.”*

—PARK VISITOR

NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER

causing a moratorium on groundwater development in their basins and causing conflict over how to use this limited water supply.

- Preservation of the outstandingly remarkable values of the Niobrara River requires a minimum flow of water for the survival of fish, wildlife, and plant populations and to provide adequate flows for recreational use.

#### NATIONAL PARKS

**Primary Theme: National park units are one type of public land protected for all because people cared enough to persuade their representatives in Congress of their value as national treasures.**

**Supporting Facts:** The Niobrara is protected by the National Park Service for all Americans so that all may enjoy this scenic river heritage.

**Intangible Meanings:** Patriotism, democracy, civic pride, heritage, legacy, preservation, love, appreciation, protection, stewardship, enjoyment, conflict, advocacy, care, management, history, future, time, and change.

#### Subthemes:

- As a National Scenic River, the Niobrara possesses five outstandingly remarkable values that are unique, nationally significant examples of superlative characteristics, in addition to its free-flowing nature and high water quality.
- The National Park Service administers 391 units in 49 states and six territories and districts that preserve the significant stories of our nation’s history and nature.
- National park management has changed over time in response to advances in science and changing public attitudes about the natural environment and our nation’s diverse culture.

- Whether called a national park, monument, historic site, battlefield, etc., all units of the National Park Service share a common mission: to conserve the outstanding resources for which they were established and to allow for the enjoyment of the same in such a way as will preserve them unimpaired for future generations.
- A variety of careers can be found in the National Park Service similar to the jobs needed to run and maintain a small town or city.

#### VISION AND PRIMARY INTERPRETIVE THEMES

At the 2009 long-range interpretive plan workshop in Valentine, Nebraska, three vision statements were developed for the division’s 10-year future. The park’s seven primary themes serve those visions as follows:

**By 2019 the river will be widely recognized as a national treasure, cared for and respected by the local community and visitors alike.**

**National Parks:** America’s Best Idea”

**Water Quality:** “Essential Fluid”

**By 2019 the river will be a premier destination for outdoor recreation, meeting the spectrum of needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders.**

**Recreation:** “Outdoor Fun”

**Landscapes:** “Timeless Vistas”

**By 2019 there will be a wide range of learning opportunities available to the public throughout the year.**

**Biology:** “Ecological Crossroads”

**Geology:** “Rock of Ages”

**Paleontology:** “Stones and Bones”

# Current Visitor Experience

## NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER VISITOR STATISTICS

Niobrara National Scenic River Recreational Visits		
	2008	2009
January	689	663
February	699	369
March	1,963	443
April	1,251	779
May	2,538	2,921
June	11,279	13,464
July	23,030	23,128
August	21,098	20,324
September	4,881	3,644
October	1,517	-
November	678	-
December	674	-
<b>Totals</b>	<b>70,270</b>	<b>65,732</b>

Recreational Visitors, 2004-2009	
2009	65,732 *
2008	70,270
2007	79,942
2006	60,397
2005	58,750
2004	54,385

\* Partial year data

### Visitation Data from Niobrara NSR Partners

Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge  
Number of people floating the stretch of the river managed by Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge

2003	13,993
2004	11,980
2005	11,515
2006	10,027
2007	8,836
2008	9,021

#### Visitors to Smith Falls State Park

2003	55,987
2004	55,120
2005	57,310
2006	57,988
2007	54,230
2008	53,130

The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve estimates that approximately 11,000 visitors use the trails, the facility at Norden, and the river adjacent to their land each year.

## CURRENT AUDIENCE TYPES

### Educational Users

Students (all ages), teachers. Organized school groups or other education groups who ask for a ranger to speak to them, primarily during the autumn and spring months.

**Issues:** Adequate NPS staffing to present education programs may take years to develop. NPS needs partners to help serve educational groups.

### Spiritual Users

Native American ceremonies, weddings, funerals, wilderness users (solitude, spiritual retreat).

**Issues:** Spiritual experience of the river is degraded by the number of other visitors present who are not seeking quiet and solitude.

### Cultural Users

Native American ceremonies, artists, photographers.

**Issues:** Lack of understanding of the private land ownership along the river can lead to frustration and conflict among both landowners and river users.

### Commercial Users

Concessions, outfitters, ranchers, bus tours, media.

**Issues:** Lack of open communication and understanding between commercial users and the National Park Service creates and enhances conflict. The NPS as a government agency is seen as a potential threat to commercial users and local landowners. The NPS and national scenic river designation is also seen by some as a positive force to enhance the river and a positive economic factor for the area.

### Local/Traditional Users

Local landowners, ranchers, and river users who live along or close to Niobrara NSR. Many traditional users live in the four-county area surrounding Niobrara NSR, yet some rarely float the river. Some local/traditional users own river outfitter businesses.

**Issues:** Many in the local community are unaware of the national significance of the Niobrara, but are keenly aware of its personal or local significance. Some local landowners have issues regarding out-of-town river users and their impacts on local lands and livelihoods. Others welcome the economic benefits that recreational use of the river brings.



Floating the Niobrara in inner tubes makes a relaxing family outdoor adventure.



Tubing is one of the most popular and refreshing ways to experience the river on a hot summer day.

#### **Regional/National River Users**

Visitors from cities (e.g., Omaha, Lincoln, Sioux Falls, Sioux City) in Nebraska, South Dakota, Iowa, and other Midwest states. These visitors primarily engage in canoeing, tubing, kayaking, rafting, swimming, sightseeing, and photography, usually from May through September, and primarily through the use of private outfitters.

**Issues:** Because many of these visitors use the river only as a seasonal, recreational pursuit, it is a logistical challenge to reach river users with provocation to appreciate the national significance of Niobrara NSR and to be good stewards of this treasure. Information provided to visitors by outfitters may not raise awareness of the national significance of the river or its protected status as a national scenic river.

#### **Regional/National Land-Based Users**

Those who come from regional, national, and international locations to visit the Niobrara River Valley to hike trails, see waterfalls, view wildlife, and/or look at the river—but not to float on the river. These visitors engage in sightseeing, camping, picnicking, hunting, fishing, and other land-based activities, usually from April through October.

**Issues:** Most of these land-based users visit “areas” along the river corridor, but some may not actually use the Niobrara River. Many land-based users (much like river users) may not understand the significance of Niobrara NSR or that it is a unit of the National Park System. Lack of NPS facilities presents a challenge to providing consistent wayside information, orientation and interpretation that could reach land-based users as well as river-based users.

#### **Stewards**

Staff, park friends, volunteers, politicians, benefactors, all visitors could/should be.

**Issues:** Lack of capacity has been the primary roadblock to forming and nurturing relationships, designing volunteer opportunities and recruiting participants, and reaching out to political representatives and potential benefactors.

#### **Virtual (off-site) Users**

Internet, mail/phone information requests. National and international visitors who “visit” the river from computers in their homes or offices via the park’s web page.

**Issues:** Relatively static nature of NPS web pages limits opportunities for off-site users.

# Existing Conditions

## BUDGET AND STAFFING

The Division of Interpretation and Education at Niobrara started operations in Fiscal Year 2009 with the hiring of a GS-11 Chief of Interpretation. In late FY2009, a new GS-9 Park Ranger position was announced. During FY 2009, two seasonal employees and two Teacher-Ranger-Teacher positions assisted in the summer months.

The portion of the park Operation of the National Park System (ONPS) budget allocated to Interpretation and Education in FY 2009 was \$152,000. This budget is anticipated to remain relatively stable in out years unless/until a base operating funds increase for Interpretation is received. A base budget increase to fund the core operations of the park is being requested from the Midwest Region. However, there are no guarantees that it will be granted.

## INTERPRETIVE FACILITIES

### Niobrara National Scenic River

The park has no visitor center or public contact station. There is a small headquarters office in Valentine, Nebraska, where exhibits consist only of paper maps on wall partitions. Ranger staff are often in the field and may not be present. If the ranger station is unstaffed, visitors are referred to the Valentine Chamber of Commerce on Main Street to obtain park information. Bassett, Ainsworth, and Springview also have Chambers of Commerce.

With lack of an NPS visitor center or other land-based area, the park's Division of Interpretation participates in partnerships with land-based entities such as the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge and Smith Falls State Park.

Besides being an inadequate facility for visitor welcome and orientation, the headquarters office has only limited and shared office space. Employees are required to share desks, and there is a certain amount of constant noise as employees

from different divisions attend to their various tasks: phones ring, and several conversations take place at the same time in the office. Storage for interpretive materials is limited to a designated space in the "shop" (the building was constructed and used as a car garage before serving as the park headquarters).

Although the NPS owns no land along the river (land is held in private ownership, or by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, and State of Nebraska Game Management), an extensive way-finding sign program has been developed through Harpers Ferry Center. This includes park identity/facility signage, visitor information signage river signs, and motorist and highway guide signs. Many private landowners do not want signs on their property, and some of the government entities do not want the NPS arrowhead on signs placed in their locations. Therefore, the wayfinding signs do not make specific reference to the National Park Service or the Niobrara as a National Scenic River.

### Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)

Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1912, is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They are responsible for the management of the National Scenic River within the boundaries of the refuge. Located four miles east of Valentine, Nebraska, the refuge is the first destination for many Niobrara NSR visitors. Once past the refuge entrance, a gravel road leads to a visitor center that contains an exhibit room, a sales area, an information desk, restrooms, and refuge offices. An exhibit room reveals Fort Niobrara's military and natural history and includes artifacts, historic photographs, hands-on exhibits, furs and hides, and an interactive display.

Many visitors to Niobrara National Scenic River start their river visit at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. Cornell Bridge and boat launch is the first put-in point

on the scenic river, just past the refuge's entrance sign. Land-based visitors to Fort Niobrara NWR also enjoy its visitor center, a Wildlife Drive featuring bison, elk, and prairie dogs; and a trail to 50-ft.-high Fort Falls and the river.

In 2009 the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge installed a number of new interpretation and orientation wayside exhibits on the refuge. These include themes of recreation, biodiversity, geology, human history, and wildlife management.

#### **Smith Falls State Park**

Smith Falls State Park, established in 1992, is administered by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Located about 15 miles east of Valentine, Nebraska, and south of Nebraska Hwy. 12, this 250-acre park protects 63-ft.-high Smith Falls, the tallest waterfall in the state, and one of the highlights for most visitors to Niobrara National Scenic River. Just inside the park entrance, a short road leads to a park office and visitor information building that contains an information desk, a small exhibit space, a sales area, and offices. The eclectic group of exhibits in the visitor information building generally addresses the park's natural history. The state park's current visitor facility is a modest frame structure.

#### **The Niobrara Valley Preserve**

The Nature Conservancy owns and manages nearly 60,000 acres and 25 miles of Niobrara River shoreline. The Nebraska Natural Heritage Program identified the Niobrara Valley Preserve as the biological crossroads of the Great Plains. To date, 581 plant, 213 bird, 86 lichen, 70 butterfly, 44 mammal, 25 fish, 17 reptile and eight amphibian species have been recorded at the preserve. The preserve was acquired by The Nature Conservancy in 1980. The goal of the Niobrara Valley Preserve is to maintain the diversity of regional biological resources by adapting land-management practices to local environmental conditions. Land management consists of planned grazing by several thousand head of cattle and several hundred head of bison, prescribed burning, and noxious weed control.

The preserve headquarters area includes an office building, visitor center, seasonal quarters, a bunkhouse, and a 1920s Sears and Roebuck catalog house. A self-guided two-mile loop nature trail begins in this area. In addition, a three-mile self-guided loop trail exists on the north side of the river. Staff consists of four full-time employees under a project director.

### **PARTNERSHIPS**

#### **Existing Partnerships**

- **Niobrara Council:** The NPS has an annual cooperative agreement with the Niobrara Council and provides funding for land protection, education, and an array of resource management activities and programming.
- **Niobrara Valley Preserve:** The NPS has a general agreement with The Nature Conservancy supporting fire management, weather data collection, communications, research, resource management, training, stream bank restoration, and interpretive programming.
- **Nebraska Game and Parks Commission:** The NPS routinely consults with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and assists with boat landings, stream bank restoration, trail work, design, and maintenance needs. Interpretive programs and informal roving interpretation are presented mid-June to mid-August at the park. Law enforcement activities at the park could also be future joint ventures with the staffs of Niobrara NSR and Smith Falls State Park.
- **Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District (NRD):** The NPS works directly and through the Niobrara Council to design, plan, and fund specific projects at the NRD's Brewer Bridge access.
- **Fort Niobrara NWR:** The NPS seeks to work cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to assist each other in planning efforts, search and rescue, emergency medical services (EMS),



Community outreach through curriculum-based school programs is an effective way to engage children in history and nature.

- resource management, training, public safety, research, law enforcement, and interpretation.

  - Niobrara Valley Outdoor Education Partners:** No formal agreement exists; however, the NPS is actively engaged with this informal group of outdoor educators to provide planning, coordination, and programming for the annual *Nature Fest* event for area fifth graders in September.
  - Outlaw Trail and Bridges to Buttes Scenic Byways** are potential partners to reach land-based users along Nebraska Highways 12 and 20, respectively.
  - Friends of the Niobrara** is an Omaha-based group of concerned citizen advocates, many of whom were actively involved with the efforts to designate the Niobrara as a national scenic river. Though no formal agreement is in
- place, the NPS is providing review for a Niobrara film project by this group.

  - Ainsworth Public Schools System (Teacher-Ranger-Teacher Agreement):** The NPS has a two-year Intergovernmental Personnel Agreement (IPA) with the school so that interested teachers may be selected to work on detail for the NPS during the summer months to develop curriculum-based activities and assist river visitors.
  - White River Public School System (Teacher-Ranger-Teacher Agreement):** Same as above.

**MEDIA CONDITIONS**

**Off-site Waysides:** Waysides exist at both Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge and Smith Falls State Park. Because Niobrara NSR does not have a significant land base, no waysides are currently owned by the park. The NPS has designed, had fabricated,

and installed two wayside exhibits with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC). One is located in Smith Falls State Park and describes aspen stand regeneration work, and one is at the Fred Thompson Wildlife Management Unit Overlook on Nebraska Highway 7 and describes the area's biodiversity.

**Publications:**

**Park Map and Guide:** The park has a current Unigrid brochure with a detailed map and interpretive text. Maps are distributed to outfitters, Smith Falls State Park, the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, the local chamber of commerce, local lodging sites, and by roving rangers. The Park Map and Guide was reprinted in 2009.

**Rack Card:** A full-color rack card designed to encourage readers to visit the park website has been produced and distributed to area Welcome Centers along Interstate 80 in Nebraska. Funds are needed to revise and reprint this publication for wider distribution throughout the region.

**Site Bulletins:** Several informational sheets describing river segments have been produced and distributed at the headquarters office and are available on the park website. A listing of these sheets includes:

- Paddling Guide to the Niobrara NSR
- River Guide: Borman Bridge to Cornell Bridge
- River Guide: Cornell Bridge to Berry Bridge
- River Guide: Berry Bridge to Brewer Bridge
- River Guide: Brewer Bridge to Rocky Ford
- River Guide: Rocky Ford to Norden Bridge
- River Guide: Norden Bridge to Meadville Campground
- Geology of the Niobrara River Valley
- Waterfalls of the Niobrara River Valley

**Website:** The park maintains a website at [www.nps.gov/niob](http://www.nps.gov/niob).

**Partner Sites:** Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge has recently updated their refuge visitor map.

**Smith Falls State Park** is in the process of updating their park flyer. There are also publications that are produced by the Niobrara Council, various river outfitters, the Valentine Chamber of Commerce, and other local entities. There is no design or content coordination among the various publications.

**EXISTING INTERPRETIVE WORKLOAD**

**Formal Programs**

During the summer season, interpreters present formal evening programs on Friday and Saturday nights at Smith Falls State Park.

**Community Programs**

As staffing permits, park interpreters collaborate with various stakeholders, agencies, and schools to provide interpretation at community events.

**Informal Programs**

Each interpreter has at least three mini-presentations prepared which are thematic and which incorporate props. In this way, informal encounters with visitors can efficiently be turned into interpretive opportunities.

Roving interpretation is conducted whenever possible during the busy season. This has included: Saturdays at Cornell Landing from 9-11 a.m., Saturdays and Sundays at Smith Falls State Park, whenever possible, by canoe.

**Law Enforcement**

Park staff continuing to provide roving patrols on the scenic river. This important function of the NPS ranger staff provides a necessary NPS presence on the scenic river to ensure visitor safety and provide information.

**Core Operations Evaluation**

In 2008 Niobrara National Scenic River participated in a Core Operations Evaluation. That study identified that the basic operations of the Division of Interpretation required 2.81 FTE (full-time equivalents) to achieve their basic operational level.

# Issues and Influences

## INTERNAL ISSUES

### Lack of Facilities

No National Park Service-owned facilities exist at this time. The conditions of picnic areas, campgrounds, visitor centers, exhibits, and signs all vary from agency to agency and among outfitters. Reaching sufficient numbers of visitors with interpretation in certain areas at certain times can be difficult. Interpretive programs will need to be carefully planned in order to reach the most people, and will only be successful with good coordination and cooperation from outfitters and other agencies. The non-personal services (media) must be strategically placed and have a common theme and design to offer visitors quality interpretive experiences.

### Historic Resource Studies

*A Historical Overview and Inventory of the Niobrara River* was completed by the National Park Service in 1994. It provided a cursory analysis of key themes, events, and resources that pertain to cultural resources within 15 miles of the river. There are many themes to be explored for possible interpretative topics, media, and programs. Although none rose to the level of an outstandingly remarkable value, the National Park Service should encourage cultural resource interpretation by park partners and surrounding communities.

### Additional issues include:

- Lack of an accurately detailed map with consistent locations and mileages.
- Budget and staffing.
- Communication challenges.
- Perception of exclusion of non-Anglo traditions and cultures.
- River Management Plan will designate areas of use and zoning.
- Superintendent's Compendium articulates prohibitions.

- Clarification of Niobrara National Scenic River's law enforcement jurisdiction is needed.

## EXTERNAL ISSUES

### Multi-Jurisdiction

Several different jurisdictions exist on lands along the 76-mile scenic river, including four counties, a state park, Bureau of Reclamation lands, Bureau of Land Management lands, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge, and a state wildlife management area. Verbal and written agreements have been initiated with several agencies; more work needs to be pursued to enhance cooperative management efforts, especially in regards to law enforcement, fire management, emergency medical services, and safety.

### Multiple Access Points

Only three public access points exist on the upper river, and two of these charge fees for access. The state park has a daily entrance fee (or an annual permit is required) and the refuge has a daily launch fee of \$1 per vessel. Most outfitter sites charge \$2 to either take out or put in a vessel on the river and prefer that arrangements be made in advance. The town of Meadville has a \$1 per person day use fee at their campground. Some river users put in at county or state highway bridges on public rights-of-way that vary from 66 feet to 150 feet in width. State laws may prohibit parking in these areas, causing further confusion or access problems, since none of the bridges actually have improved formal river access. Obtaining accurate information to visitors is a challenge. The NPS folders that provide orientation, education/interpretation, and information are given to outfitters, hotels, and chambers of commerce for distribution, but it is unlikely that each visitor group receives a park folder, and it is unknown whether visitor questions are answered. Outfitter facilities are vital contact points for visitors. Even if an interagency visitor center is constructed, many visitors may still go directly to an outfitter for river information and/or equipment.

### **Seasonal Visitation Fluctuations**

Most river use occurs from late April through mid-October, with the majority of use between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Furthermore, the highest use occurs between Independence Day and the beginning of school in late August. Most use occurs on weekends. River traffic is nearly non-existent in the winter months and very light during the shoulder seasons. If a strategically placed interagency visitor center is built to inform and orient the many non-water visitors (tourists, hunters, ice fishermen) that pass through in the off-season, off-season river use (as well as summer use) could increase.

### **Campgrounds and Interpretation**

Reaching visitors on the river during the evening at private campgrounds and at Smith Falls could be an effective technique in educating and informing visitors about the Niobrara River Valley's many recreational opportunities and its cultural and natural history. Partnerships and cost-share programs could be created to provide facilities and equipment to implement such programs.

### **Park Boundary**

The 2006 general management plan identifies a park boundary based on outstandingly remarkable values. The majority of this acreage (about 23,000 acres) is private land, so there will never be fences or traditional NPS entrance signs. As of yet, there are few signs telling visitors that they are within a NPS boundary or on a national scenic river. This presents a challenge in managing the scenic river surrounded by a privately-owned landscape. Future road signs should identify Niobrara NSR at bridge crossings, and standard river signs for the public—including private facilities open for public use—should be developed to identify the Niobrara as a national scenic river. Once an interagency facility is developed, orientation to the national scenic river could become clearer to visitors.

### **Public Access on Private Land**

Most landowners along the upper 30-mile section have traditionally expected—and to a great extent, tolerated—limited public

use of their lands. Most of this use is seasonal and confined to the riverbed and immediate banks of the river. Littering, trespass, illegal fires, improper waste disposal, unlawful camping, damage to fences, and impact to natural resources are occasional problems associated with public river use. Landowners below the Norden Bridge are not accustomed to seeing river users, since traditional use is infrequent. Problems usually occur at bridge crossings or where roads are nearby and may involve vandalism, graffiti, alcohol and drug use, littering, and disturbing the peace. Hunting and fishing violations and associated trespass have always occurred to some extent along the river. Most landowners are likely uncomfortable with the general public entering their lands. Nebraska recreational use statutes protect the landowner from liability, unless a fee would be charged to access their lands. The NPS or the Niobrara Council could enter into agreements or purchase recreational access easements from willing landowners to allow for limited public use of private lands if desired, such as primitive camping, hiking trails, horseback rides, or other activities.

### **Regional Community Activities and Facilities**

Future plans envision the construction of an interagency facility to orient visitors to the river, and interpret the natural and cultural resources of the river valley and the Nebraska Sandhills. Such a facility would be a joint effort with potential partnership with agencies such as the NPS, Nebraska Game and Parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Niobrara Council, the local chamber of commerce, and other entities. Visitors would not only learn about the national scenic river, but also be informed of other recreational opportunities in the area. Experts from various agencies could lead interpretive programs and activities, and help design exhibits and other media. Visitors could have a fuller, richer experience and stay longer, thus benefiting local economies as well.

### **Alcohol Policy**

Confusion exists among some visitors as to what is permitted or restricted along different river sections. Currently alcohol,

squirt guns, and loud music (boom boxes) are prohibited on the river within the national wildlife refuge. Refuge regulations allow no more than five tubes to be tied together in a raft. Alcohol is prohibited on land (and technically while standing on the riverbed) at Smith Falls State Park. The NPS may manage these and other aspects of visitor use (such as glass containers, Styrofoam, and water balloons) through development of the park's river management plan, or through the currently drafted "Superintendent's Compendium of Designations, Closures, Permit Requirements and Other Restrictions Imposed Under Discretionary Authority."

### **Hunting and Fishing Activities**

Hunting, trapping, and fishing have occurred along the Niobrara for many years. These recreational activities will be allowed to continue under guidance and regulation by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Park rangers will help enforce these regulations on federal lands and possibly on other lands by formal agreements, depending on jurisdictional issues. Hunting from the river surface is only allowed by state regulations when the boat is tied or anchored. Hunting, trapping, and fishing would require visitors to have permission from the private landowner in most instances, unless visitors are fishing from a boat.

### **Special Use Permits**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finalized a Refuge River Recreation Plan which set limits on the number of boat permits and boat livery operations it would allow at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. Some outfitters have disagreed with these limitations or the processes used to determine them. The NPS needs to include local residents, concerned visitors, environmental organizations, boating groups, outfitters as well as other agencies in its dialogue when formulating its river management plan in order to seek consensus.

### **Mobile Visitors**

Unlike traditional parks with set numbers of entrance roads, visitor facilities campgrounds, picnic areas, and ranger stations on public lands, reaching visitors on the

Niobrara NSR (being spread out over a multi-jurisdictional landscape with many access points and various management agencies and private outfitters) will always be a challenge. Visitors tend to spread out around the area and travel through different points without congregating in one place or at one time. The construction of a centrally located interagency complex may begin to address this challenge.

### **Central Visitor Center**

A centrally located visitor facility is essential in assuring the success of distributing interpretive messages to all visitors. Having an interagency visitor center makes sense because of the distinct and diverse recreational opportunities that the area and its different landforms support. The NPS ranger station in Valentine could include visitor services but it would need to be relocated to a larger facility, and need adequate staff and/or volunteers to keep regular hours.

### **Additional concerns include:**

- Interpretation of laws: what people "read" vs. how the laws apply.
- Lack of standardized zoning between counties on the corridor.
- U.S. economy effects on travel and tourism.
- Infrastructure: roads and bridges used by visitors, but not owned by park, need upkeep and replacement.
- How to manage resources on private landscapes.
- Lack of protection of private lands. Zoning regulations are ambiguous and not stringent.
- Competing priorities of various land management agencies.
- Prescribed fire is a concept newly introduced to the region.
- Politics are important, at the various levels of federal, state, counties, and local municipalities.

- Local and regional anti-government sentiment affects how area citizens view the NPS and the NSR.
- Fire danger due to cedar encroachment
- Local residents do not like the use of the word “park” because it makes visitors expect a land base.
- Managing conflicting visitor expectations of social gregariousness vs. solitude while on the river.

## RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ISSUES

### Threatened and Endangered Species

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated critical habitat on the Niobrara River for threatened and endangered species. The NPS has begun monitoring the threatened piping plover and the endangered least tern along the lower half of the Niobrara River. The state of Nebraska and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurrently monitor these species in other areas, with different intervals or varying methods. Other species such as bald eagles and whooping cranes are occasionally sighted or are seasonal residents. Educating the public about these species and minimizing human impact is an important task for interpretation.

### Water Quality

The NPS began monitoring water quality in the late summer of 2001. Water quality monitoring is also an important responsibility of the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality. Ensuring good water quality is a major goal of the principal managing

agency within the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. It is also part of the NPS Strategic Plan which states that it is important to protect valuable aquatic resources and to help ensure public health. Good water quality is important to visitors to the scenic river and often contributes to visitor satisfaction.

### Additional resource management issues include:

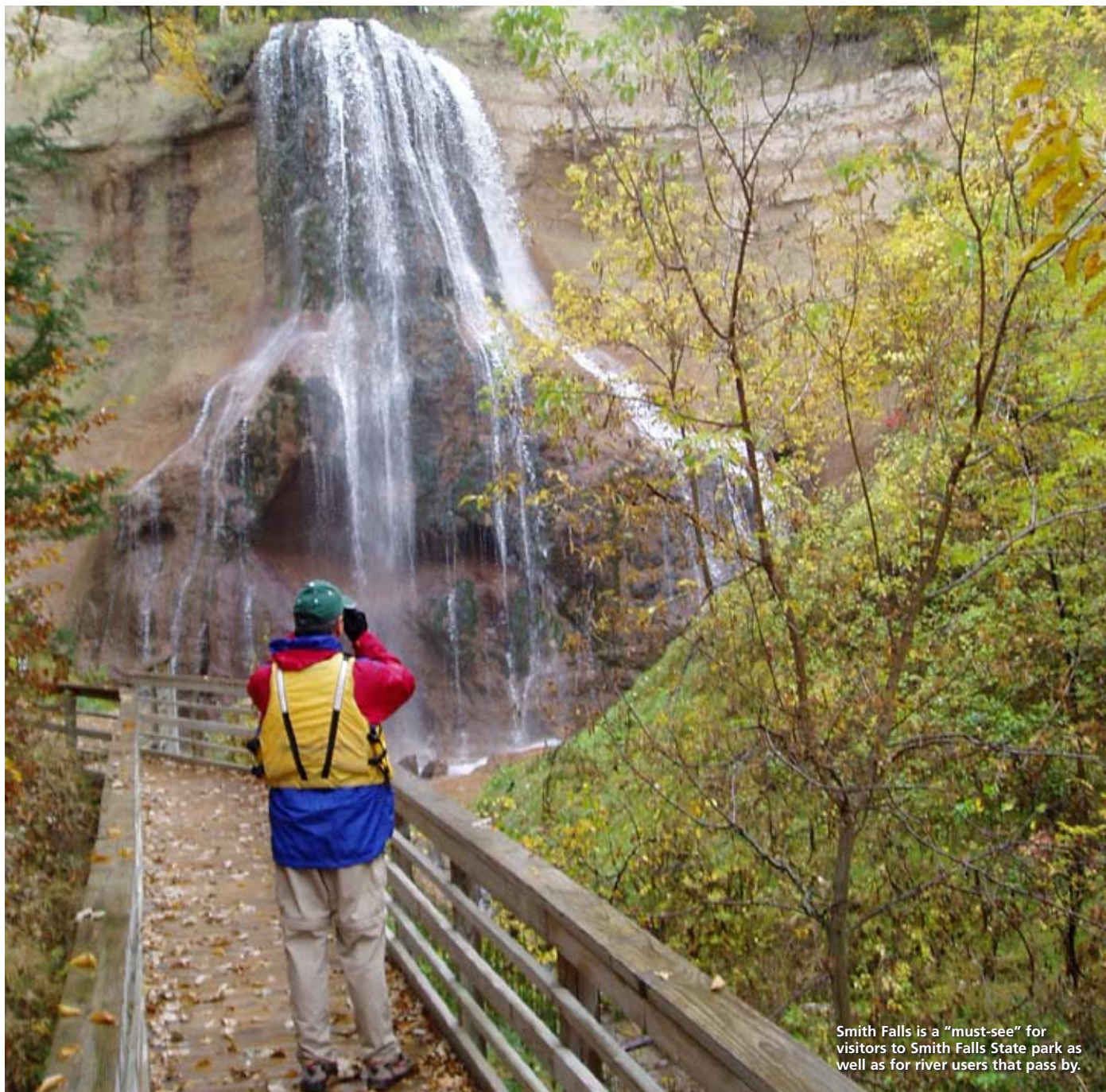
- Local impacts of Global Climate Change.
- Cornell Dam structure retention or removal.
- In-stream flow establishment and water quality protection.
- Urban visitors may not understand the rural land ethic.
- Exotic species encroachment.
- Aircraft overflight.
- Private lands within boundary not protected from subdivision and development.
- Funding needed for conservation easements.
- Linear nature of river poses geographic and spatial challenges to managers.
- Human choices impact nature in river corridor (night lighting, farming practices, etc.).
- Forest ecosystem health decline

*“The Niobrara National Scenic River is a showcase for natural wonders such as the various ecoregions. The river valley holds examples of many plants and animals not usually found together.”*

—PARK VISITOR  
NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER



Cowslip parsley is native to the Niobrara Valley.



Smith Falls is a "must-see" for visitors to Smith Falls State park as well as for river users that pass by.

## Part 2: Future Interpretive Program

*This part of the long-range interpretive plan describes the mix of facilities and services, both non-personal (media) and personal (programs), that are necessary to communicate park themes and facilitate identified visitor experiences (DO-6, page 9).*

## Recommendations

### VERP

In 1992 the National Park Service began developing the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) framework to address visitor use management and carrying capacity issues in the units of the National Park System.

Some of the VERP tasks still to be completed include:

- Describe a potential range of visitor experience and resource conditions (potential prescriptive zones).
- Allocate the potential zones to specific locations in the park (prescriptive management zoning).
- Select indicators and specify standards for each zone; develop a monitoring plan.
- Monitor resource and social indicators

In Fiscal Year 2010 Niobrara National Scenic River is beginning work on a River Management Plan. It is expected that the above tasks will be a part of that plan. There is a project entered into the Project Management Information System (PMIS) to address the need for this work:

### 113394: Develop a River Management Plan for Niobrara National Scenic River

The development of a River Management Plan and associated environmental compliance will examine and provide a full range of alternatives for the management of the Niobrara National Scenic River (NIOB). Alternatives will address delineation of river segments; desired resource conditions and visitor experiences for each segment (based on park purpose, significance, and outstandingly remarkable values); measurable indicators that reflect the status of park resources and visitor conditions for each segment; establish quantifiable standards against which each indicator is measured; describe and assess existing conditions (a baseline for future measurements); assess whether or not management action needs to be taken because existing standards are close to or have been exceeded or violated; design and implement a monitoring program to determine effectiveness of management strategies/ actions; and develop general adaptive management strategies to help address adverse resource impacts or maintain satisfactory visitor experiences.



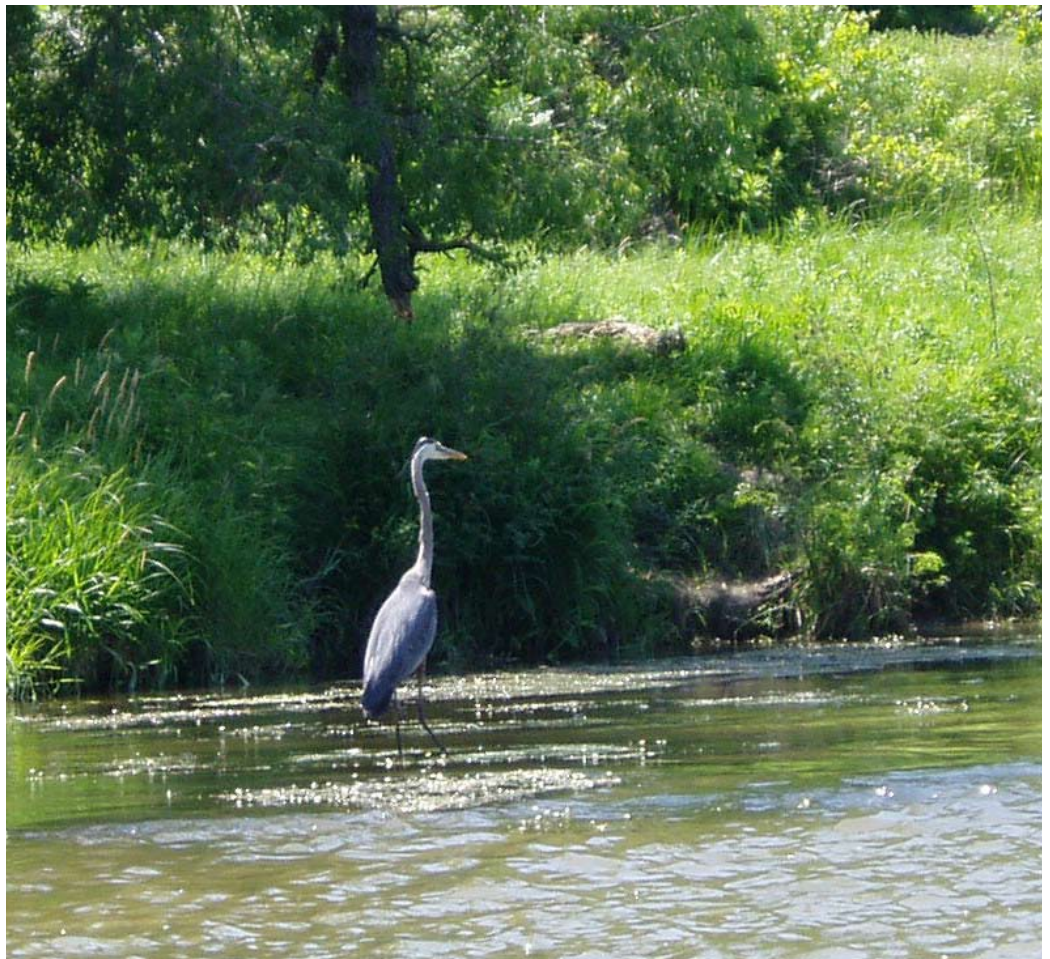
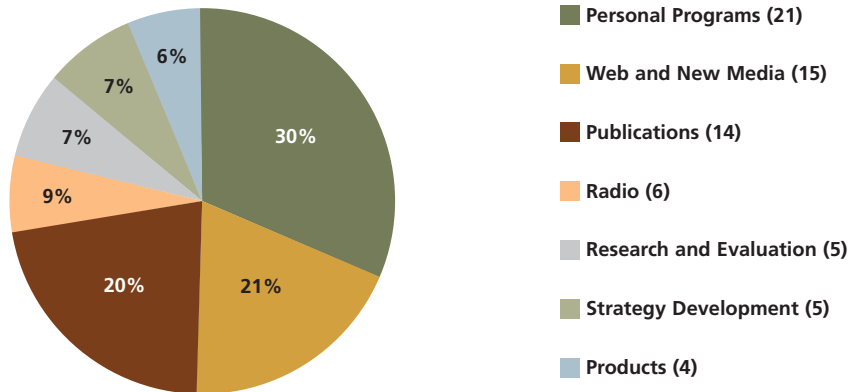
While floating the Niobrara is a popular summer activity, spring and fall are also great times to enjoy the river by canoe or kayak.

# Recommendations for the Interpretive Program

At the September, 2009 long-range interpretive planning workshop in Valentine, Nebraska, numerous recommendations were made for the park's programming. The chart below reflects the

nature of the recommendations. Several fell into more than one category, such as the recommendation to develop an outreach strategy for local residents through multiple avenues.

Number of Recommendations for Program Areas



A diverse array of avian life inhabits the Niobrara Valley. Outdoor enthusiasts are likely to encounter great blue herons peering intently into the water.

# Interpretive Program Recommendations by Goal

At the September 2009 long-range interpretive plan workshop in Valentine, Nebraska, three visions and 11 goals for the Division of Interpretation and Education were articulated. For each goal, a series of tasks were identified. These are listed in entirety, without prioritization.

**By 2019 the river will be widely recognized as a national treasure, cared for and respected by the local community and visitors alike.**

**Goal 1:** Visitors and other stakeholders will understand and appreciate the outstandingly remarkable values of the National Scenic River and the river's place in the Wild and Scenic River and National Park Systems.

- Develop and monitor a "Facebook" group site for the river.
- Develop biweekly or monthly "River Updates" for local radio and newspaper.
- Provide annual legislative familiarization tours.
- Develop loaner backpack/dry bag of activities for families.
- Develop a web page on "national significance."

**Goal 2:** Visitors and other stakeholders will recognize the dependence of the Niobrara River's health on its "host" partners.

- Develop an evaluation method for this goal to measure effectiveness by 2019.
- Develop a "Respect the River" campaign targeted to college students.
- Support outfitter annual orientation meetings.
- Develop and implement landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings.

**Goal 3:** Visitors and other stakeholders will demonstrate stewardship by respecting the park's natural resources, agency regulations, and landowners' property rights.

- Develop a *Leave No Trace* page on the park website.
- Enhance the volunteer program by creating and advertising projects locally and on volunteer.gov website.
- Create a strategy to assess the level of stewardship among river visitors.

**By 2019 the river will be a premier destination for outdoor recreation, meeting the spectrum of needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders.**

**Goal 4:** Visitors will use the river safely and responsibly to ensure safety and a sense of security for themselves, their family, landowners, and other visitors.

- Create a short safety video for reviewing prior to getting on the river.
- Pull out desired portions of the safety video above for podcasts.
- Tack on a "river flow level" report to every local radio weather report.

**Goal 5:** Visitors will have the opportunity to enjoy a variety of recreational activities, regardless of ability level, that do not interfere with other people and do not adversely impact the river resources.

- Reevaluate existing self-guided tours, including those produced by the Scenic Byway, Fort Falls, Smith Falls, and The Nature Conservancy, to accommodate people of all ability levels.
- Create CDs and DVDs for self-guided auto tours.
- Create special topic podcasts from material created for self-guided auto tours.



Soaring bluffs and a relatively narrow channel characterize the western portion of Niobrara NSR.

- Reevaluate existing special programs to accommodate people of all ability levels.

**Goal 6:** Visitors will be provided with opportunities to experience solitude and discover nature in the company of friends and family.

- Create podcasts where appropriate.

**Goal 7:** Visitors will experience the natural landscapes of the Niobrara River Valley through sight (scenery, clear night skies, wildlife), smells (campfires, nature), hearing (friends, water, wind, night sounds), touch (water in falls vs. river, heat of sun), and taste (campfire cooking, local produce).

- Develop special events that include hands on-demonstrations of recreation and outdoor skills such as campfire cooking, etc.
- Create a “Facebook” page for fans to share experiences. Post Niobrara videos of scenes and sounds.

**Goal 8:** Visitors will easily obtain accurate information about wayfinding, resources, river access points, accommodations, and other basic needs.

- Assist visitors in finding information by reviewing and improving brochures and other media.

- Consider developing an interagency welcome newsletter to be distributed via hand-to-hand, mail, and e-mail.

- Post GPS coordinates of landings, restrooms, etc. on website.

- Create a standard map for use by all groups, including visitors, agencies, and outfitters.

- Develop press kits.

**By 2019 a wide range of learning opportunities will be available to the public throughout the year.**

**Goal 9:** Visitors will be able to purchase publications, maps, and other educational materials to enhance their river experience.

- Develop a river biology or geology guide that covers geology and paleontology.
- Develop river-specific self-guiding field guides with features such as species lists or quick identification cards.

- Develop and provide publications for distribution to outfitters including park brochures, bird lists, site bulletins, rack cards, safety cards, etc.
- Encourage a non-profit partner, such as the Niobrara Council, to establish a sales outlet.

**Goal 10:** Through effective personal and non-personal interpretation, visitors will discover personal meaning in the Niobrara resources.

- Work with Elder Hostel programs.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.
- Provide training to outfitters on resource protection issues.
- Invite researchers to give interpretive programs.
- Network with other fossil sites to create a shared “Fossil Freeway” program.
- Network with other river parks to create shared programming.
- Develop cell phone/audiovisual media products for on-site presentation, as practicable.

- Prepare a menu of program opportunities and make it available to outfitters.
- Develop pre- and post-trip planning using new media, including pod casts, e-tours, websites, and social networking.

**Goal 11:** Through outreach efforts and educational programs, the public will have opportunities to learn about the mission and resources of Niobrara National Scenic River.

- Develop K-12 curriculum-based education programs with local educators that meet national and state standards.
- Develop and present teacher workshops.
- Provide community outreach through newspaper column, cell phone update, e-mail list, quarterly newsletter, and radio.
- Develop fossil dig educational program.
- Develop speaker series in Valentine on resource issues.
- Develop program for scouts to earn badges and awards.
- Create service learning opportunities.

*“Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things? Throw a stone into the stream, and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful type of all influence.”*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON  
NATURE

# Implementation Plan

The measure of success of any plan is the extent to which it is implemented. Initial implementation strategies need to be both realistic and flexible. The implementation plan for the long-range interpretive plan outlined on the following pages is an initial blueprint.

Because funding opportunities and priorities often change, park managers need to adjust the implementation strategies to adapt to changing conditions. Therefore, this LRIP should be updated annually through the park's Annual Implementation Plan (AIP).

## PRIORITIZATION OF TASKS

At the September 2009 long-range interpretive plan workshop, specific tasks were prioritized in three ways: as the single most important task to be accomplished, as the most important to accomplish within the next year, and as the most important to accomplish within the 10-year planning framework. The results are as follows:

### Single most important tasks:

- Develop and implement a landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.
- Provide community outreach through newspaper columns, cell phone updates, e-mail list, quarterly newsletter, and radio.

### Most important tasks to accomplish within the next year included the three items above, and also:

- Develop and monitor a "Facebook" group site for the river.
- Provide annual legislative familiarization tours.
- Enhance volunteer program by creating and advertising projects locally and on volunteer.gov website.

- Tack on a "river flow level" report to every local radio weather report.
- Create special event to include hands-on demonstrations such as outdoor cooking, art-in-the-park, information booths, etc.
- Create a standard map to be used by all groups, including visitors, agencies, and outfitters.
- Develop press kits.

### Most important tasks to accomplish within the ten-year planning framework include two tasks mentioned above:

- Create a standard map to be used by all groups, including visitors, agencies, and outfitters.
- Develop K-12 curriculum-based education programs with national and state standards.

### As well as the following tasks already named:

- Provide annual legislative familiarization tours.
- Create a special event with hands-on demonstrations such as outdoor cooking, art-in-the-park, information booths, etc.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.
- Provide community outreach through newspaper column, cell phone update, email list, quarterly newsletter, and radio.
- Develop and implement landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings.

# Personal Services

## Advantages of Personal Services

- Direct human to human communication is often more enjoyable to visitors than communication by impersonal media.
- Can easily be customized to meet visitor needs or changing conditions.
- Can use group/visitor reactions to stimulate interest.
- Can be interactive.
- May be monitored and changed accordingly.
- Tap diverse skills of interpreters.
- Versatile, effective, and relatively easy to implement.
- Can be cost-effective, especially in the short term.
- Can convey complex messages, and help visitors connect tangibles and intangibles to universal concepts.

## Limitations of Personal Services

- Require well-trained interpreters.
- May not give consistent messages.
- Require close supervision and management.
- Can be difficult and expensive to maintain year round.
- High recurring costs.
- Can be difficult to critique properly.

## INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS TO BE CONTINUED

### Formal Programs

During the summer season, interpreters will continue to present formal evening programs on Friday and Saturday nights at Smith Falls State Park.

## Community Programs

As staffing permits, park interpreters will continue to collaborate with various stakeholders, agencies, and schools to provide interpretation at community events.

## Informal Programs

Each interpreter will continue to prepare at least three mini-presentations which are thematic and which incorporate props. In this way, informal encounters with visitors can efficiently be turned into interpretive opportunities. Informal roving takes place during the summer months, primarily on weekends, at Smith Falls, Cornell Bridge, and on the river via canoe.

## Law Enforcement

Park staff will continue to provide “roving patrols” on the scenic river. This important function of the NPS ranger staff will provide the primary NPS “presence” on the scenic river. While greeting and answering visitor questions, these roving patrols also allow rangers the opportunity to give important safety messages and basic orientation and information.

## PMIS #148555 YPP - Teacher/Ranger/Teachers Developing Curriculum for Underserved Youth Education Outreach

Niobrara National Scenic River seeks funding to develop and establish a sustainable and long-term Teacher to Ranger to Teacher (TRT) program. This will not only be the first TRT program at Niobrara, it will also be developing the first curriculum-based outreach education materials for the park. The resulting education outreach programs will be targeted to area underserved schools with student populations from rural ranching and Native American culture. Local school children will make direct and personal connections with the park through understanding their connections to the river, its ecologically diverse resources and their culture.

The teachers will work with NPS interpretation staff and resource professionals in

Planning is underway for scheduled formal Junior Ranger Activity Programs at Niobrara NSR.



developing and evaluating curriculum-based materials. This includes creating lesson plans, pre-and post-visit activities, and program materials. Working together, park staff and teachers will develop strategies to foster student interest in natural and cultural resources as well as in potential careers with the NPS. Teachers will have an opportunity to present to park staff details on how they will utilize curriculum materials and knowledge gained from their experience in their classrooms. The materials developed in collaboration will also be shared with home school, public and private schools, locally, and nationwide. During National Park Week teachers will make presentations on the NPS and their partnership experiences to students in their school district.

#### **INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS TO BE DEVELOPED**

- Provide annual legislative familiarization tours.
- Support outfitter annual orientation meetings.
- Develop and implement a landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings.

- Reevaluate existing special programs to accommodate people of all ability levels.
- Create special events with hands-on demonstrations to include such things as outdoor cooking, art-in-the-park, information booths, etc.
- Work with Elder Hostel programs.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.
- Provide training to outfitters on resource protection issues.
- Invite researchers to give interpretive programs.
- Network with other fossil sites to create a shared “Fossil Freeway” program linking sites together.
- Network with other river parks to create shared programming.
- Develop K-12 curriculum-based education programs with national and state standards.



A new program called "Camping Adventure with My Parents" will engage underserved rural audiences.

Below: Children who participate in "CAMP" will have an overnight camping experience with their family along the Niobrara River.

- Provide teacher workshops.
- Create service learning opportunities.
- Provide community outreach through a variety of techniques that could include: newspaper column, cell phone update, e-mail list, quarterly newsletter, and radio.
- Develop programs for scouts to earn badges and awards.
- Develop a speaker series in Valentine, Nebraska, on resource issues.

#### PROJECTS ALREADY ENTERED INTO PMIS

The following PMIS projects, if funded, would establish new interpretive programs:

##### **PMIS #149451 - Create Junior Ranger "Camping Adventure with My Parents" program at Niobrara NSR**

This project would secure supplies and materials to establish and pilot a Junior Ranger family camping program at the Niobrara National Scenic River targeted to engage underserved rural audiences in resource understanding, appreciation and stewardship. The funding would purchase camping equipment to enable 25 individuals

to experience a facilitated introduction to an overnight camping experience. Two overnight experiences will be planned to be piloted and evaluated during the summer of 2010 serving up to 50 underserved individuals.

##### **PMIS #150916 - Initiate Scheduled Formal Junior Ranger Activity Programs at Niobrara NSR**

This project would enable the Niobrara National Scenic River to initiate and provide regularly scheduled, facilitated Junior Ranger activity programs at partner sites through the national cooperative agreement with the Student Conservation Association (SCA). The \$8,900 funding would be used for one SCA resource intern for 12 weeks. This intern would be responsible for providing at least 50 Junior Ranger activity programs to at least 200 underserved children during the summer visitor use season. Funding would also be used to purchase program activity supplies and materials used to provide participants have a take-home reminder of their resource learning experience. Items such as Junior Ranger badges and certificates as well as program supplies to make plaster wildlife track casts, tree cookies, journals, sketchbooks, etc. would be purchased.



# Publications

## Advantages of Publications

- Are portable.
- Can treat a subject in-depth.
- Provide a source of detailed reference information.
- Can be produced in different languages.
- Suited to presenting sequential or complex material.
- Can be read at visitors' own pace.
- Can produce income.
- Can often be revised at a reasonable cost.
- Can be produced at various levels of detail.
- Have value as a souvenir, something to take home.
- Can be used before going to a site, during the visit, or after returning home.
- Can be produced to treat the same subject for different audiences.
- May be appropriate for stories lacking in artifacts or photographs.

## Limitations of Publications

- Can discourage potential readers with lengthy and/or complex texts.
- Can be a source of litter.
- Require periodic revision to remain current and accurate.
- May require facilities and maintenance (such as brochure dispensers).

## PUBLICATIONS TO BE CONTINUED

**Park Map and Guide:** The park will continue to update and produce the NPS Unigrid

brochure. These brochures will continue to be distributed to outfitters, Smith Falls State Park, the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, the local chamber of commerce, local lodging sites, and by roving rangers.

**Rack Card:** Funds are needed to redesign and reprint the full-color rack card which was designed to encourage readers to visit the park website.

**Site Bulletins:** These could possibly be revised to include maps and more interpretive text to function as a river user guide for each segment. The informational sheets describing river segments will continue to be distributed. Downloadable copies are also made available on the park website. A listing of these information sheets includes:

- Paddling Guide to the Niobrara NSR
- River Guide: Borman Bridge to Cornell Bridge
- River Guide: Cornell Bridge to Berry Bridge
- River Guide: Berry Bridge to Brewer Bridge
- River Guide: Brewer Bridge to Rocky Ford
- River Guide: Rocky Ford to Norden Bridge
- River Guide: Norden Bridge to Meadville Campground
- Geology of the Niobrara River Valley
- Waterfalls of the Niobrara River Valley

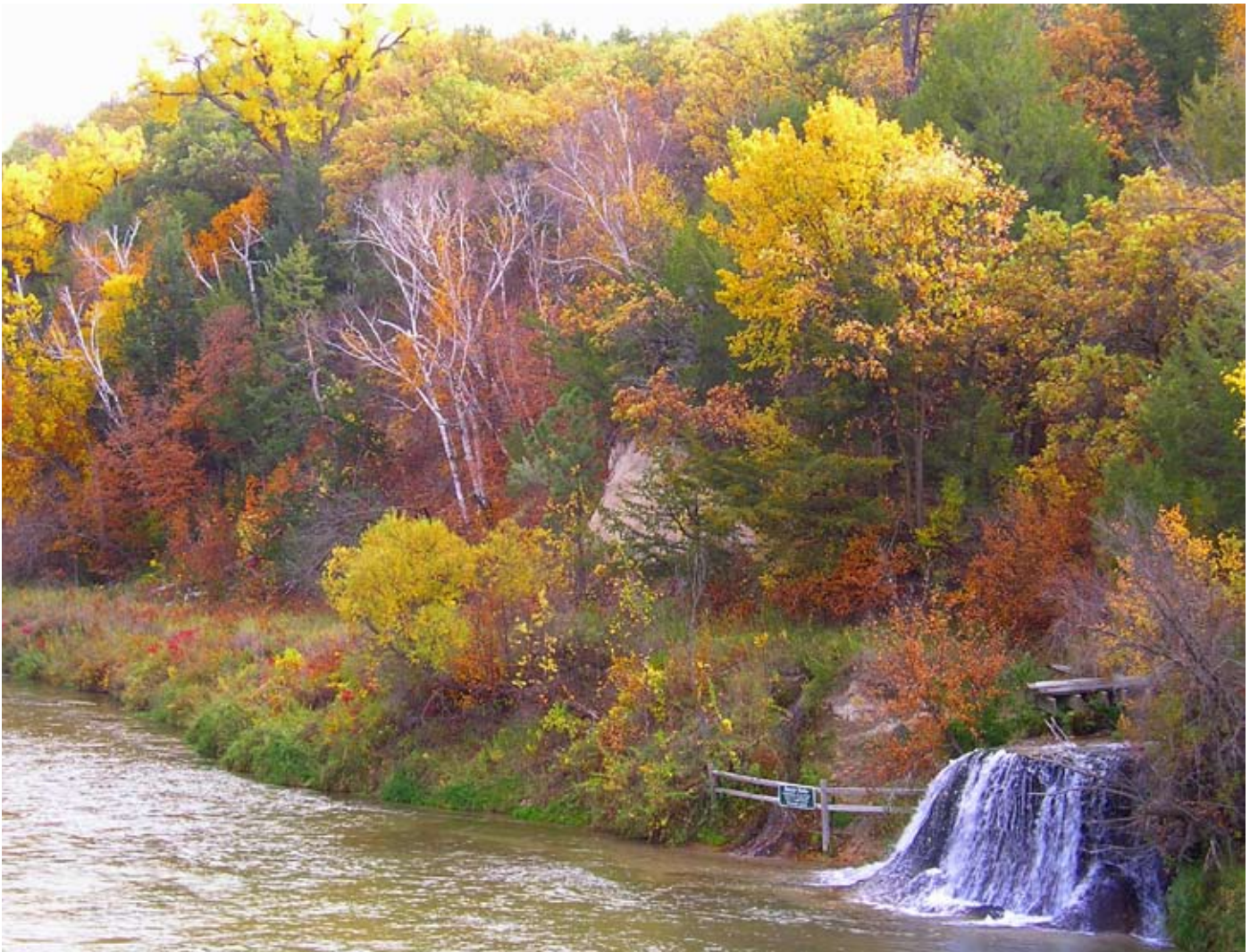
**Partner Sites:** Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge has a refuge brochure as does Smith Falls State Park. There are also publications that are produced by the Niobrara Council, various river outfitters, the Valentine Chamber of Commerce, and other local entities. There is no design or content coordination among the various publications.

## NEW PUBLICATIONS TO BE CREATED

- Consider developing an interagency welcome brochure to be distributed via hand-to-hand, mail, and e-mail.

- Create a standard map to be used by all groups, including visitors, agencies, and outfitters, which shows jurisdictions.
- Map may be in the form of a tear-sheet.
- Develop and implement landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings
- Develop and provide publications for distribution to outfitters including park brochures, park newspaper, bird lists, site bulletins, rack and safety cards, etc.
- Develop river-specific self-guiding field guides, with species lists.
- Develop biweekly or monthly “River Updates” for local radio and newspaper.
- Develop press kits.
- Enhance volunteer program by creating and advertising projects locally and on volunteer.gov website.
- Find ways to aid visitors in finding information by reviewing and improving brochures and other media.
- Prepare a menu of program opportunities and make it available to outfitters.
- Provide community outreach through media such as: newspaper column, cell phone update, e-mail list, quarterly newsletter, and radio.
- Assist in evaluation of existing partner produced self-guided tour media, including those produced by the scenic byway, Fort Falls, Smith Falls, and The Nature Conservancy, to accommodate people of all ability levels.

The Niobrara River drains nearly 12,000 square miles and cuts through four rock formations that provide the underground “plumbing” which supplies numerous springs and waterfalls.



# Websites and Other Electronic Media

The long-range interpretive planning workshop for the Niobrara National Scenic River included information sharing and discussions about new media. Various types of new media were evaluated that may prove to be useful in enhancing the visitor experience at the Niobrara National Scenic River.

Niobrara NSR should examine and regularly reevaluate new media possibilities for reaching audiences and visitors. “New media” is a rapidly evolving scenario, and choosing the appropriate media requires careful consideration of present and future technologies. The preparation for and implementation of new media also demands reevaluation of available resources and staffing.

The recommendation is to avoid implementation of electronic media on the river. Preserving the sanctity of the Niobrara River and maintaining a disturbance-free environment should remain high on the priority list. There are ample venues onshore to provide necessary visitor information.

The merging of individual, stand-alone technologies will influence future decisions about which media to use for defining and/or enhancing visitor experiences at Niobrara NSR. Wireless telephone technology advances (such as Smartphone) may soon eliminate the need for a separate GPS-enabled device or a separate MP3 player for listening to podcasts.

“Flickr,” “You Tube,” and other popular websites demand that the NPS is vigilant in creating the online experience desired park visitors. National Park Service sites usually do find their place on “Flickr” and “You Tube” whether desired or not. Controlling the message as much as possible is a good idea. Harnessing the power of these audience-building (also communication and networking) tools will require allocation of already scarce resources, but using these online tools to control and define the National Park Service online presence is necessary.

## **Advantages of websites and other electronic media:**

- Well-suited to the presentation of chronological and sequential material.
- Can capture realism and provide emotional impact.
- Provide opportunities for dramatization.
- Can be portable for off-site use.
- Provide views of places, animals, plants, and seasons otherwise unavailable or inaccessible.
- Can create a mood or atmosphere.
- Can reach many visitors at one time.
- Can be adapted to serve physically impaired visitors .
- Can illustrate before and after effects.
- Can be produced in different languages.

## **Limitations of websites and other electronic media:**

- Cannot be used everywhere.
- Require backup equipment, periodic maintenance, and regular monitoring.
- May be perceived as sterile or impersonal.

## **WEB-BASED INTERPRETATION**

Websites are frequently the main source of information for visitors. Website content should reflect the desired visitor experience. In determining website content, some basic questions are usually addressed. These are a few examples:

- What experiences will be shared with the visitor?
- To what level of detail or intensity?
- What can be downloaded or printed?



- Can a trip itinerary be done online?

At the 2009 long-range interpretive planning workshop, the group reviewed several NPS websites to better understand the extent to which a website can be used by visitors to plan itineraries, to learn about the site, and even to begin experiencing a particular destination.

The Niobrara National Scenic River experience is much more than just “running the river” (floating downstream for a few hours). Nationally significant fossil mammal sites, fascinating waterfalls, threatened/endangered species, and converging ecosystems are just some of the river’s other features that could be explored and addressed using web-based interpretation. There is no doubt that NIOB rangers and others who know the Niobrara well have unique river experiences and river stories that have yet to be shared with visitors. Web-based interpretation provides the vehicle for accomplishing this.

Using a previously developed and implemented NPS website model—the Acadia National Park eCruise—the Niobrara River experience could be effectively communicated in a “virtual” manner. (<http://www.nps.gov/acad/photosmultimedia/virtualtour.htm>) In reviewing the Acadia National Park eCruise online features, it was clear that the template and style of the eCruise would be a natural fit for NIOB.

This type of virtual tour can be customized. The visitor selects and activates audio and video clips, photographs, information panels, panoramic images, and park ranger talks. Easy to use “quick facts” and “start over” buttons make the experience a simple and pleasurable one.

A virtual tour of the Niobrara River would allow visitors to share in some of the magic of the Niobrara River in a way that may not be possible on a simple day canoe trip, allowing the visitor to experience the Niobrara River at dawn, at different seasons, and to see and hear things that may not always be evident on the river. The virtual

tour provides an experience for the “visitor in absentia,” as well as solutions for disabled persons who may not otherwise have the pleasure of experiencing the Niobrara National Scenic River in person.

#### **Advantages of web-based interpretation:**

- Cross media digital files can be uploaded and used as necessary.
- Website reaches unlimited visitors.
- Basic site rules and regulations can be easily disseminated.
- Website is accessible on-site (via internet enabled phones), but does not litter the landscape with additional electronic installations or devices.
- Allows for a wide variety of visitor experiences remotely.
- Virtual tour template already exists within National Park Service.
- Virtual tour is a great venue for ranger talks.
- Unique and special experiences can now be shared with all visitors.

#### **Disadvantages of web-based interpretation:**

- Website management requires significant resources for development and maintenance.

#### **WEB-BASED INTERPRETATION TO BE CONTINUED**

**Website:** The park will continue to maintain the website at [www.nps.gov/niob](http://www.nps.gov/niob).

#### **WEB-BASED INTERPRETATION TO BE CREATED**

- Develop a web page on “national significance.”
- Develop a *Leave No Trace* page on the park website.
- Enhance volunteer program by creating and advertising projects locally and on volunteer.gov website.

- Create podcasts where appropriate.
- Create special topic podcasts from the material created for self-guided auto tours.
- Post GPS coordinates of landings, restrooms, etc. on website.
- Develop pre- and post-trip planning using new media, including pod casts, e-tours, websites, and social networking.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.

### CELL PHONE AUDIO INTERPRETATION

At the 2009 long-range interpretive planning workshop, the group considered how cell phone audio technology works for the visitor, as well as how the technology would work for NIOB. Various examples of cell phone signage (arboretums, zoos, cemeteries) were reviewed. Still images of the Laurel Hill Cemetery audio tour were reviewed to help visualize how non-intrusive cell phone audio interpretation signs can be. An ABC News “You Tube” clip describing the Laurel Hill Cemetery cell phone audio tour experience worked well, as did the video clip introducing visitors to the Orange County Library facilities. Both of these are “Guide By Cell” programs.

Cell phone audio interpretation holds long-term (future) potential for NIOB. It is a media type that can be implemented and installed at a relatively low cost. Telephone numbers can be posted away from the riverbed at logical visitor gathering places. These prompts would work well at the canoe launch sites, scenic overlooks, and at the Smith Falls State Park Visitor Center.

The current obstacle to implementing this media type is that there appears to be no cell phone coverage near the riverbed and at the aforementioned visitor gathering places. Plans for cell phone signal enhancement by the Cherry County cell phone service providers should be researched.

### Advantages of cell phone audio interpretation:

- Can be implemented in areas outside of the Niobrara River.
- Visitors are likely to bring along cell phones on an outdoor hike or canoe trip.
- Future NIOB Visitor Center facility can list all cell phone audio interpretation telephone numbers pertaining to the NIOB experience centrally.
- Can call or access audio information remotely to learn about the river.

The Niobrara National Scenic River website is the main source of information for visitors.

The screenshot shows the NPS.gov website for the Niobrara National Scenic River. The header includes the NPS logo and the text "National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior". The main content area has a green background with the title "Niobrara" and the subtitle "National Scenic River Nebraska". To the right is a large image of a river with rapids. Below the title is a "view map" button. On the left side, there is a search bar and a list of links: "PARK HOME", "PLAN YOUR VISIT", "PHOTOS & MULTIMEDIA", "HISTORY & CULTURE", "NATURE & SCIENCE", "FOR TEACHERS", "FOR KIDS", "MANAGEMENT", and "SUPPORT YOUR PARK". Below these links is a "Site Index" link. On the right side, there is a "QUICKLINKS" section with links to "Directions", "Operating Hours & Seasons", "Fees & Reservations", "Waterfalls & Springs", and "Centennial Initiative 2016". Below this is a section titled "Not Ordinary, Extraordinary" with a paragraph of text about the river's unique features.

- Content can be recorded and updated easily.
- Content can be presented in multiple languages.
- Partnership possibilities.
- Can be used to provide information about scenic byways and overlooks in the area.
- Can be used to educate visitors about the river's features.
- Can be used as an adventure game experience for the visitor groups that NIOB rangers currently interact with at Smith Falls State Park (including scout and school groups).
- Can provide information about scenic byways and overlooks in the area.
- Can be used to educate visitors about the NIOB features.
- Point of Interest (POI) triggered programs on geology, ecosystems, fossils, etc., are needed at NIOB.

#### **Disadvantages of cell phone audio**

##### **interpretation:**

- Currently there is no reliable cell phone coverage on or near NIOB, effectively eliminating this new media as a viable option for the near term.
- Water is normally considered an unfriendly environment for electronic devices.
- GPS technology works on the river (as opposed to cell phones).
- Extensive battery power and waterproof features are built in.
- Can be used as an orientation tool
- good mapping capabilities on a portable handheld device.

#### **CELL PHONE AUDIO INTERPRETATION TO BE CREATED**

- Develop cell phone/audiovisual media products for on-site presentation.

#### **GPS LOCATION-BASED INTERPRETATION**

The discussion about Global Position System (GPS) technology considered satellite technology basics and the wide array of uses in people's everyday lives (cartography, forestry, etc.) Next, "GPS Ranger" handheld devices were considered, and their potential applications for the NIOB experience. "GPS Ranger" can serve as an instrument for self-guided multimedia tours, as well as a device for adventure game experiences. Both of these uses have potential application at NIOB. The location-triggered nature of "GPS Ranger" makes it especially useful as a source of both general and detailed information about NIOB and its features.

#### **Advantages of "GPS Ranger" technology:**

- Other cross media digital files can be uploaded and used on "GPS Ranger" (existing podcasts, still images, audio interpretation programs, etc.).

- Is a viable solution to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance issues at NIOB,
- Suitable for individuals or small groups
- supplements and enhances the "live" ranger experience.

#### **Disadvantages of "GPS Ranger" technology:**

- Relatively high cost of purchasing "GPS Ranger" devices.
- Relatively high maintenance and repair costs of "GPS Ranger" devices.
- Distribution and collection of "GPS Ranger" devices could be complex at NIOB.
- Water is normally considered an unfriendly environment for electronic devices.

#### **GPS LOCATION-BASED INTERPRETATION TO BE CREATED**

Although the usefulness of GPS technology for NIOB was acknowledged, only one task was identified for this medium.



Rafters brave the choppy rapids at Rocky Ford on the Niobrara River.

- Post GPS coordinates of landings, restrooms, etc. on website.

Several other topics discussed included:

- Handheld units, owned by the park, could be used for scavenger hunts or other interactive programs for scout and other youth groups.
- Using “Google” or other extant formats, a map could be created showing the exact locations of landings, bathrooms, river features, jurisdictions, etc.
- NPS geocaching policy and the pitfalls of geocaching on the private or public lands of NIOB territory; geocaches can be “mugged” or “plundered” (jargon).

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

At the 2009 long-range interpretive planning workshop, the group reviewed the basics of “Twitter,” “MySpace,” “Facebook,” and texting.

Workshop members had the chance to look at and understand how “Facebook”

connects people with similar interests. Using the State Parks of Arkansas “Facebook” account as an example of an organization with a “Facebook” presence, the group navigated through information about upcoming events, park visitor photo galleries, discussions about park features and links to official state park websites. “Facebook,” as well as a variety of other popular online media tools should, indeed, be monitored and wherever possible, harnessed, and controlled to the benefit of NIOB. If a NIOB “Facebook” site can be created, being actively involved in this process only stands to benefit the river.

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA TO BE CREATED**

- Create a “Facebook” group site for fans to share experiences. Post Niobrara videos of scenes and sounds.
- Develop pre- and post-trip planning using new media, including podcasts, e-tours, websites, and social networking.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations;

# Wayside Exhibits

## Advantages

- Can be available 24 hours a day.
- Use real objects and features in their own setting as objects of interpretation.
- Are relatively inexpensive.
- Can be designed to blend with site environment .
- Provide on-site interpretation of specific sites and stories.
- Can depict a place as it appeared many years before.
- Can show a feature from a view unattainable by visitors.
- Can illustrate phenomena that are invisibly affecting a resource.
- Establish a park identity at remote, unstaffed locations.
- Alert visitors to safety or resource management issues at the point of danger, decision, or environmental impact.
- Can be replaced relatively quickly and inexpensively.

## Limitations

- Limited amount of text and graphics per panel.
- Don't work well for complicated subject matter.
- Focus attention on tangible resources; less effective with intangibles and universal concepts.
- May intrude on a park's visual landscape.

- May not be practical at sites with climatic or environmental extremes.
- Susceptible to vandalism.

## PROJECTS ALREADY ENTERED INTO PMIS

The following media projects have been entered into PMIS:

### **PMIS #79466 MWZ - Wayside Exhibit Rehabilitation**

Repair and rehabilitate wayside exhibits along both the Missouri National Recreational River and Niobrara National Scenic River. This project will provide a uniform/consistent look for exhibits that will be readily recognizable to the public as belonging to and originated by NPS.

### **PMIS #150361 - Plan, Design, Fabricate, and Install Wayside Exhibits for Visitor Safety and Orientation**

This project will provide comprehensive wayside exhibit planning, design, fabrication and installation of 40 to 45 exhibits for the Niobrara National Scenic River in 2011 and 2012.

This project will provide a comprehensive graphic identity for Niobrara NSR while communicating important river safety, orientation, and interpretive messages to the public using the river.

Since the National Park Service owns no land along the river, these exhibits will be installed in partnership with state and federal partners, non-profit organizations (such as The Nature Conservancy), and other river access point landowners. The planning, design, fabrication, and installation will be completed by the Harpers Ferry Design Center of the National Park Service with interpretive oversight by the staff of the Niobrara NSR and the input of park partners.

## Other Media

### PRODUCTS TO BE CREATED

- Develop loaner backpack/dry bag of activities for families.
- Create a master safety video/DVD to mail out to school groups.
- Create a short safety video for reviewing prior to getting on the river.
- Create CDs and DVDs for self-guided auto tours.

### RADIO PROGRAMS TO BE CREATED

- Develop biweekly or monthly “River Updates” for local radio and newspaper.
- Develop and implement landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings.
- Enhance volunteer program by creating and advertising projects locally and on volunteer.gov website.
- Add a “river flow level” report to every local radio weather report.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver these in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.
- Provide community outreach through newspaper column, cell phone update, e-mail list, quarterly newsletter, and radio.

### RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

- Develop an evaluation method for the goal “Visitors and other stakeholders

will recognize the dependence of the Niobrara National Scenic River’s health on its ‘host’ partners” to measure effectiveness by 2019.

- Create strategy to assess level of stewardship among river visitors.
- Reevaluate existing self-guided tours, including those produced by the Scenic Byway, Fort Falls, Smith Falls, and The Nature Conservancy, to accommodate people of all ability levels.
- Reevaluate existing special programs to accommodate people of all ability levels.
- Assist visitors in finding information by reviewing and improving brochures and other media.

### STRATEGIES TO BE DEVELOPED

- Develop a “Respect the River” campaign targeted to college students.
- Develop and implement landowner communication strategy to include updates and personal meetings.
- Create strategy to assess level of stewardship among river visitors.
- Encourage a non-profit partner, such as the Niobrara Council, to establish a sales outlet.
- Develop resource protection messages and programs. Deliver messages and programs in a variety of media, at a variety of locations.

*“Who hears the rippling of rivers will not utterly despair of anything.”*

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

## New Facilities and Partnerships

### NEW FACILITIES

Although the park is currently limited to a leased facility in Valentine, Nebraska, it is hoped that someday a facility will be constructed for visitor services. A Project Management Information System project addresses this:

#### **PMIS #137921 - Construct a regional, multi-agency visitor information and education center.**

Constructing and interagency visitor and education center will allow each agency/entity to educate the public about the recreational opportunities that each area offers, as well as tie together the various recreational experiences into a common theme of the Sandhills/Niobrara River environs. This is especially true of state lands (state park, wildlife management areas) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands (Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge) with the possibilities of connector trails and water trails.

Establishing an interagency visitor and education center would orient travelers and park visitors to the national scenic river and surrounding resources and educational opportunities offered by other agencies. The NPS would have the opportunity to present safety messages and provide information and educate visitors about the park resources. There is no current visitor center for the NPS. Local residents have longed for a regional visitor center to serve the needs of the Sandhills.

Nearby are various state recreation areas such as Merritt Reservoir and Smith Falls State Park, two national forests,

and two U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuges. An interagency visitor center would showcase the region's diverse resources and recreational opportunities with the Niobrara River acting as the common thread linking the various lands together. Partnerships with these agencies and other local organizations to build and operate the center would be a logical option and a wise use of public funds.

### NEW PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to nurturing the existing partnerships described in the Existing Conditions section of this document, the park should work to develop new partnerships which may include:

- Individual Outfitters or Niobrara Outfitters Association: Cooperative ventures with outfitters could consist of interpretive canoe programs, canoe technique safety, orientation, distributing water trail brochures, site bulletins, wall-mounted displays, interpretive signs, location signs, landing improvements, and evening programs offered at campgrounds.
- Valentine Chamber of Commerce
- Nebraska Tourism Department
- Rosebud Sioux Tribe
- Cherry County Extension Service
- Local Schools
- Local Youth Groups: 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scout, etc.

*“There is no rushing a river. When you go there, you go at the pace of the water and that pace ties you into a flow that is older than life on this planet. Acceptance of that pace, even for a day, changes us, reminds us of other rhythms beyond the sound of our own heartbeats.”*

—JEFF RENNICK

RIVER DAYS: TRAVELS ON WESTERN RIVERS  
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

# Needs

## LIBRARY NEEDS

The library for Niobrara NSR should have books to support the scenic river's interpretive program, resource management program, and research efforts. A limited number of books currently exist at the Niobrara NSR Ranger Station in Valentine, Nebraska. The staff adds other titles and resources to these libraries on an annual basis. The library should eventually contain titles and resources related to each of the park's significance statements and interpretive themes.

As media is developed for the scenic river over the years, the park staff should start and update a library section that organizes the entire park's planning documents and media plans. This section would be the basis of the Interpretive Database (ID) portion of the Comprehensive Interpretive Plan (CIP).

## COLLECTION NEEDS

The proposed museum objects collection at any park should support the park's future exhibit needs and research efforts. At Niobrara NSR, there are no objects in the collection at this time. Any future collections should be developed under the guidance of a scope of collections statement and collection management plan (CMP); the CMP would determine whether a curatorial storage facility is needed at Niobrara NSR.

The scenic river's curatorial collection should respond to the needs documented in the park's Resource Management Plan, and the need for objects documented in the Museum Exhibit Plan prepared for the proposed visitor center. If a permanent curatorial storage facility is established in the proposed visitor center, the park could start a variety of collections such as insects, fish, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, birds, plants, geology, and fossil specimens, as well as American Indian, pioneer, and ranching artifacts.

## STAFFING NEEDS

In 2009 Niobrara NSR conducted a Core Operations Evaluation, a stringent

analysis of park priorities and minimum needs. At that time it was identified that a complete interpretive staff would include the following positions, which are not yet included on the park's organizational chart:

- 1 - GS-9 Training or Educational Specialist
- 4 - GS-5 Seasonal Park Ranger Interpreters:

These positions are in addition to the current staffing which includes:

- 1 - GS-11 Chief
- 1 - GS-9 Park Ranger

This brings this information into line with the Core Operations Evaluation plan and Operations Formulation System (OFS) request.

Tasks for which significant staffing hours are needed include managing and maintaining the NIOB digital image library.

In an effort to expand visitor services, the park has submitted the following PMIS projects:

### **PMIS #149270 - Volunteer-In-Parks - NIOB VIP Program Support**

This project would provide funding to implement volunteer safety and task training, safety, task and uniform supplies, and reimbursements for program participants.

### **OFS FUNDING REQUESTS**

Several requests have been submitted to the Operational Funding System which, if/when funded, will improve the capacity and efficiency of interpretive operations at Niobrara NSR.

### **OFS #24113A - Provide GSA leased space for headquarters and increased staff.**

Funding is requested to provide GSA leased space in Valentine, Nebraska for the staff of Niobrara National Scenic River, consisting of approximately 15 positions, including seasonals. The leased space would provide office space, a small visitor contact

area, workshop for repair of canoes and other equipment, and indoor parking for law enforcement and fire vehicles. This funding would contribute to increased visitor satisfaction with services offered and provide adequate office space for increased visitor protection staff.

**OFS#12013A: Expand Visitor and Resource Protection Program at Developing Park.**

Funding is requested to expand the visitor and resource protection program at Niobrara National Scenic River in response to a 50 percent increase in visitation from 52,776 in 2004 to 79,706 in 2007. Current law enforcement coverage is inadequate to ensure a safe floating experience. In recent years the park had to request assistance from other parks and agencies in order to provide visitor use management during the busy floating season. Average staffing level for last four years has been two rangers. The park is unable to manage disorderly visitors, control alcohol-related problems, or ensure compliance with boating laws.

In the last four years, direct river use has increased 22 percent. Direct law enforcement contacts have increased 30 percent. Funding would allow increased presence of seasonal rangers on the river; daily patrol of two to three river segments instead of one; and coverage of two shifts instead of one. Projected outcomes are: visitor satisfaction would increase four percent from 89 to 93 percent; visitor understanding would increase two percent from 83 to 85 percent; average number of visitor accidents each year would decrease from three to one.

**OFS#11273A: Strengthen the Niobrara's resources management partnering capabilities.**

Legislation and congressional testimony encouraged managing the Niobrara NSR in cooperation with local partners to the fullest extent possible, a vision grounded in a core tenet of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Niobrara general management plan acknowledges that some 90 percent of the lands within the boundaries are privately held and destined to remain so, yet the unit is necessarily managed in complete accord with the high standards of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and NPS Organic Act. This funding request specifically enables the NPS to enhance its partnering capabilities through an array of cost-share initiatives to more aggressively manage unique resources on the non-federal lands within the unit. Outcomes include proactive resource stewardship on the non-federal holdings, restrained land development in accordance with local zoning codes (and even deflected development), and harmony among somewhat apprehensive and generally conservative park landowners.

An additional OFS request is currently being developed to request funding for additional staff identified in the 2009 Core Operations Evaluation Plan for the Niobrara National Scenic River. For interpretation and education to achieve basic core operational levels, we will be requesting base funding to establish a GS-9 education or training specialist and up to four seasonal park ranger interpreter positions. Funding to maintain two Teacher-Ranger-Teacher summer positions is also being requested.

*“Any river is really the summation of the whole valley. To think of it as nothing but water is to ignore the greater part.”*

—HAL BORLAND  
THIS HILL, THIS VALLEY

# Research Needs

## VISITOR STUDIES

Niobrara NSR has been approved for an in-depth visitor study in Fiscal Year 2010. This will be conducted by the University of Idaho Visitor Studies Project (VSP) with the assistance of NIOB staff. The park's management team will formulate the goals for this study, which will include gaining a better understanding of visitor motivations and interests. Data from the study will inform future interpretive programming and the upcoming River Management Plan.

The FY2010 study may be an appropriate venue through which to accomplish the following two tasks as identified in the 2009 long-range interpretive plan workshop:

- Develop evaluation method for the goal "Visitors and other stakeholders will recognize the dependence of the Niobrara River's health on its 'host' partners" to measure effectiveness by 2019.
- Create strategy to assess level of stewardship among river visitors

## NATURAL HISTORY

The resource management specialist at Niobrara NSR addresses many natural resource issues; park ranger/interpreters should keep current with these issues on an ongoing basis. As research takes place on the following topics, interpreters will develop interpretive programs and media to enable the public to understand the impact and significance of managing critical natural resources. Subjects may include:

- Air quality
- Water quality
- Waterfall formation
- Hydrology/age of water
- Sediment transport and streambed erosion
- Fire history

- Plant composition/types
- Aspen and birch survival/ecology
- Hybrid species (birds, plants)
- Federal and State Threatened and Endangered species (whooping cranes, piping plovers, least terns, finescale dace, blacknose shiners)
- Exotic species management (purple loosestrife, leafy spurge)
- In-stream flow (Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is studying limits to water withdrawal permits)
- Groundwater recharge studies (conducted by the Upper Great Plains Inventory and Monitoring Network)
- Assessment of paleontological resources

The following projects have been entered into the Project Management Information System :

**PMIS #105788 - Evaluation of potential impacts of human physical disturbance to benthic communities on tributaries.**

**PMIS #82031 - Investigate the formation and unique geometry of waterfalls along the Niobrara River.**

**PMIS #143398 - Visitor impacts on spiny softshell turtles on the Niobrara National Scenic River.**

**PMIS #105662 - Weather/microclimate interactions in relation to paper birch decline at Niobrara National Scenic River.**

**PMIS #124022 - Age structure of forests containing paper birch within the Niobrara National Scenic River.**

**PMIS #85487 - Research and monitor water quality of the Niobrara National Scenic River.**

**PMIS #151519 - Determining the sources of bacteria in the Niobrara National Scenic River and its tributaries.**

- Ranching heritage
- Fort Niobrara

**PMIS #151804 - Sediment budget for the scenic and recreational reaches of the Niobrara River.**

- Railroads
- Settlement

#### **CULTURAL HISTORY**

Management at Niobrara NSR addresses many cultural resource issues. As research takes place on the following topics, interpreters will develop interpretive programs and media to enable the public to understand the impact and significance of managing critical cultural resources. Subjects may include:

- Affiliated American Indian tribes
- History of the four-county region (Cherry, Rock, Brown, and Keya Paha)
- History of local communities (Meadville, Carns, Riverview, Mariaville)
- Historic bridge structures (Norden, Carns, Berry, Borman)

- Homesteaders
- Exploration
- History of wilderness
- Wild and Scenic River preservation

A “Historic Overview and Assessment” was completed for the scenic river in 1994. However, a historic resources study and special resources study still needs to be completed on the themes listed to provide factual information for interpretation.

The following projects have been entered into PMIS:

**PMIS #82478 - Study the range cattle legacy of the Middle Niobrara.**



Niobrara fossils are an unseen treasure trove preserved in two- to six-million year old volcanic ash.

# Planning Team

In September 2009 Niobrara National Scenic River held a long-range interpretive planning workshop in Valentine, Nebraska. During the workshop, park staff and about 20 park stakeholders discussed their 7 to 10-year vision for Niobrara NSR that is summarized in this Long-Range Interpretive Plan. The workshop participants who helped forge this LRIP are:

## NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER

Dan Foster	Superintendent, Niobrara National Scenic River and Missouri National Recreational River
Sandi Kinzer	Chief of Interpretation and Education, Niobrara National Scenic River
Pamela Sprenkle	Resource Management Specialist, Niobrara National Scenic River
Stuart Schneider	Chief Ranger, Niobrara National Scenic River
Adrianne Johnson	Park Ranger, Niobrara National Scenic River

## HARPERS FERRY INTERPRETIVE DESIGN CENTER

Peggy Scherbaum	Interpretive Planner (Team Captain)
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## MIDWEST REGIONAL OFFICE

Roberta Wendel	Interpretive Specialist, NPS Midwest Regional Office
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## PARK PARTNERS AND CONSULTANTS

Vid Mednis	Media Specialist, Interpretive Solutions
Steve Hicks	Manager, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge
Sandy Benson	Northern Prairies Land Trust
Twyla Graham	Niobrara Council and Niobrara River Outfitters Association
Tracey Nelson	The Nature Conservancy
Kayla Kelly	Niobrara Council
John Lemmon	Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
Anne Doherty-Stephen	Missouri National Recreational River
Jack Lemmon	Smith Falls State Park
Kalli Kieborz	Niobrara Council
Nancy Reinhardt	Writer
Dallas Dodson	Niobrara Council
Dean Jacobs	Valentine Chamber of Commerce
Rich Mercure	Little Outlaw/Supertubes Outfitter

*“The Niobrara River shows that even in Nebraska we have some really neat stuff to see and do.”*

—PARK VISITOR  
NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER

# Appendix

## SPECIAL POPULATIONS GUIDANCE

Harpers Ferry Center has recently revised the *Programmatic Accessibility Guidelines for NPS Interpretive Media*. It clarifies how to provide programmatic access to people with disabilities and those from special populations. The document is written for media specialists, interpreters, rangers, superintendents, and other National Park Service employees and contractors who approve or develop interpretive media and programs. It provides guidance regarding personal services programs, audiovisual programs, audio tours, exhibits, publications, and web-based media. Topics include:

- New chapters on the laws, regulations, and policies that govern accessibility interpretive media.
- Highlights of the new *Americans with Disabilities Act and Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Guidelines* (ABAAS), which takes the place of the *Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards* (UFAS).
- Useful links to laws and best practices in accessible media.
- Park and Harpers Ferry Center accountability for accessible media.

- The latest pictographs and links for pictograph downloads.
- How to plan and scope for accessibility.
- Accessibility for web-based media.
- Updates on new technology.
- How to prepare a report or document so that computers can read the text content aloud.
- How parks can get the word out about their accessible sites and programs.
- Many diagrams to help NPS employees and contractors understand the specifications.

Successful programmatic accessibility begins with comprehensive parkwide interpretive planning so that all media and personal services can work together. Where one may not be accessible to all persons, other services can fill the gaps. Early recognition of, and sensitivity to, accessibility issues will result in the most successful visitor experience.

The new guidelines are available now in PDF format at [www.nps.gov/hfc](http://www.nps.gov/hfc).

Wild bergamot, or bee balm, is a member of the mint family with many medicinal uses identified by Native Americans.



*“To trace the history of a river or a raindrop . . . is also to trace the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body. In both, we constantly seek and stumble upon divinity, which like feeding the lake, and the spring becoming a waterfall, feeds, spills, falls, and feeds itself all over again.”*

—GRETEL EHRLICH  
ISLANDS, THE UNIVERSE, HOME

**Cross Falls is located on a short spring branch near the Niobrara River.**

*Please reduce, reuse, and pass this publication along to other readers.*



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



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