Cultural Resources and Climate Change

Background

Cultural resources, which include archeological sites, cultural landscapes, ethnographic resources, historic and prehistoric structures, and museum collections, have distinct considerations with respect to climate change. Most are fixed in place or derive much of their significance from the place within which they were created. Many are nonliving, and all are unique. As a result, the capacity of cultural resources to adapt to changing environments is limited.

Impacts to cultural resources from climate change range from coastal erosion and storm damage to effects of wildfires, floods, melting permafrost and more rapid deterioration due to changing rain and temperature patterns. Cultural resources have always been subject to these types of environmental forces. However, observed and projected climate change trends are a great concern as these forces accelerate, intensify, and combine in new ways that are increasing our rate of loss of cultural resources. These trends heighten the urgency for the NPS to survey climate-vulnerable areas, develop appropriate preservation and documentation techniques, and learn from the history and prehistory these resources contain. With so many cultural resources entrusted in our care, the NPS provides leadership nationwide to their preservation and management in regards to climate change.

Approach

Cultural resources are irreplaceable indicators of the wide array of lifeways, ideas, beliefs, practices, and experiences that, over time, have led to the world we live in today. The NPS researches both the impacts of climate change on cultural resources as well as the many forms of information about human history and human-environment interactions they contain. The NPS works to adapt cultural resource stewardship, management, research, and interpretive practices to the challenges of climate change.

Current Projects

Policy and Program Development

- Expansion of *NPS Climate Change Response Strategy* Goal 7 — Implement Cultural Resource Adaptation — into a comprehensive program plan that sets out the dual relationship of cultural resources and climate change – impacts on and information from.
- Engagement of park, regional, and program staff in the "Climate and Culture" community of practice.

Science

- Development of a handbook outlining the types of impacts observed and anticipated from climate change to all categories of cultural resources across each eco-region of the nation.

At Dry Tortugas National Park, repair planning at Fort Jefferson must take into account projected sea level rise and increased storm intensity.

- Ongoing inventory and research of artifacts exposed by melting high mountain ice patches, known as "ice patch archaeology."
- Integration of natural and cultural data in assessments of resource vulnerability to projected climate change trends.
- Incorporation of cultural resources into scenario planning training and park planning documents.
- Training and guidance on cultural resources research priorities and planning at landscape and multi-agency scales for federal, state, tribal, and other partners.

Coastal Adaptation Handbook

- Development of management options for vulnerable cultural resources in the coastal zone and linking of the decision frameworks to those for adjacent natural resources and infrastructure.

Telling Climate Stories

- Cultural resources are an integral part of NPS climate change story. Developing instructional products on the progression of climate change and engaging with long-term and ongoing relationships between humans and our environments will help park staff more fully share these impacts and lessons learned with park visitors.

More Information

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