

ITEM 8:

Consider an amendment to the T. H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park Management Plan (Lease No. 3533).

LOCATION:

Gulf County

APPLICANT:

Division of Recreation and Parks

STAFF REMARKS:

The Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) is requesting ARC approval of an amendment to the T. H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park (St. Joseph Peninsula) Land Management Plan. St. Joseph Peninsula is approximately 2,791 acres in size, located in Gulf County approximately 21 miles from Port St. Joe and 26 miles from Apalachicola. Access to the park is from State Roads 30A and 30E. The DRP is requesting approval of a land planning concept that would redevelop, enhance, and improve land use and resource management for the state park.

The amendment is a summary report of the DRP’s redevelopment planning and implementation efforts for St. Joseph Peninsula following the extensive damages incurred during Hurricane Michael. The details of the report distinguish between projects already completed and those that are conceptual. Consistencies with and departures from the 2014 approved management plan are also noted.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

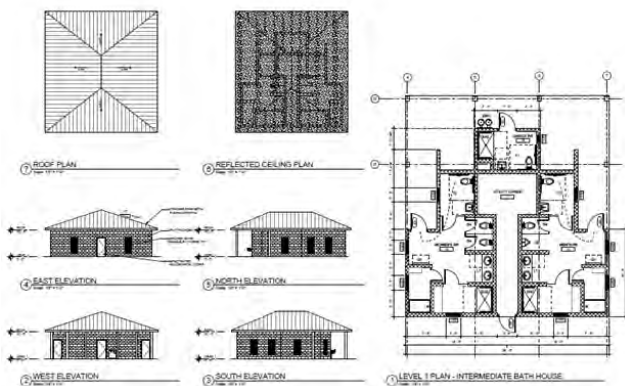
Approve the management plan amendment.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

- APPROVE**
- APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS:** _____
- DEFER**
- WITHDRAW**
- NOT APPROVE**
- OTHER:** _____



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan





T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Timeline

On October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael devastated northwest Florida with unprecedented force, leaving many communities and regional assets in severely damaged condition. Included among the damages were eight Florida State Parks, with T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park near the center of the hurricane landfall.

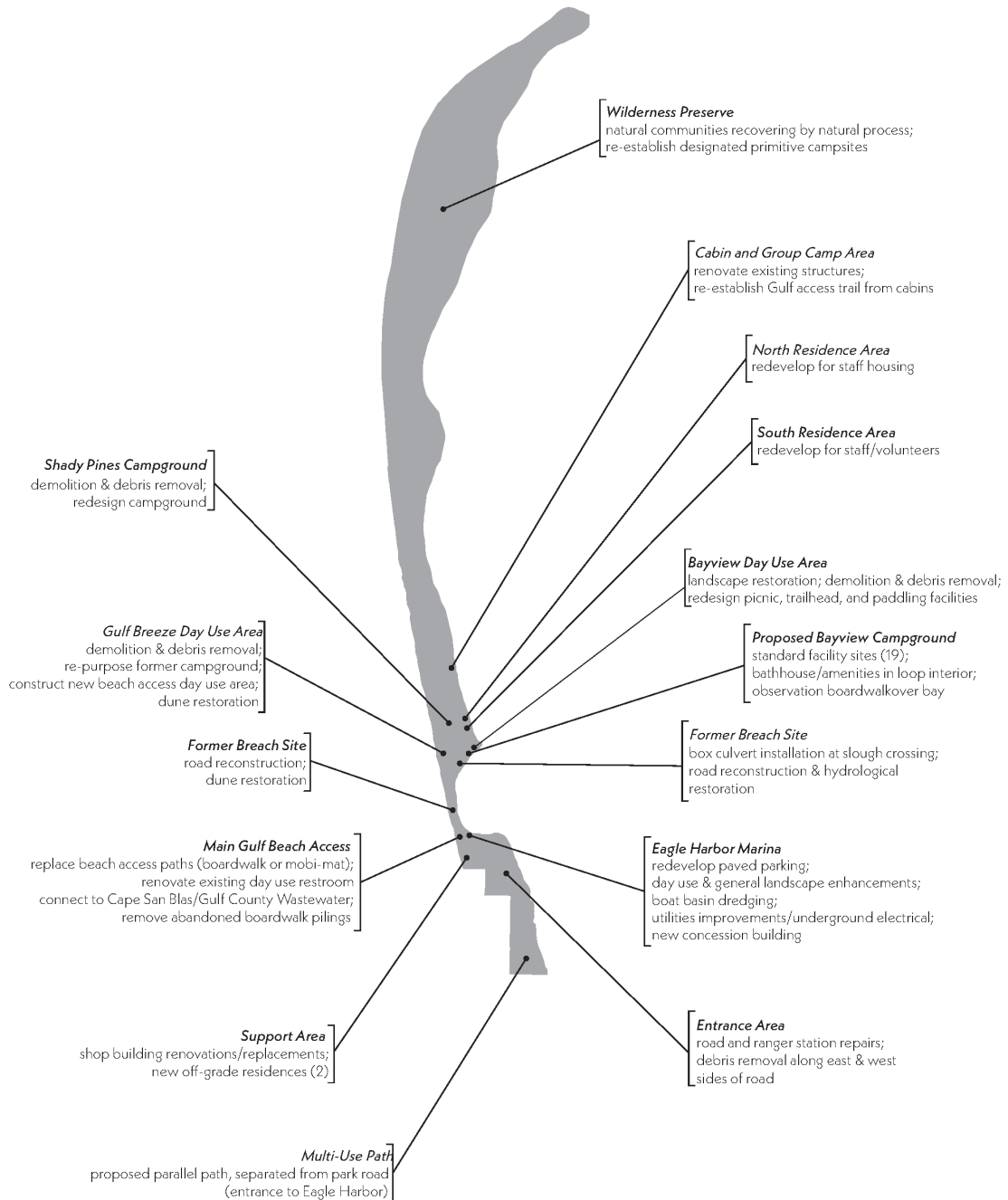
The initial recovery actions and subsequent long-term redevelopment planning for St. Joseph Peninsula State Park have taken approximately three years to complete. As of October 2021, the Division of Recreation & Parks intends to complete the reconstruction of most or even all park facilities in the park by July 2021.

October 10, 2018	Hurricane Michael landfall in northwest Florida
October 2018 – January 2019	Assessments of parkwide damages and infrastructural triage under emergency authorizations
January 15, 2019	First general public meeting conducted in Port St. Joe (Gulf Coast State College) to describe impacts and hear from community stakeholders (approximately 130 participants)
January 18, 2019	Reopening of southernmost Gulf beach and bay shoreline access for day use
April 30, 2019	Second general public meeting conducted in Port St. Joe (Centennial Building) to provide progress updates on recovery efforts and planning concepts with opportunity for stakeholder comments (approximately 90 participants)
November 2018 – February 2019	Gradual process of natural accretion of sand in the breach site
November 2019	Complete authorization and deposition of native beach sand from a permitted offshore site for full repair of the breach site
November 2019 – September 2021	Ongoing debris removal and planning, surveying, designing, and permitting for reconstruction of park infrastructure and use-area facilities
September 20, 2021	Third general public meeting conducted virtually to describe all redevelopment concepts and hear from stakeholders
September 30, 2021	Open-house format public meeting conducted at the St. Joseph Bay Buffer Preserve visitor center to further engage with stakeholders regarding park redevelopment concepts



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Redevelopment Projects Map



Last revised: October 21, 2021



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan Land Use Improvements & Resource Management

The following report describes all public access and park service support facilities projects that have been planned for the redevelopment of St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, in south-to-north geographic order:

Multi-Use Path and Entrance Area

- A multiuse (bicycle-pedestrian) path separated from the park road will extend north from the existing Cape San Blas Trail, providing a safe alternative to driving into the park.
- Repairs to gate and lower park road completed to welcome visitors and for ease of driving.
- Completed minimally-invasive debris removal along east and west sides of park road to maximize natural regrowth of flatwoods vegetation and scenic viewsheds for visitors on arrival.
- Reduced fire hazard adjacent to neighboring residential communities.

Support Area

- Support buildings for maintenance and storage have been repaired to continue daily park operations to support visitor services and resource management.
- Two new off-grade staff residences are designed, permitted, and under construction.

Eagle Harbor Marina

- Create new parking for beach visitors and boaters, within former paved footprints, realigning the configuration to maximize safety and convenience.
- Redesign of pedestrian walkways between concession area amenities.
- Basic landscape enhancements to encourage growth of naturally occurring coastal vegetation.
- Re-dredge boat basin to maximize safe navigation by visiting watercraft.
- Extend electrical utilities underground north from the marina site.
- New concession building with restroom to replace existing structure has been designed and permitted. To be constructed in a later phase.

Main Gulf Beach Access

- Renovate existing aged day-use restroom.
- Connect to Cape San Blas/Gulf County wastewater facilities south of park.
- Replace boardwalks extending to beach from parking and picnic area.



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan Land Use Improvements & Resource Management

Former Breach Site (project area 1)

- Road reconstruction has been completed along nourished sand corridor with restored dunes and coastal vegetation.
- Extend electrical utilities underground through this corridor.

Former Breach Site (project area 2)

- A newly constructed road now crosses significant slough feature utilizing large box culverts, where on-grade roadbed formerly bisected the waters.
- Box culverts have restored natural hydrology to this slough (consistent with 2014 UMP) and are sufficiently wide to allow passage of paddlers during low tide conditions.
- Yielding favorable restoration results, i.e., water quality and ecological improvement.

Proposed Gulf Breeze Day Use Area (Former Gulf Breeze Campground)

- Extensive debris scatter from former campground has been removed and natural dunescape is returning with native plant installations.
- Ruined bathhouses have been demolished.
- A short segment of new roadway will bring visitors to a parking area with access to the Gulf beach where previously the park only offered overnight facilities.
- The new Gulf Breeze Day Use area will allow visitors to explore an area of beach north of Eagle Harbor with a scenic backdrop of piney flatwoods and open marsh that provide habitat for an abundance of wildlife.
- Opportunities for passively viewing and interpreting this interior landscape will be provided by short walking paths and a potential observation platform.
- Additional amenities at this location will include overflow parking for vehicles with boat trailers, a restroom, and covered pavilions.

Shady Pines Campground

- New box culvert installed to cross slough for campground access, maximizing natural hydrology.
- Complete redesign and reconstruction planned, including realignment/reconfiguration of campground roads away from the natural wetlands to maximize use of dry terrain for campers.
- Significant natural and infrastructural debris scattered throughout has been removed. Many standing declining/dead trees removed, while protecting eagle nest within the vicinity.
- Reestablish walking trail access to Gulf beach directly from the campground.



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan Land Use Improvements & Resource Management

Shady Pines Campground (continued)

- New campground will feature approximately 36 standard-facility campsites and 10 tent campsites with the potential for multiple (estimated total of four) elevated tent camping platforms overlooking the forested/wetland interior of the peninsula. Other observation decks may also be included for campers to interpret surrounding landscape.
- Two new bathhouses will be centrally located within the campground.

Bayview Day Use Area

- Regrading and restoration of original terrain to be completed where deep soil erosion occurred.
- Reestablish the Bayview Hiking Trail stemming from this day use area.
- Continue to utilize this site for launching paddlecraft/small watercraft where Eagle Harbor is optimally suited for larger motorized boats.
- Construct new shade pavilions for picnics and use by hikers and paddlers.

Proposed Bayview Campground

- A new campground loop will be created on the site of a former boat trailer parking loop road.
- Campers will enjoy a scenic view over the waters of St. Joseph Bay.
- Approximately 19 standard-facility campsites proposed within interior of this loop.
- Potential design elements:
 - Interior of campground loop will be canopied by natural scrubby flatwoods landscape.
 - Interior of loop will be traversed by a footpath with a centrally located bathhouse.
 - Observation boardwalk with covered platform extending from camping area.

Residence Areas

- Staff residences, heavily damaged by the hurricane will be reconstructed to ensure that management presence continues to serve the resources and visitors of the park.
- Campsites for volunteers may be established to promote ongoing community-supported stewardship and recovery of the park.

Cabin and Group Camp Areas

- The eight cabins and linked boardwalks were moderately to severely damaged by storm surge flooding and will be renovated and/or reconstructed as necessary to bring back this highly popular overnight accommodation within the park.
- Gulf access trail from cabins will be reestablished for cabin visitors to reach the beach within short walking distance.
- Restore water and electric utilities to group camp area.



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ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK
Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan
Land Use Improvements & Resource Management

Wilderness Preserve

- Natural debris scatter along shoreline and within scrub interior has dissipated by natural processes, making way for growth of successional vegetation.
- Where there was extensive acreage of standing dead trees with widespread canopy loss, new oaks and pines are rapidly emerging in the understory.
- These highly sensitive natural communities not suitable for clearing but have demonstrated natural resilience to the impacts of the hurricane.
- Wilderness preserve management calls for minimal, non-mechanical solutions.
- Seven designated primitive campsites to be reestablished after safety and access concerns are resolved.



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to describe progress on and plans for the redevelopment of St. Joseph Peninsula State Park three years after Hurricane Michael devastated the Florida Panhandle; regionwide devastation that included the infrastructure and natural landscape of this beloved and beautiful park.

The Florida Park Service held three public meetings to gain stakeholder input during its post hurricane efforts. The first meeting, which was held in January 2019 in Port St. Joe, was to describe the impacts and invite public comments and questions about potential routes to recovery.

The second meeting, conducted in April 2019, also in Port St. Joe, was to communicate solutions to the first major hurdles in recovery and to garner further public and stakeholder input. That meeting involved a joint effort with the DEP Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection and the Florida Geological Survey to address complex issues pertaining to the massive breach through the peninsula and to consider the peninsula's ecological relationship to the waters that surround it.



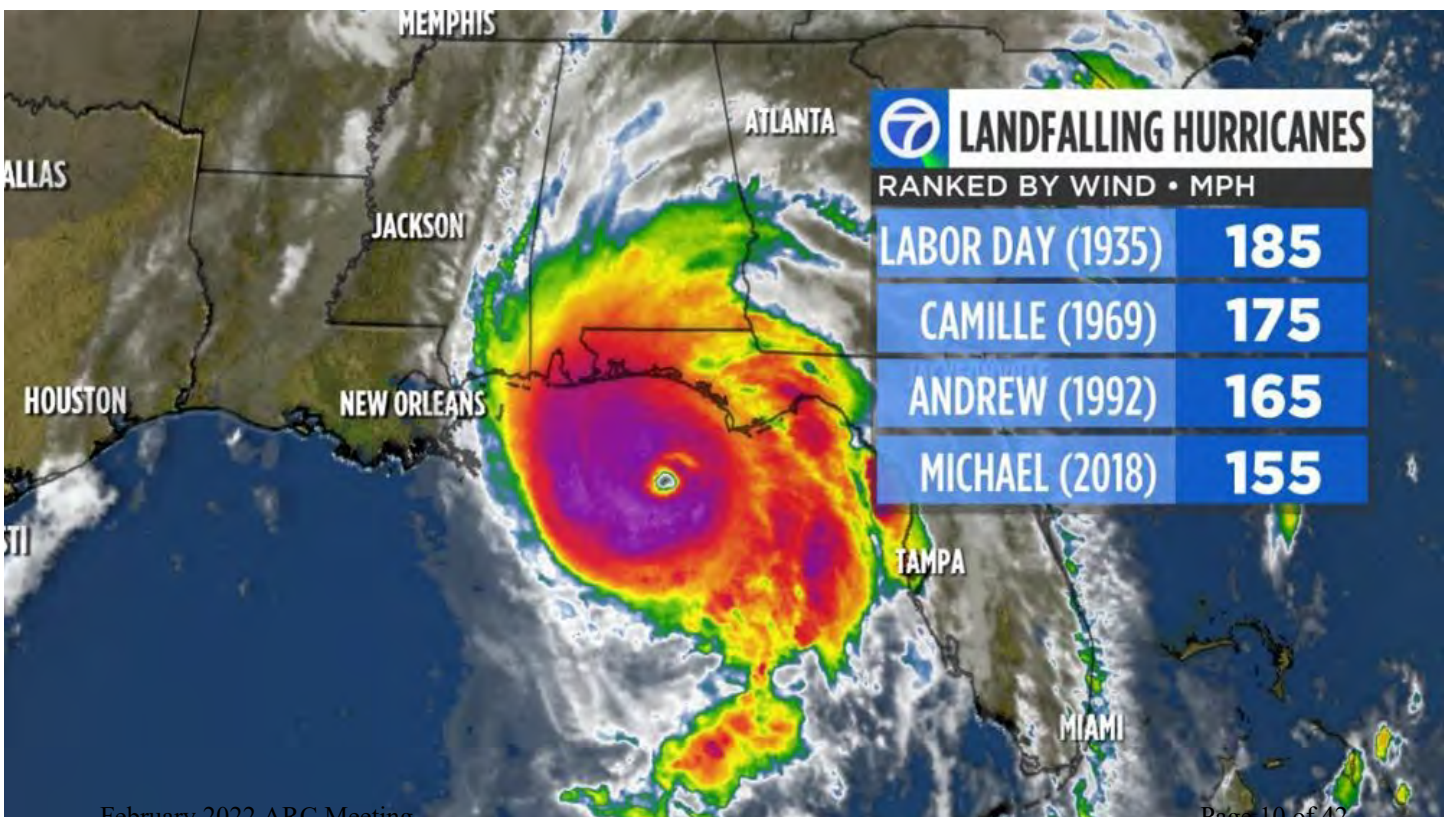


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Hurricane Michael

On October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael struck northwestern Florida with unprecedented and highly destructive force, from which numerous communities are still recovering to this day. It was a hardship endured by many individuals, families, cities, and, collectively, this entire stretch of the Gulf Coast.

While many impacts, along the coast and farther inland, were mended swiftly, others took longer, and still some continue to be addressed through complex engineering, environmental evaluations, and financial considerations. Very much included in the affected geographic area, and with a mixed story of both short- and long-term recovery, is St. Joseph Peninsula State Park.





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ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK
Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Hurricane Michael

St. Joseph Peninsula State Park was not the only unit of the Florida Park System to incur considerable damages to infrastructure and natural and cultural resources.

Since the hurricane, most of the eight parks listed below have made major, if not complete, recoveries, including roads, facilities, utilities, and buildings; perhaps less for their natural landscapes.

St. Joseph Peninsula, which was situated in the center of the storm's path, has required an especially long recovery effort.



Heavily Impacted Parks:

Torrey State Park

Three Rivers State Park

Florida Caverns State Park

Falling Waters State Park

St. Andrews State Park

Constitution Convention Museum State Park

T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park

Dr. Julian G. Bruce St. George Island State Park



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Pre-Hurricane Conditions

To best understand the scope of the redevelopment, it is important to review the park as it was before Hurricane Michael, because, by looking at the park's pre-hurricane capacity, we can better explain how and why things are being reconstructed or redeveloped the way they are.

Acquired as a state park in 1964, encompassing 2,791 acres, St. Joseph Peninsula has a well-established history as an anchor of conservation and ecotourism in Northwest Florida. Prior to the hurricane, in Fiscal Year 2017-2018 alone, the park welcomed nearly 300,000 recorded visitors. Those multiple hundred-thousands of visitors collectively spent over \$21 million dollars in the local area in conjunction with their park visits. These expenditures yielded an estimated Direct Economic Impact of over \$22 million dollars of tourism and outdoor-recreation spending. This economic activity supported an estimated 300 jobs across the local & regional area.





T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan Pre-Hurricane Conditions

For day use, the park has been most known as a destination for:

- Accessing approximately 20 miles of shoreline along both the Gulf of Mexico and St. Joseph Bay, including about 10 miles on the Gulf and another 10 miles on the bay – with abundant opportunities for swimming, snorkeling, shoreline fishing, and wildlife observation.
- Hiking along networks of interpretive trails and boardwalks, including an eight-mile trail through 1,950 acres of designated wilderness preserve and launching boats or kayaks, paddleboards, and canoes into the clear waters of St. Joseph Bay.
- To support all of this resource-based outdoor recreation and interpretation, the park offered substantial amenities.





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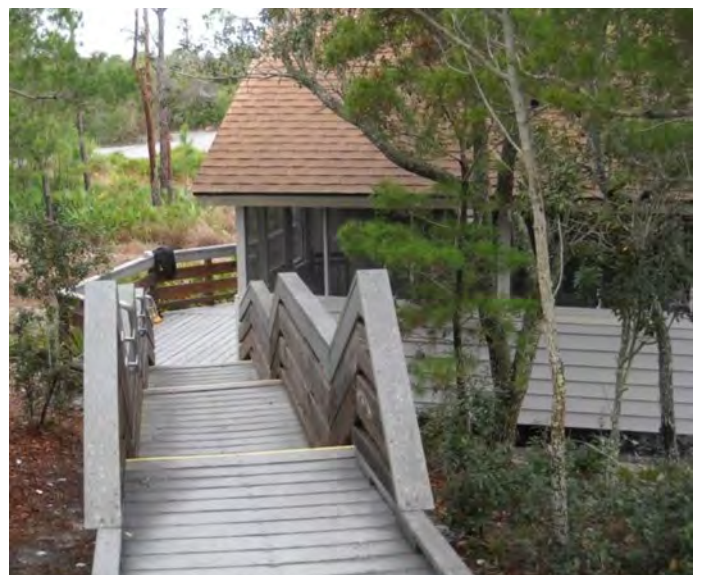
Pre-Hurricane Conditions

For overnight use, the park also boasted 119 campsites in two separate standard-facility campgrounds, eight cabins and seven designated primitive campsites widely spread across the wilderness preserve in the northern reaches of the peninsula.

The striking sunsets west over the Gulf, dark skies by night, and impressive sunrises east over the bay certainly made for rewarding overnight experiences that many visitors sought out for decades.



To sustainably support these camping and cabin experiences, the park offered considerable specialized infrastructure.





T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan Post-Hurricane Conditions

Unfortunately, all park amenities and infrastructural components to support day and overnight access to this conservation area were heavily damaged by Hurricane Michael.

Visitation dropped to between 17-18,000 visitors per year, having only the capacity to offer the most basic day use access in the southernmost portions of the park.

The subsequent pages of this report will examine each of the specific sites of the park that have been most significant in this long hurricane recovery story; to identify progress, the natural processes that have occurred, the tasks that have been successfully completed, and the next projects that are planned.





T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Redevelopment Areas

This parkwide map, with a rotated north-south-oriented position, flags the 12 main redevelopment project sites, geographically ordered north to south - from where visitors first enter the park to the wilderness preserve.

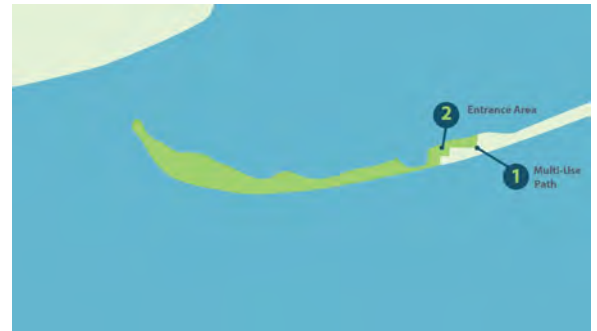




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Multi-Use Path & Entrance Area

Beginning at the south end, where Cape San Blas Road meets St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, there are two elements to consider: a proposed multi-use path to extend into the park and the broader entrance area that marks the visitor's arrival into this special place.



Where many cyclists already ride the busy park road (without a dedicated lane), construction of a multi-use path has been a longstanding concept for diversifying modes of access to the park and to bring more cyclists and pedestrians into the park safely and confidently, extending parallel to the existing park road – but separated modestly from motorized vehicular traffic, with a vegetated median as a buffer.



If constructed, the trail would terminate at the south end of Eagle Harbor. This concept was widely shared and approved through the 2014 unit management plan but has not yet had the funds for construction.

The big picture of post-hurricane redevelopment has urged the Park Service to revisit the multi-use path as a viable option for reducing car traffic, reducing strain on limited parking, and for capitalizing on the already long-existing and popular trail that runs parallel to Cape San Blas Road.

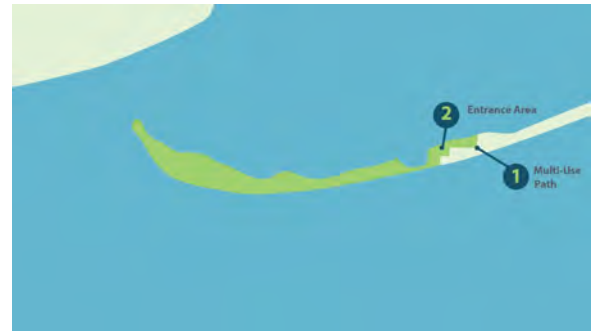




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Multi-Use Path & Entrance Area

The true park entrance is often perceived as being where the park road meets the ranger station, where entrance fees are collected, campers register, wayfinding and interpretive information is given, and where park staff initially greets incoming visitors.



But the entrance for St. Joseph Peninsula constitutes an entire area – a one-mile scenic road corridor from the park gate at the southern edge of the park boundary that opens every morning at 8:00 am, passing the trailhead for the Maritime Hammock Trail (which is currently open for hiking), and frequently driven by cars, trucks, boat trailers, RVs, and cyclists.

Clearing large volumes of debris and restoring this vital stretch of road and the ranger station were crucial first steps in the recovery of the park. The proposed multi-use path and other roadway and ranger station improvements will be made gradually to ensure optimal park access and sense of arrival.





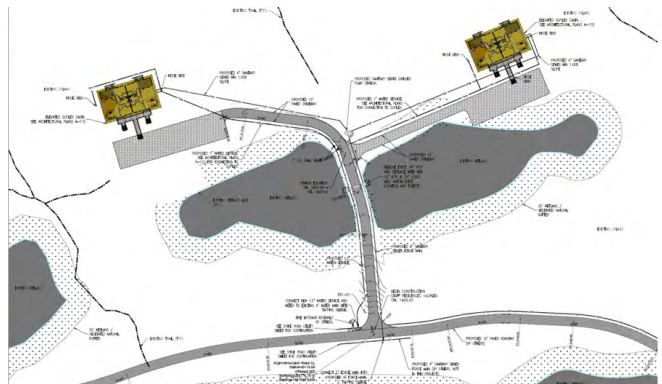
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Support Area

After the ranger station, on the west side of the peninsula, is a small area devoted to park service support.

The support area is the maintenance, storage, residence, and operational hub for rangers, managers, and biologists who are stewards of the park resources, maintain facilities, and interact with the many park visitors to ensure high-quality visitor experiences. This area took a notable toll in the hurricane and has been largely reconstructed to resume critical operations.

An addition that was carefully designed and permitted, and that is now in progress by virtue of post-hurricane emergency orders, is two new off-grade (stilted) structures to house essential staff who can be available to ensure safety and tend to a wide array of infrastructural and resource managements needs (including fire management and wildlife monitoring) around the clock. One other small support area, located in the northeastern portion of the park, will also be redeveloped with similar critical needs in mind.



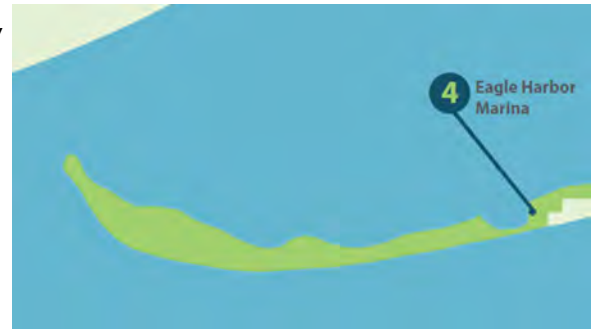


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Eagle Harbor Marina

Eagle Harbor Marina is the park's most developed day use area, serving as a bayside hub for many park visitors.

Eagle Harbor provides popular access to the protected waters of St. Joseph Bay, with its expansive seagrass flats, sandy shoals, and diversity of marine fauna – readily accessible for boaters and paddlers seeking to fish, scallop, snorkel, and just generally explore.



One of the main infrastructural assets of Eagle Harbor Marina is its vehicle parking, especially for boaters and anglers towing boat trailers. The loss of parking at this site, even with the temporary solutions put into place for the interim, has been a significant setback and demands redevelopment plans to create new parking for boaters (and also beachgoers and concession customers), within former paved footprints, and realigning the parking spaces and travel lanes to maximize safety and convenience.

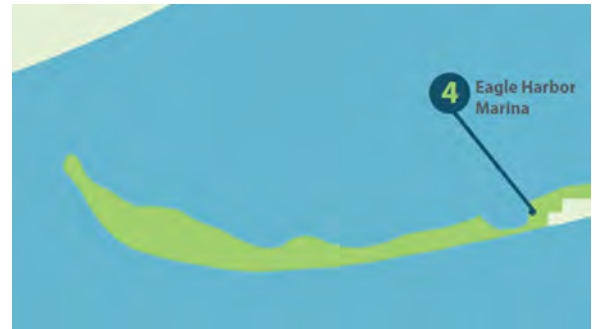




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Eagle Harbor Marina

Although the size and shape of the new parking area is still under internal consideration, tentative designs indicate the feasibility of 32 paved parking spaces, another 50 spaces unpaved (but stabilized with gravel or crushed shell), and ample travel lane for efficient (uncongested) traffic circulation.



Other design elements and utilitarian attributes or needs may include redesigning the pedestrian walkways between the concession area amenities, basic landscape enhancements to encourage growth of naturally occurring coastal vegetation, and re-dredging the boat basin to maximize safe navigation (in and out) by visiting watercraft, reconfiguring electrical utilities underground (if feasible) north from the marina site, and constructing a new concession building, with a restroom and various visitor amenities, to

replace the small and aged existing structure at this site. This concession building, although designed and permitted, is to be constructed in a later phase.





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Main Gulf Beach Access

Adjacent to Eagle Harbor, and in several ways sharing the same infrastructural amenities, is the Main Gulf Beach Access for park day visitors. This popular beach access shares the same latitude as Eagle Harbor and the narrow stretch of easily accessible bayside beach, but instead of looking east over Eagle Harbor and St. Joseph Bay, we are now turning our attention west overlooking the Gulf of Mexico.



The main path that accesses and passes the restroom building and the dune cross-over boardwalk were heavily damaged and the seaward slopes of the dunes themselves were sheared off by wind and water.

In the interim, an alternative on-grade boardwalk located several hundred feet to the south, where the dunes did not form an unpassable ledge,

has provided the only visitor access to the sandy beach of the Gulf – but improvements, and return to its former level of service, are currently underway and the vegetated dunescape is recovering well by natural processes and deliberate restoration efforts.



February 2022 ARC Meeting





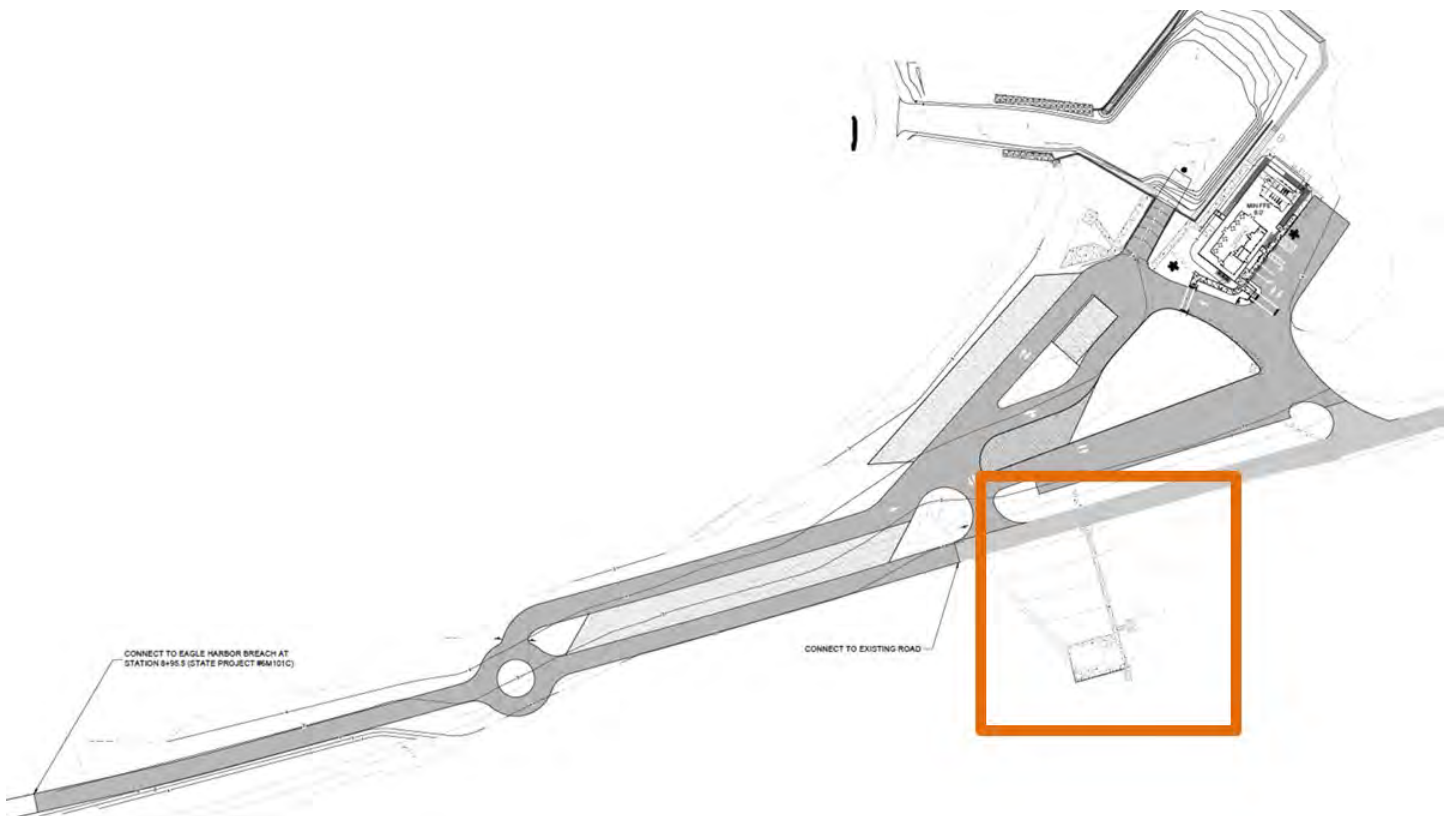
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Main Gulf Beach Access

For this location, plans are to finish the renovations of and access to the existing aged day-use restroom, which was swept over by storm surge and buried under sand, ideally connecting to Cape San Blas-Gulf County wastewater facilities beyond the park, and to replace the former boardwalks extending to the beach from the parking and picnic area.



Framed in orange on the map below— relative to the larger project of redeveloping Eagle Harbor and the parking area, the Main Gulf Beach Access is quite small in size and number of features. The importance of this beach access point, however, is noteworthy, as this is where the vast majority of the park's visitors have always accessed the Gulf.

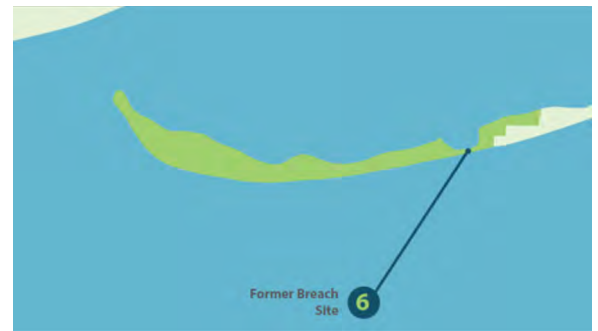




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Gulf-Bay Breach

Only a short distance north of the Main Gulf Access, the former breach was not the location of a specific use area or visitor amenity. It was a narrow stretch of the peninsula that consisted mostly of beach and sand dunes on each side of the park road – narrow because of the way that Eagle Harbor carves out a deep cove in the bayside of the peninsula's landform.



Even if it did not take with it very much infrastructure, the breach that severed the St. Joseph Peninsula has remained one of the most iconic images of how this hurricane altered the physical landscape of Northwest Florida.

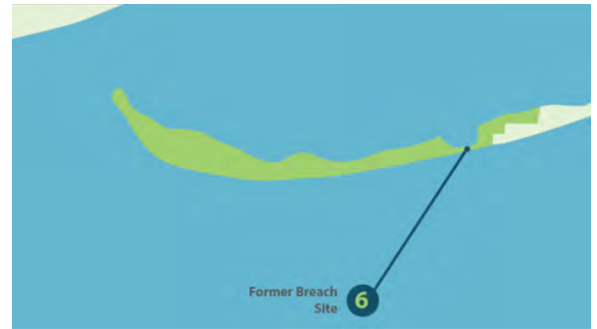




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Gulf-Bay Breach

The breach occurred within the state park, approximately one mile north of the park entrance, rendering 8.5 miles of the park as an island, which significantly complicated recovery and redevelopment efforts.



The wide breach meant that the DRP would need to wait for the littoral drift – the transport of sand by longshore currents – to naturally and gradually fill the breach and to then augment and expedite this natural process with more sand pumped from a permitted offshore site.



Fortunately, within a matter of several months, the natural accretion of sand occurred as predicted.

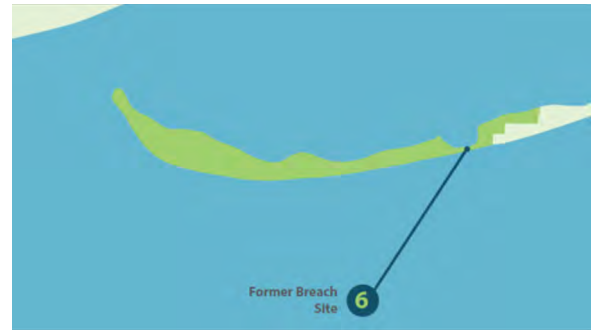




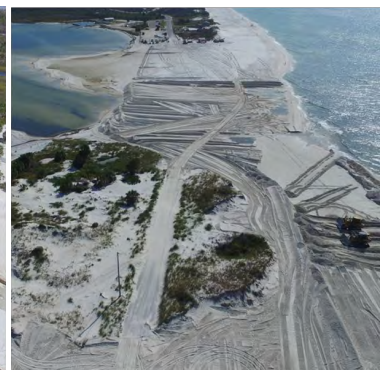
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Gulf-Bay Breach

This natural accretion put to rest the debates over whether to leave the breach open as a navigable pass or to increase seawater circulation through St. Joseph Bay, which DEP later assessed might have had adverse consequences on the ecology of the bay and would also have created very costly and challenging logistics for any future park operations north of the breach.



Between February and October 2019, the Florida Park Service and Department of Environmental Protection coordinated with the US Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission to strategize and permit the deposition of 154,693 cubic yards of native sand on the former breach site.

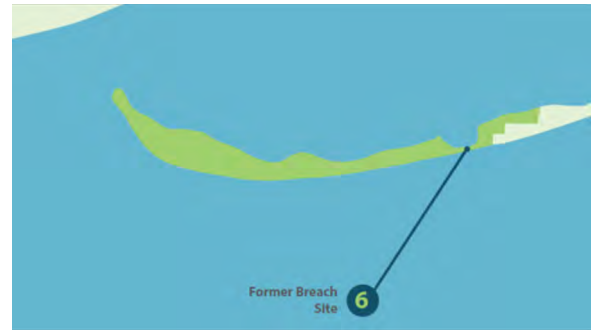




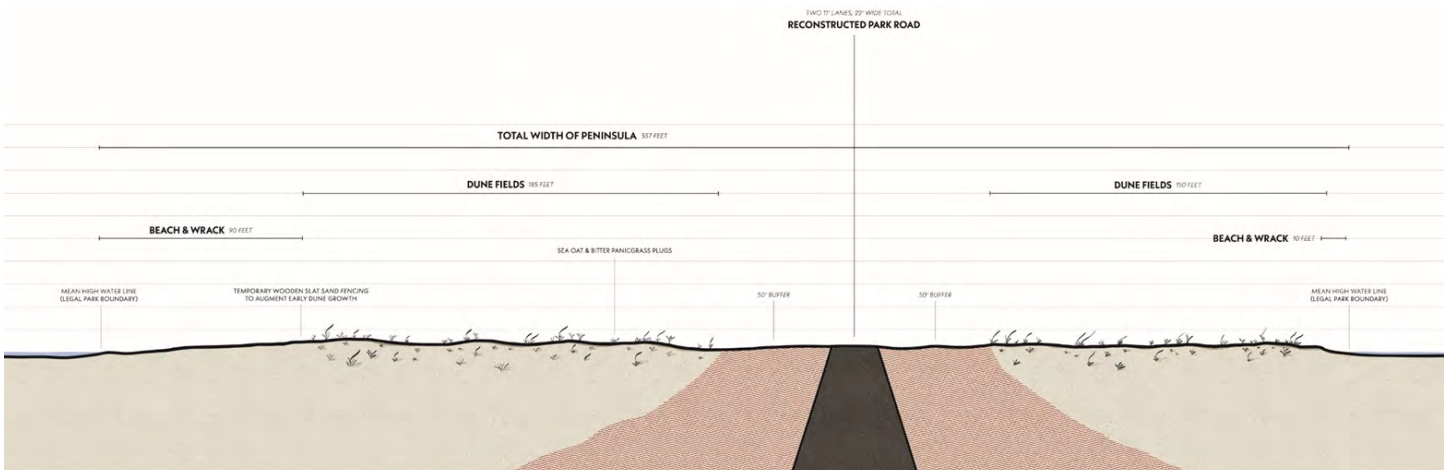
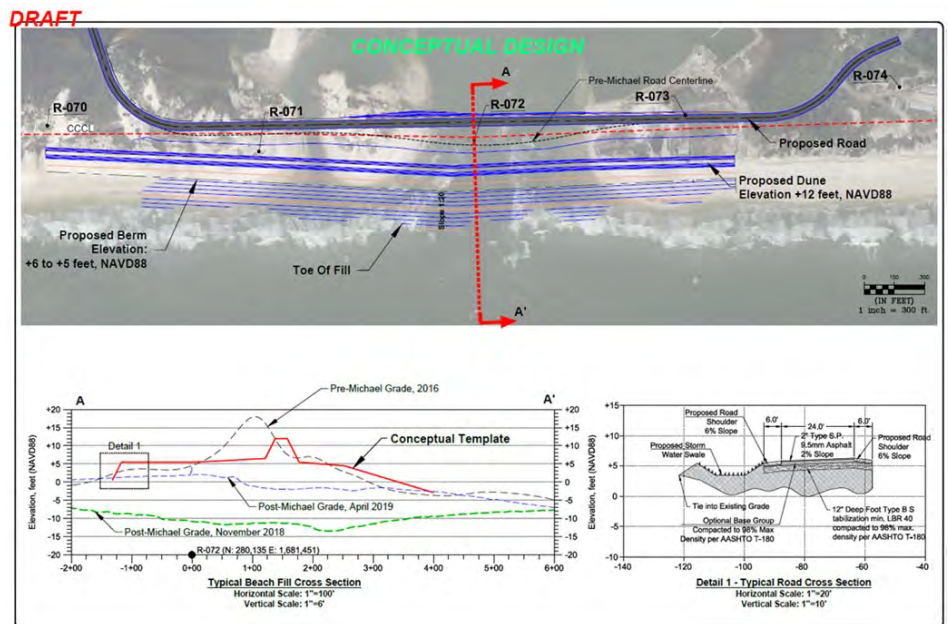
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Gulf-Bay Breach

Pursuant to specific permit conditions, this placement of sand (geographically centered on R-Monument 72) was completed with collection and study of bathymetric and topographic survey data, comparison of current data to historic data (to ensure that the sand remained within the bounds of the pre-hurricane uplands), and physical monitoring of site conditions (including the presence of wildlife) during the process.



Below is an illustrated example of how the DRP Office of Park Planning worked closely with District 1 biologists, the Bureau of Design & Construction, and aquatic preserve partners to steer toward the reconstruction of a necessary park road while successfully restoring the peripheral dune landscape.

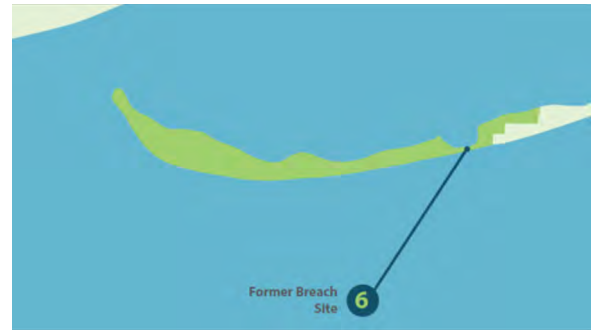




T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Gulf-Bay Breach

The result was a stable and compact sand base, over which a new road could be paved, new utility lines could be buried underground, and dunes and shorebird nesting and resting habitat could be restored. Development of the new road is pictured below.



Applying our existing knowledge of coastal systems ecology and geomorphology and consulting with numerous subject-matter experts from across DEP and other agencies, we identified the natural patterns of

vegetation from the foredunes to the back dunes and successfully reconstructed the dune system that was previously found in the area where the breach occurred.

This very recent photo – facing north up the Gulf side of the peninsula – captures a segment of the reconstructed dune ridge with sea oats and varieties of planted dune vegetation. The posts and rope delineate the sensitive restoration zone and deter foot traffic while the new dunes continue to form and the flora takes stable root.

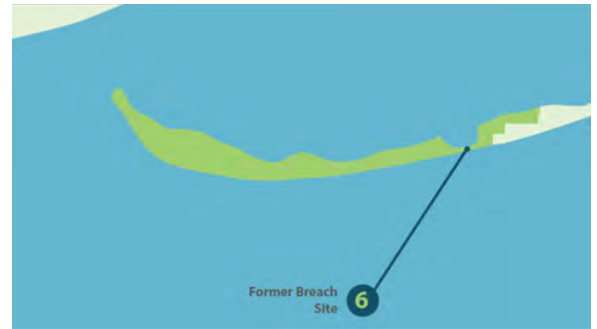




T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Gulf-Bay Breach

Approximately one mile farther north along the park's spine road, on the far side of the breach, we achieved another remarkable planning and redevelopment success.



Now able to drive load-bearing construction vehicles across the former breach, the DRP implemented conceptual land use and hydrological restoration objectives from the 2014 unit management plan – the installation of a wide and sturdy twin-barreled box culvert.



This box culvert essentially functions as a bridge and fixes the hydrological impediment that previously separated a large area of saltmarsh from the bay. With the former road segment lost to storm surge, we gained an ideal opportunity to reconstruct the road in a manner that would be less prone to the destructive forces of water pressure in the future and that returned natural hydrological flow to a bisected waterbody.

The rebounding ecology of this saltmarsh slough is evident already today and may now even be accessible to ambitious paddlers passing through the box culvert on a low tide.



February 2022 ARC Meeting

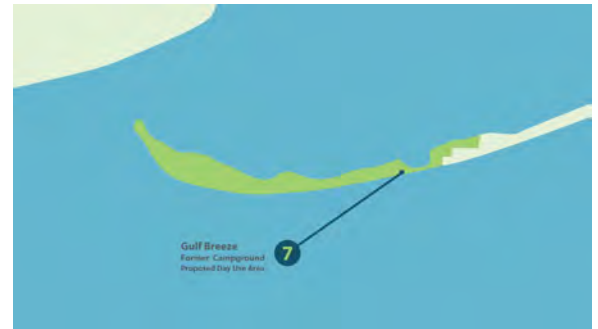




T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

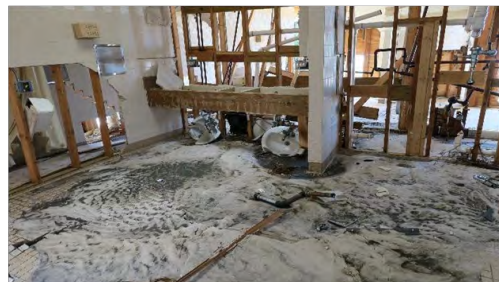
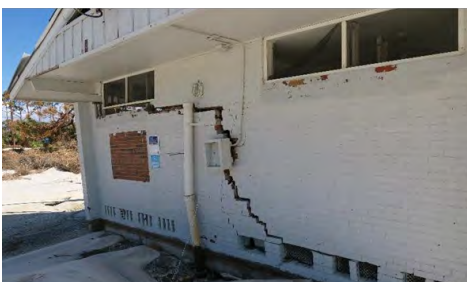
Former Gulf Breeze Campground

Before the hurricane, the Gulf Breeze area held a 59-site standard facility campground that featured two bathhouses. It was known for sunshine, sea breezes, and very convenient access to the Gulf, as the name might imply. For a campground, however, it was also precariously situated.



Over the decades of its existence, the Gulf Breeze Campground experienced multiple inundations. These sites, desirable for their near Gulf-front location and shielded only by a single dune ridge, were ultimately too vulnerable and faced frequent closures due to storm impacts.

The bathhouses, depicted below, had their foundations under-washed, fractured, and irreparably damaged. All campsite utilities (water and electrical lines) were ruined. The dunes were dissipated and the surrounding scrub habitat was unrecognizable.





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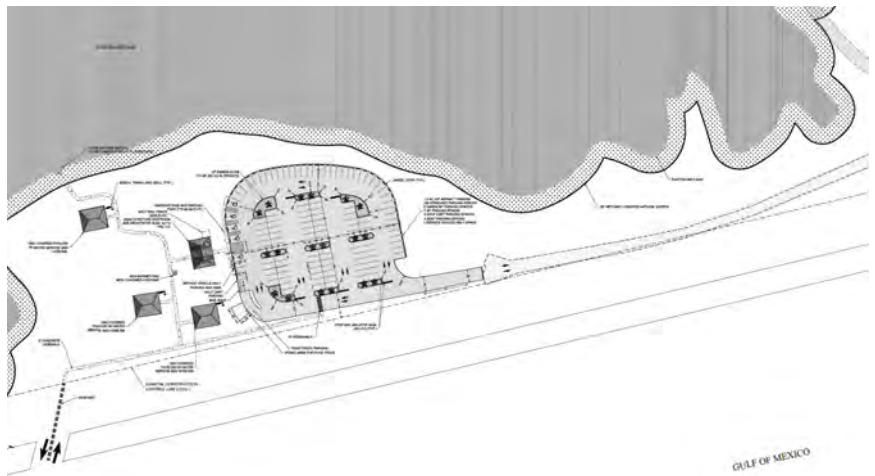
Former Gulf Breeze Campground

The photo on the left below depicts the beginnings of a new dune ridge where sea oat saplings were installed. The photo on the right depicts the sparsely vegetated open space behind the dune where campsites were previously located. Given the newly clear landscape of Gulf Breeze and recognizing the ongoing threats that this site will face with climate change, a planning decision was made to convert the site to a beach access day use area so that it can continue to be used for recreational purposes but with potentially less infrastructure.



By constructing a smaller and simplified type of use area, the site will be less vulnerable to catastrophic damages from future storms. The future Gulf Breeze Day Use Area will entail:

- A short segment of new road that will bring visitors to a parking area with access to the Gulf beach where previously the park only offered overnight facilities.
- An opportunity for visitors to explore an area of beach north of Eagle Harbor with a scenic backdrop of piney flatwoods and open marsh that provide habitat for an abundance of wildlife.
- Opportunities for passively viewing and interpreting this interior landscape may be provided by short walking paths and a potential observation platform.
- Additional amenities at this location will include overflow parking for vehicles with boat trailers, a restroom, and covered pavilions.





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Former Gulf Breeze Campground

The photo below captures the complex interior scenery behind Gulf Breeze where a trail and potential observation platform are proposed. As depicted in the photo, this landscape consists of a wet prairie-like area surrounding a brackish depression marsh and salt marsh with a flatwoods treeline visible in the background.



Although the beach proximity of the Gulf Breeze Campground will be missed by visitors, a new campground at an alternative location is now being planned. The alternative location, while resulting in a net loss of total campsites, will qualitatively compensate for that loss with reliability, modern utility connections, and a comparably beautiful waterfront proximity – this time overlooking the protected waters of St. Joseph Bay.

The preliminary artistic rendering of the future Gulf Breeze Day Use Area shown at right depicts the proposed restroom building with adjacent parking and distant pavilions. Similar to the above photo, the tall pines of the flatwoods and redeveloping dunes are also visible in the background.



GULF BREEZE DAY-USE – LOOKING NORTHWEST



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Bayview Day Use Area & Campground

Bayview has always served as a small waterfront day use area, geared toward launching small watercraft, especially kayaks and canoes. Prior to the hurricane, it offered three pavilions, a restroom, stabilized parking for 24 vehicles, a hiking trailhead, and several related amenities – all of which were irreparably damaged. Now, in the post-hurricane redevelopment efforts, the DRP is designing not only a reconfigured and optimized new version of the day use area, but also an adjacent campground.



The photo on the left shows the cove that was severely eroded and filled with debris after the hurricane, with one of the damaged pavilions in the background. The more recent photo on the right

(taken June 2021) shows the regeneration of healthy saltmarsh around the perimeter of the use area. A kayak fisherman visible in the background exemplifies typical use of this area.

The new campground concept is proposed for a small (3.5-acre) area of altered scrubby flatwoods, located just south of the day-use area. Although a picturesque wooded area, the natural conditions of this site do not preclude the construction of facilities. Given the existing paved road that surrounds the entirety of the scrubby flatwoods, it has long been disconnected from the more expansive and fully-intact natural areas in the vicinity.





T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Bayview Day Use Area & Campground

The wide spacing between the pine trees in the Bayview area may allow for campsites situated between the existing trees. The surrounding road, although in poor condition, and nearby utilities of the neighboring day-use area offer the essentials of what's needed to develop a campground without need of clearing for an altogether new road and utility lines. The future campground loop road is clearly captured near the center of the photo on the left below. In the photo on the right, looking east, the Bayview Area is shown in the background. The former Gulf Breeze Campground – the facility to be replaced by the proposed Bayview Campground – is captured in full view in the foreground.



This CAD image above shows the project area. The orange rectangle frames the specific area where the Bayview redevelopment is proposed to take place.



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Bayview Day Use Area & Campground

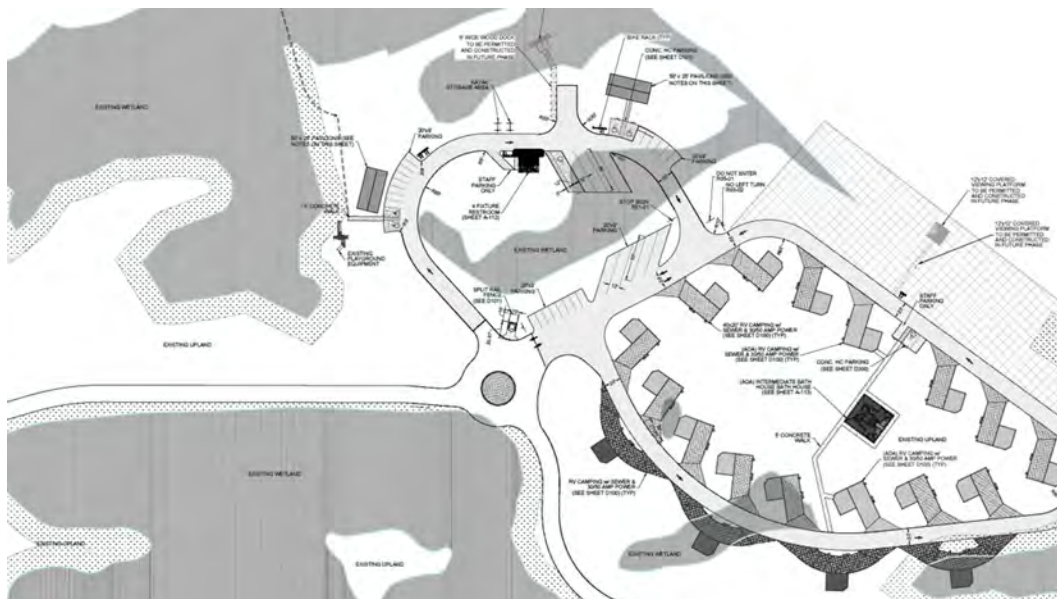
This CAD image below brings us closer to the Bayview project area, identifying natural and manmade debris to be removed and structures to be demolished and also marks wetlands and other sensitive features that require protection.



Major design elements for the day-use area include regrading and restoring the original terrain (to be completed where deep soil erosion occurred), reestablishing the Bayview Hiking Trail stemming from this day use area, continuing to utilize this site for launching paddlecraft and other small



watercraft (recognizing that Eagle Harbor is optimally suited for the larger motorized boats), and constructing new shade pavilions for picnics and use by hikers and paddlers at the front and back ends of their excursions.





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Bayview Day Use Area & Campground

Another preliminary artistic rendering – shown below – loosely depicts the potential arrangement of the Bayview Day Use Area (on the left) and Campground (on the right).



Major design elements for the Proposed Bayview Campground include the new loop road (on the footprint of a former boat trailer parking area), a scenic viewshed over the waters of St. Joseph Bay, and approximately 19 standard-facility campsites proposed within interior of this loop.

Other potential design elements may include a partial tree canopy of the scrubby flatwoods, a footpath with a centrally located bathhouse that traverses the interior of the campground loop, and an observation boardwalk with a covered platform extending from the camping area over the bay.





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Shady Pines Campground

Shady Pines was perhaps the most well known of the two campgrounds prior to the hurricane, nestled in the woodland interior of the peninsula.

During Hurricane Michael, Shady Pines Campground lost the majority of the maritime hammock and flatwoods canopy that gave it the namesake shade and reputation for avoiding the intense sunlight of this harsh coastal environment. As depicted in the photos below, the campground was in severely damaged condition and required substantial debris removal.



Many of the trees that remained standing were, unfortunately, dead or declining such that they had to be fully cut. As the photos indicate, the result is a much sunnier version of Shady Pines – a

characteristic that we intend to reverse after the new construction is completed by planting trees – eventually restoring the desirable tree canopy. In the distant background, is an eagle’s nest perched high in one of the snag trees at the end of the path in the center photo. When this nest became active shortly after the hurricane, we had to modify our debris removal and demolition activity to avoid disturbance.





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Shady Pines Campground

The orange box in the rendering below frames the specific project area for redevelopment of Shady Pines Campground. It is significant to note the location of this site in relation to other features and facilities in this portion of the park. The loop road is depicted with the surrounding wetlands that define the shape and size of Shady Pines Campground. Pre-hurricane, Shady Pines held 59 campsites.



In redeveloping the campground, major design elements will include:

- Complete redesign and reconstruction, including realignment and reconfiguration of the campground road away from the natural wetlands to maximize use of dry terrain for campers
- Reestablishing access to the Gulf beach directly from the campground

- Approximately 36 standard facility campsites and 10 tent campsites
- Potential small observation decks for campers to interpret the surrounding landscape,
- Two new bathhouses (to replace the old structures) that will be centrally located within the campground

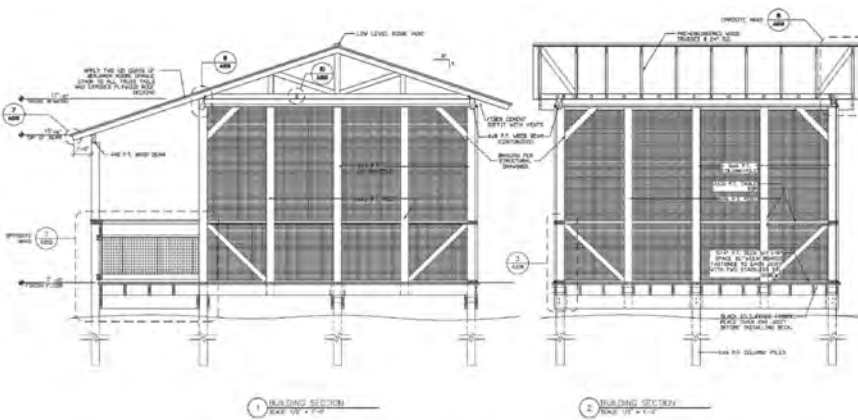




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Shady Pines Campground

In evaluating options for the redevelopment of facilities on St. Joseph Peninsula, the park planning team researched national and regional trends in outdoor recreation – particularly trends in the most popular modes of camping. One of the findings included the growing popularity of elevated camping platforms.



As depicted in the draft CAD renderings to the left, the redevelopment plan calls for a few camping platforms overlooking the scenically forested interior of the peninsula. This particular design compares well to the screened huts found along the Suwannee River Wilderness Paddling Trail in northeast Florida.

This preliminary artistic rendering offers a northwest perspective into the presently sparsely treed campground with a central bathhouse.





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Cabin Area & Group Camp

The cabin area and group camp are the northernmost of the developed facilities in the park. Also hard hit by Hurricane Michael, the few amenities of the semi-primitive group camp were destroyed. The basic utilities of this site, including potable water and an outhouse, will be restored.



Located only a short distance farther north beyond the group camp, the eight park cabins were also heavily damaged by wind and flooding. Fallen trees and storm surge wrecked



the boardwalks that linked the cabins to the small parking area and the bayshore.



In the near future, each of the eight cabins will be renovated or reconstructed as necessary to bring back this highly popular overnight accommodation within the park.

The Gulf access trail from cabins will also be reestablished for cabin guests to reach the beach within modest walking distance of the cabins themselves.

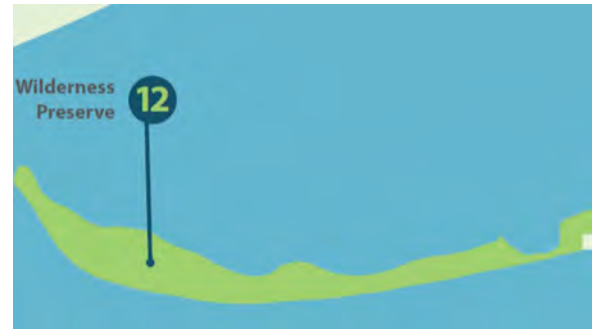




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Wilderness Preserve

The wilderness preserve of St. Joseph Peninsula is one of the most impressive conservation attributes of the park. It is one of eight wilderness preserves in the Florida State Park system and carries a particular set of management expectations, modeled after the Federal Wilderness Act. The preserve contains 1,946 acres, or 72% of the total park. It has no built infrastructure and is instead defined purely by its tall dunes, interdunal swales, and dense scrub forest.



The natural features were significantly affected by the hurricane, though somewhat spared from the most severe impacts due to its multi-layered, mature, and heavily vegetated dune series. Large swaths of dead or damaged scrub oak and pine turned brown and grey, losing much of their otherwise green foliage. The understory was left quite tangled. The seven remote primitive campsites are temporarily inaccessible, but will be re-established when conditions are safe.

Despite heavy wind damage and inundation by saltwater, the wilderness preserve is already starting to show its resilience by the remarkable signs of ecological recovery where fresh green growth is emerging in the scrubby canopy and along the dunes – optimistic indications that some vegetation wasn't dead but merely stunned by the passing trauma of the hurricane.



Given the rigid protections of its special designation, the Park Service will not be extracting natural debris from the wilderness preserve. Fortunately, however, such intervention seems unnecessary where natural processes are at work – uncomplicated by the needs of human access infrastructure.



T.H. STONE MEMORIAL ST. JOSEPH PENINSULA STATE PARK Post-Hurricane Michael Recovery Plan

Resilience Planning

Resilience Statement

“Climate related shocks and stressors present new challenges to the Florida Park Service mission of providing resource-based recreation while preserving, interpreting, and restoring natural and cultural resources. Parks will adapt to climate threats with prescriptive strategies to minimize and manage the impacts of more severe storms and droughts, sea-level rise, invasive organisms, and other emerging environmental disturbances. Resilience strategies will be incorporated in all park plans and resources management decisions.”

In response to the multiple tropical storm and hurricane impacts between 2016 and 2018, the Florida Park Service developed a mission statement to guide its efforts in preparing for and recovering from natural disasters.

Recovery planning tends to be very involved and requires not only the rescue and triage component, but the planning and foresight to make parks better. But, how do we make parks better; not simply fixed, but actually more functional, stronger, and even more consistent with the Park Service Mission?

The very nature of recovery planning is the act of re-construction – building back from damages. But, what if we didn't even need to re-construct or build back? What if state parks – the resources and infrastructure – were maintained, organized, and developed in a way that greatly reduced the extent of damages suffered in the first place?

While achieving complete impact avoidance may be impossible – recognizing the inevitability of at least some damages – we may, over time, develop strategies and invest in methods to avoid some of the heaviest setbacks. With the resilience statement firmly in mind, the Florida Park Service is confident that it has achieved at least part of that goal in the redevelopment plans presented in this summary report.