



INTER AGENCY  
**VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT**  
COUNCIL



# Rapid Assessment Guidance

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this document is to support a faster application of the Visitor Use Management Framework (“the framework”) to federally managed lands and waters during dynamic events. The framework is flexible so that in critical times of heightened risk to safety or resources, park managers need only hours to take significant action.

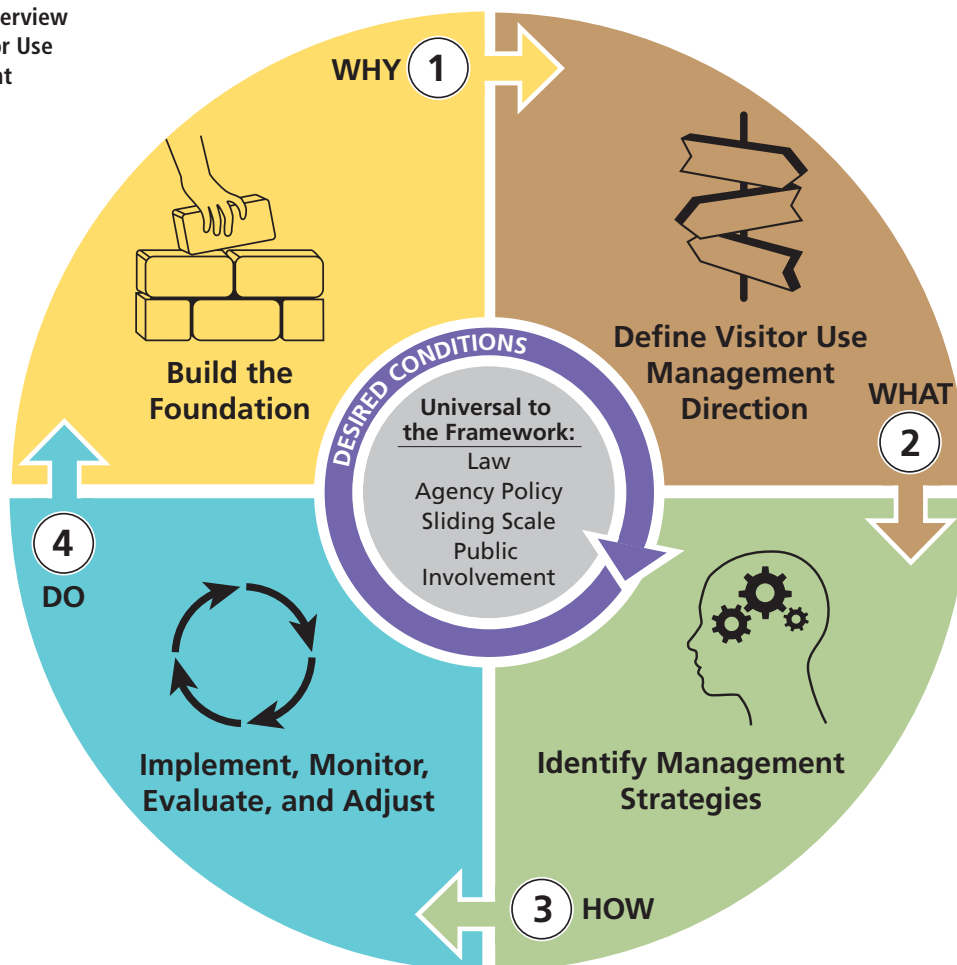
**This document is not a replacement for the Visitor Use Management Framework.** Guidance related to the framework and associated products still applies in a rapid assessment context and is incorporated here for reference: <https://visitorusemanagement.nps.gov/>.

## INTRODUCTION

The Visitor Use Management Framework has been used to plan for sustainable recreation on federally managed lands and waters since 2016. It outlines an adaptable and iterative process that includes 14 steps organized into four elements (see figure 1).

The framework is applicable across a wide spectrum of situations, fit to address long-term planning, urgent operational needs, and any circumstances in between.

Figure 1: Overview of the Visitor Use Management Framework



There are many situations—often attributable to unanticipated or disruptive events—in which the framework may need to be applied rapidly. These events include wildfires, floods, hurricanes, oil spills, rockfalls, downed tree hazards, special public events, and natural phenomena like a total solar eclipse. Rapid assessments for visitor use management can help identify and maintain desired conditions, monitor conditions to track progress toward or away from desired conditions, and employ appropriate strategies and actions to manage visitor use.

## THE SLIDING SCALE

The sliding scale of analysis is an essential tool when applying the Visitor Use Management Framework in all situations (figure 2). The sliding scale of analysis seeks to match the investment of time and resources with the level of uncertainty and risk associated with the issues being addressed.

Figure 2: Sliding Scale Approach

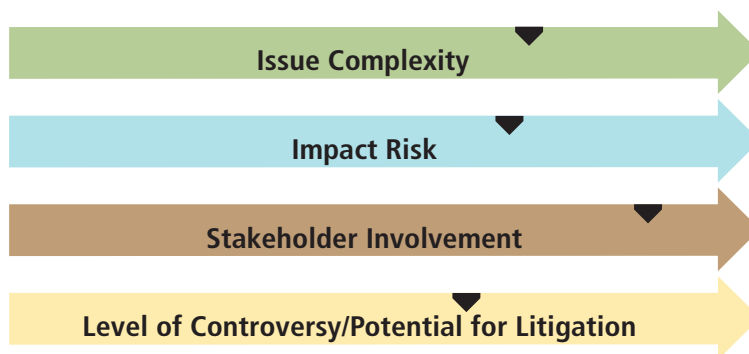
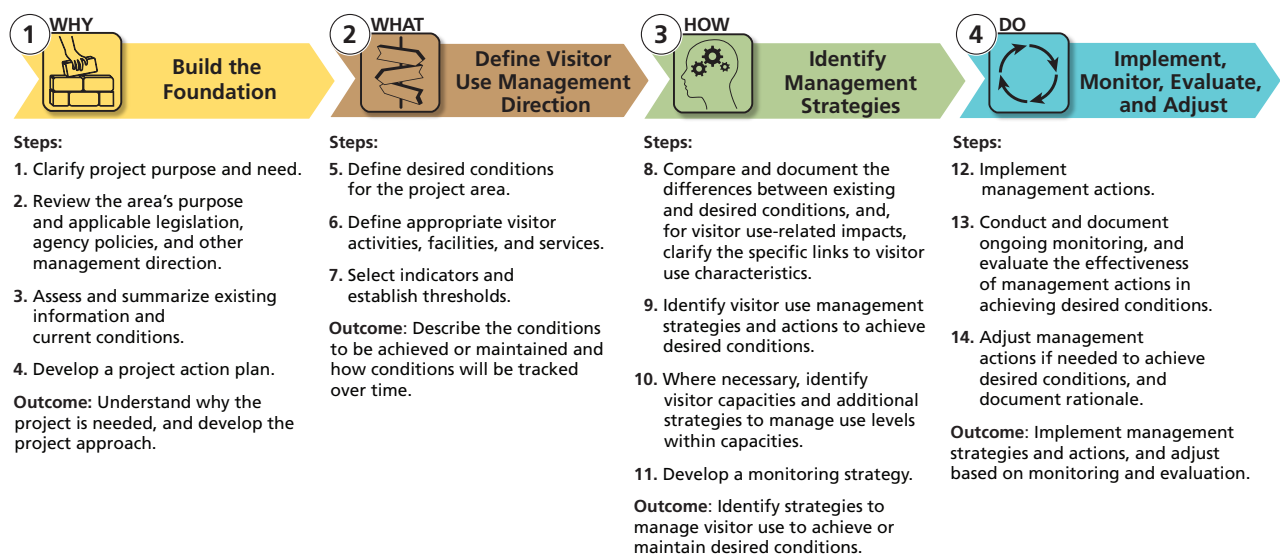
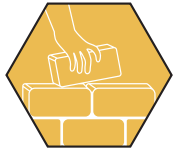


Figure 3: Elements and steps of the Visitor Use Management Framework





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## ELEMENT 1: BUILD THE FOUNDATION

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Steps:

1. Identify the key issues and determine which are most critical to address.
2. Review existing direction and knowledge.
3. Review any local, regional, or national guidance applicable to the issues.
4. Summarize relevant background information and develop an action plan.

The purpose of Element 1 is to understand what key issue(s) needs to be solved and the best strategies for approaching it. This process ensures that vital resources are protected and that visitors still have opportunities for safe, meaningful, and enjoyable experiences.

The easiest way to clarify the purpose and need (Element 1, Step 1) is to brainstorm the issue(s) related to visitor use and identify which of these are most critical to address.

Reviewing any applicable legislation, agency policies, or management direction from the surrounding area (Element 1, Step 2) can help teams stay on track, maintain efficiency, and focus efforts. Begin by reviewing the area's management plan to focus on the protection of resources and values essential for maintaining the park's significance. For example: In a fragile desert ecosystem, efforts should be focused on protecting iconic elements such as unobstructed views of a distant mountain range and significant Paleo-Indian archeological sites.

While the area's management plan is a good place to start, another layer of guidance may be necessary. During the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, it was essential that public lands were managed in consistence with evolving local health guidance and national agency leadership. If such guidance exists, it should be at the forefront of the rapid assessment process. During more localized or short-term events, when this sort of broad-based guidance is not as likely to exist, the quickest way to find good guidance is often to leverage other municipal agencies with similar issues. Mining these contacts for guidance is often much quicker and more practical than researching agency policy.

Summarizing existing information and current conditions (Element 1, Step 3) will likely be accomplished during the initial brainstorm of issues. However, during dynamic events, existing information and current conditions can change by the day or even hour. Stay abreast of current conditions by hosting a daily briefing or making available central points of communication. Leverage frontline staff in this effort to stay on top of developing news.

Next, identify who will create an action plan (Element 1, Step 4) and when they will do so.

The Incident Command System will often identify the “who” and “when” pieces. The “who” would be the Incident Management Team and the “when” would be identified by operational period. The action plan would be the Incident Action Plan under the Incident Command System.

Use Element 1, Step 2, guidance to review the area’s purpose and management plan.



## ELEMENT 2: DEFINE VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

### Steps:

1. Review existing desired conditions, and ensure they are still viable.
2. Identify any changes that need to be made to desired conditions and management direction, then determine whether these changes would be permanent or temporary.
3. Review and apply existing indicators where possible.
4. Document current conditions.

Desired conditions are important to the rapid assessment process (Element 2, Step 5). Verify that these conditions are still viable under the current circumstances, and if necessary, incorporate minor updates. Desired conditions are meant to be long-term, and any changes should be accompanied by sound justification and documentation. Changes can allow for flexibility over time by considering for dynamic ecological systems, shifts in values, and data monitoring.

Some dynamic events may require making updates to existing desired conditions. For example, during a one-time event such as the total solar eclipse, desired conditions might shift temporarily to allow for a more social experience in areas normally managed for solitude. During these instances, tolerance may increase for short-term resource impacts (such as vegetation trampling) with a plan in place to adjust management strategies during and after the event.

Desired conditions directly inform the types of visitor activities, facilities, and services that are appropriate for a specific area. Therefore, during a rapid assessment, activities, facilities, or services may need to be adjusted for the area. Consistent communication that aligns with the action plan is advised in circumstances where adjustments are necessary.

Use existing data and simple monitoring protocol (Element 2, Step 7) for rapidly changing environments to track changes in conditions and streamline management. For example, trail counter data may offer insight into trail conditions and be easier to collect than counter rates for short-term decision making. Focus on documenting current conditions and use of existing data to reduce staff time at key destinations and on trails. Other commonly selected indicators that are applicable during dynamic events include people-per-view in a particular area, incidences of noncompliance with special conditions for the area or rules (e.g., closure violations), and specific safety-related metrics.

Use Element 2, Steps 5 and 6, to ground the incident objectives in pre-existing or recently established desired conditions for resources and visitor experiences.



### **ELEMENT 3: IDENTIFY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Steps:

1. Develop management strategies or actions.
2. Determine whether the strategies are intended to be temporary or long-term.
3. Consider both visitor use characteristics (timing, visitor behavior, etc.) and implementation (communication strategy, compliance needs, and capacity considerations where required).

Prior to identifying management strategies, the team should have a firm understanding of management direction and desired conditions for the project area, whether these conditions are being achieved, and if any thresholds are being exceeded (Element 3, Step 8).

Begin by identifying management strategies (Element 3, Step 9). The complexity of this step depends on where the dynamic event falls on the sliding scale. For lower-level situations—where desired conditions are mostly met and thresholds aren't exceeded—the team may develop localized, targeted strategies with minimal impact on visitation. In more complex or widespread cases—where conditions aren't met and multiple thresholds are exceeded—a broader set of strategies may be needed to manage use levels and patterns. While closure of a particular area always remains a viable option to ensure protection of public land, water resources, and employee and visitor safety, some level of use (even if it varies from typical visitation) can often be accommodated. Regardless of the strategy or strategies selected, the team will need to monitor the effects of any strategy or action implemented, and if necessary, make modifications to ensure that desired conditions are still met. It may also be helpful at this time to contact other agencies that have experienced something similar and apply any relevant lessons they learned and management actions they implemented.

## Considerations for identifying management strategies:

### Visitor Use Characteristics

- Timing of use
- Level of use
- Visitor behavior
- Visitor activity
- Type and availability of facilities
- Program support needed

### Implementation

- Short- or long-term strategy
- Communication strategy
- Compliance pathways for actions
- Capacity considerations where they exist or are required by law

When identifying management strategies, the team should consider the connection between the issues and the related aspects of visitor use that could help address the issue.

Determine whether implementing these strategies are short-term or long-term. To appropriately frame expectations to the public, regularly and clearly communicate accurate information prior to, during, and following implementation of any management strategies.

Finally, consult with your area or regional compliance experts to consider management strategies that may require additional compliance. Short-term management strategies may also require detailed compliance. Examples:

- **Event and Group Management.** Adjust directional flow of visitors by potentially allowing one-way flow on a given loop trail. Redirect visitor use patterns through the location, timing, and size of visitor programs.
- **Pilot Testing.** Pilot new opportunities to access a particular area (i.e., via a short-term commercial use authorization) or pilot test guided-hiking-only opportunities to provide access to particularly sensitive resources.

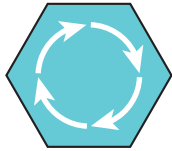
Consider visitor capacities and any additional strategies that may be needed to manage the amount and type of use within these capacities (Element 3, Step 10). If a visitor capacity has not been identified, the team should refer to the following four guidelines when identifying a visitor capacity:

- determine the analysis area, which is the area for which a given capacity will apply;
- review existing direction and knowledge;
- identify limiting attribute(s); and
- identify capacity and associated implementation strategies (see Interagency Visitor Use Management Council's *Visitor Capacity Guidebook* for more information).

It may be helpful to identify capacities that will be in effect for the period associated with the potential visitation disruption or event. Conversely, the capacity could be higher during a special event when desired conditions call for a more social atmosphere, such as a total solar eclipse. Once capacities have been identified, the team should consider implementation strategies to manage visitor use within the established capacities. For areas that have set capacities, it may be necessary to evaluate whether a dynamic event requires that capacities be adjusted. For example, there may be a need to lower capacity for social distancing during a viral outbreak, or a need to increase capacity because of a special event.

Finally, an effective monitoring framework is as important as the development of management strategies and actions. The team should monitor thresholds to inform management decisions and adjustments to use levels. This information may inform future adjustments and determinations of visitor capacity, if needed.

If helpful, use Element 3, Step 10, to develop visitor capacities for an incident area during an incident.



## ELEMENT 4: IMPLEMENT, MONITOR, EVALUATE, AND ADJUST

Steps:

1. Develop and execute a communication strategy.
2. Record results and responses to management actions.
3. Adjust or adapt strategies based on information and data collection.

This element demonstrates the process for implementing management actions, monitoring those actions, evaluating the results of monitoring, and adjusting to management strategies and actions based on the data collected.

Clearly and transparently communicate management actions to stakeholders and the public.

Key prompts to communicate:

1. Explain the current issues and challenges that prompt the action.
2. Describe the management actions and their intended effects.
3. How you plan to monitor and adjust management actions as necessary.

By focusing communication on the issues of the incident or event, visitors can better understand the need for change.

As management strategies and actions are implemented, the team must record immediate reactions to understand the effectiveness.

Quick implementation of strategies and actions may be needed to address immediate needs in the short term and as more information becomes available and monitoring data is recorded, adjustments can be made to address a dynamic event. For example, initial strategies for an event or incident may require widespread adjustments on access in certain areas. As time goes on, there may be the need to adapt and modify those adjustments as an incident moves from initial response into short- and long-term management actions.

The framework and this guidance provide an approach to decision making that intentionally applies rationale to management strategies and actions as a whole.

The team should consider if the predicted change in visitor behavior is acceptable during the rapid assessment scenario. Considering how visitors will react early on can allow teams to better plan and implement effective management strategies, such as phases approaches. For example, if a management action implements a lower shuttle capacity, there could be longer wait times for the shuttle or an increase in visitation via bicycle and personal vehicle as visitors look for a substitute to the shuttle service.

As new information becomes available, either through a changing event or as data becomes available through framework Step 13, the team should document trends and evaluate the effectiveness of the management actions. Trends can be documented quickly by recording how visitors react to the change and how visitor behaviors do or do not change. Ongoing monitoring efforts ensure that appropriate and timely actions are taken to protect resources and visitor experiences. Before adjusting the implemented management action, the team should identify the root cause of the issue and determine the appropriate level of response required to address it.

If necessary, adjust management strategies or actions when there is evidence that thresholds are being approached, triggers have been reached, or conditions are notably trending away from desired conditions. Document the rationale for the changes during a rapid assessment, and then the team can better understand how initial management actions can lead to long-term, sustainable solutions that can be implemented well after the initial dynamic event. Appropriate documentation will also help with communication to the public and demonstrate a commitment to transparency. When making changes, be sure to consider if the change requires National Environmental Policy Act documentation, which will often be in the form of a categorical exclusion in a rapid assessment context. Documenting rationale and sharing lessons learned with internal staff, external stakeholders, and across the agency can ensure that the management actions are supported and lead to more successful outcomes.

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