

Cumberland Island

at a Crossroads

National Park Service decisions could reshape one of the Atlantic Coast's last undeveloped barrier islands

Cumberland Island National Seashore in Camden County, Georgia protects one of America's last largely undeveloped barrier islands and an extraordinary diversity of wildlife across nearly 18 miles of beach, dunes, maritime forests, wetlands and salt marsh.

In 1972, Congress directed that Cumberland be "permanently preserved in its primitive state." Today, proposed land exchanges, development, increased visitation, outdated planning and unmanaged, non-native, feral horses put that mandate at risk.

Trading Public Lands for Private Development

The National Park Service has pursued two land exchanges that could transfer federal land into private ownership and enable new development up to 15,000 square feet and three stories tall. NPS negotiated these proposed exchanges outside the public view for years, with key details remaining undisclosed until record requests brought them to light.

Converting protected national seashore land to private development cannot be reconciled with Congress's mandate to preserve Cumberland in its "primitive state."

It also conflicts with the obligation under the NPS Organic Act — a century-old federal law requiring park resources and values to be kept intact for future generations.

THE WILDLIFE

300+
bird species

25-30%
of all Georgia's
sea turtle nests

18
species listed under
the Endangered
Species Act

THE THREATS

700
visitors allowed
per day, doubling
visitation

15,000 sq ft
mansions through
exchanges with
developers

For more information, contact: **Christian Hunt** chunt@defenders.org
Kelly Cox kcox@defenders.org





Meanwhile, an estimated 100-200 non-native, feral horses remain unmanaged on Cumberland **despite documented adverse impacts** to vegetation, salt marshes, dunes, water quality and shorebird nests. The horses themselves also suffer from starvation and have short life spans due to a shortage of food and fresh water.

Major new uses should not move forward while Cumberland's basic conservation and resource management needs remain unresolved.

Instead, changes to visitation, development and recreational uses should be made through a revision to Cumberland Island's general management plan, which has not been revised since 1984.

More Visitors, More Pressure on Park Resources

NPS has historically limited daily visitation to Cumberland Island to protect its fragile resources and primitive character. Despite substantial public opposition, **the recently approved Visitor Use Management Plan would more than double daily visitor capacity from 300 to 700 individuals**, while expanding recreational uses and facilities.

That figure does not include private and charter boat visitors, which at peak times can equal or exceed NPS-managed ferry visitation.

NPS has said South End Beach **can accommodate no more than 69 people** at a time to protect sensitive habitats and shorebirds. **Yet NPS has documented as many as 418 people there at once.** It found that heavy visitation and dogs disturb nesting and foraging shorebirds, including the threatened red knot and piping plover, but has refused to manage the threat through planning.

Conservation Planning is Decades Overdue

Cumberland includes 9,907 acres of designated wilderness and approximately 10,710 acres of potential wilderness. Yet, more than 40 years after Wilderness designation, **NPS has never completed a Wilderness Management Plan.**

The Need for Congressional Oversight

Cumberland is at a crossroads. NPS is advancing major decisions about land ownership and visitor use while critical questions about wilderness, wildlife and long-term management remain unresolved.

Congressional oversight can bring greater transparency to these decisions and ensure their cumulative impacts are fully evaluated. It can also hold NPS accountable to Congress's mandate, established 50 years ago, to preserve Cumberland in its "primitive state" and its obligation under the Organic Act to conserve park resources for future generations.

Cumberland does not lack a conservation mandate. It needs federal management that carries it out.