

Center for State of the Parks



THE STATE OF KNIFE RIVER INDIAN VILLAGES NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE: SUMMARY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PARK

Several Hidatsa and Mandan villages once stood near the confluence of the Knife and Missouri rivers near present-day Stanton, North Dakota. From the early-16th century to the mid-19th century, thousands of people lived in earthlodge villages along the rivers. Today, this nationally significant cultural and archaeological site is protected within Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site.

Designated by Congress in 1978, the park aims to preserve, protect, and interpret the archaeological resources and the culture and lifestyles of the northern Great Plains Indian peoples.

The park's 1,758 acres contain, at last count, 65 archaeological sites and some of the best preserved examples of the northern Plains Indian earthlodge village sites, which once numbered in the hundreds along the Missouri River in North and South Dakota. Regrettably, dam construction, inundation with water, and erosion have destroyed many similar archaeological sites since the end of World War II when much of the Missouri River was dammed for flood-control. Others have been lost because of natural channel movements, agricultural use, construction, and industrial uses of the terraces along the river. As a result, Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site affords an



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unequaled opportunity to visit some of the few surviving village sites of the Hidatsa and Mandan peoples.

Natural resources are also important components of Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site. The environment, location, and resources were primary reasons why the Mandan and Hidatsa settled and lived in the area for hundreds of years. There is a natural intersection between the park's cultural resources management and its natural resources management. Staff think holistically about the landscape as they

strive to protect cultural resources in an environment that most closely mimics the surroundings as they were when the Hidatsa and Mandan inhabited their earthlodge villages.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Cultural resources in fair condition, natural resources in poor condition:** Center for State of the Parks assessment of Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site indicates that the park's cultural resources are in fair condition, with an overall score of 73 out of 100. Natural resources conditions rated a poor overall score of 59 out of 100, although it must be noted



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that this score was derived with just half of the resource information needed to completely fulfill Center for State of the Parks methodology requirements.

- **Funds needed to address invasive plants, erosion, and tree disease:** Invasive species, riverbank erosion, and a fungus that is killing trees threaten the park's cultural and natural landscape. Archaeological resources are also at risk as riverbanks and the artifacts they contain erode into the river. Funds are needed to address these resource threats.
- **Museum curator needed:** The park has a state-of-the-art storage facility and an array of interesting museum objects and archives such as Plains Indian clothing, ceremonial objects, ceramics, historical documents, and photographs, but needs a full-time curator to properly care for the current collections, manage future acquisitions, and create museum exhibits.
- **Natural resources manager needed:** Funding limitations prevent the park from hiring permanent natural resources management staff. Instead, the park's law enforcement/resource management ranger, facility manager, and chief of interpretation work together with seasonal staff to address natural resources issues such as prescribed burns, non-native plants, and inventory and monitoring. With the increasing complexity of resource management concerns and mandates, the need for a dedicated resource manager is critical.
- **Power plants, mines, and oil and gas development of concern:** Knife River is a small, protected property in a large region full of agricultural production and intense resource exploitation such as mining. Four surface-mining operations, six coal-

fired electric generation plants, and one coal gasification plant are within a 50-mile radius of the park boundary. Additional coal-bed methane operations in Wyoming and Montana pose potential threats because of increased nitrogen oxide emissions resulting in increased nitrogen deposition.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

- In consultation with members of the Three Affiliated Tribes and a Park Service historical architect, the park designed and built an earthlodge replica. Completed in 1994, the earthlodge emulates the structures built by the area's former inhabitants.
- The park uses combinations of herbicide treatment, mechanical methods, native seed planting, and prescribed burns to restore native communities to a state representative of the landscape and vegetation that would have been familiar to the Knife River Indians in the early 1800s. For example, staff use flea beetles in combination with herbicides to control leafy spurge infestations.
- A team led by the Park Service's assistant regional curator completed an inventory of the museum collection in August 2005.
- The park uses a global positioning system (GPS) unit to record project information such as locations of invasive species, and a plotter has allowed the park to make maps, diagrams, and trailhead informational exhibits.

ABOUT NPCA AND CENTER FOR STATE OF THE PARKS

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, its members, and partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

NPCA initiated the State of the Parks® program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policy-makers, the public, and the National Park Service improve resource conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

CONTACT US

For a copy of the full report on Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site (within the *National Parks Along the Lewis and Clark Trail* report) published by NPCA's Center for State of the Parks, to get copies of reports on other parks, or for more information about Center for State of the Parks, visit www.npca.org/stateoftheparks or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president of Center for State of the Parks, at jnations@npca.org.

For more information about Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, contact the park at 701.745.3300, visit the park online at www.nps.gov/knri, or contact the Knife River Indian Heritage Foundation (www.kniferiverfriends.org). To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of our national parks, visit www.npca.org/take_action.