

# Center for State of the Parks



## SAN ANTONIO MISSIONS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

### SNAPSHOT

Located within the city of San Antonio, Texas, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park preserves four 18th-century Spanish missions—Mission Espada, Mission San Juan, Mission Concepción, and Mission San José—as well as the outbuildings and landscapes that surround them, for a total of 826 acres. The Park Service does not own the churches associated with the missions; these are still active parishes owned by the Archdiocese of San Antonio. But the Park Services does care for all the buildings not associated with the active parishes, and it owns and manages other historic structures within the park.

Each year, the park hosts about 1.2 million visitors who come to enjoy the missions' stone walls, graceful archways, religious frescos, and hand-carved wooden doors; learn about the history of the Spanish missions and the people who lived within the missions' walls; and observe herons, egrets, wood ducks, owls, and woodpeckers in the park's riparian areas.

### HISTORY

The San Antonio River has drawn people to its banks for thousands of years. Numerous groups of tribal peoples hunted game; fished; gathered edible plants, berries, and nuts; and settled around the river long before Europeans



KELLY COURKAMP

came to the area. In the 16th century, the Spanish began exploring parts of what is now Texas and the American Southwest. These early emissaries of the Spanish crown are believed to be the first Europeans to make contact with the diverse groups of native peoples who lived in the region.

Spanish influence eventually changed the area. Catholic missionaries from the Franciscan order and a few soldiers followed the first explorers to the area and established an enduring system of missions and forts. Their goals were to secure areas for the Spanish empire, introduce Christianity to the native peoples, spread Spanish culture, recruit new citizens for the empire, and protect Spanish lands from the French in neighboring Louisiana. The missions

were not simply churches; they were large, self-sustaining estates complete with their own agricultural operations and irrigation systems.

The missions lost power during the 19th century, but the churches and mission lands continued to play an important role in the community despite political upheaval and the physical deterioration of the missions' walls and buildings. Restoration efforts by local preservation groups began in earnest after the church tower of Mission San José collapsed in 1928. Finally, after years of planning and cooperation among many partners, President Jimmy Carter signed the legislation that established San Antonio Missions National Historical Park in 1978.

### THREATS

- Completing an archaeological overview and assessment and surveying 100 percent of the lands within park boundaries are among the park's highest priorities. A cohesive assessment would identify and facilitate protection of archaeological resources and expand the interpretation of historic structures, ethnography, and traditional use. It could also contribute artifacts to the museum collection.
- The majority of the park's historic structures are in good condition, but keeping them in good condition is an ongoing challenge. At current funding levels, the park can only afford to complete cyclical repairs on historic structures. Major, fundamen-



National Parks Conservation Association®  
Protecting Our National Parks for Future Generations®

tal repairs are left undone, which leaves the structures vulnerable to further damage. Funds are needed to support condition assessments and rehabilitation of historic structures, including work on more than 250,000 square feet of stone walls.

- Though the park is fortunate to have several resource specialists on staff, additional specialists would further enhance resource protection. An archivist and a curator are needed to catalog more than 700,000 artifacts and historic documents; a preservation specialist is needed to oversee assessments and preservation of historic structures; a preservation crew (masons, maintenance, and laborers) is needed to inspect, monitor, and repair historic structures; and law enforcement personnel are needed to ensure visitor safety and protect resources.
- Since 1995, the park has been awaiting funding to begin permanent operations at Rancho de las Cabras, the only remaining mission ranch. Plans include stabilizing and exposing the walls of the Rancho compound and constructing interpretive facilities. Opening Rancho de las Cabras would provide visitors with an opportunity to learn about the ranches and farmlands that supported the missions.

#### WHAT'S BEING DONE

- San Antonio Missions National Historical Park represents an extraordinary example of cooperative management where visitor services and resource protection coexist alongside active parishes. In recognition of its internationally significant resources, San Antonio Missions has been recommended for inclusion on the U.S. Tentative List for World

Heritage status by the U.S. Commission to UNESCO.

- The park's friends association, Los Compadres de San Antonio Missions, donated significant funds to help fully restore the historic grist mill at Mission San José, which opened to the public in 2001 and includes an interpretive display that demonstrates how wheat was ground into flour during the late 1700s. The group also provided funds to restore the San Juan acequia system, which was used to transport water collected behind a dam to each mission's agricultural area. Los Compadres also holds an annual fundraiser to benefit the park, which allows the group to provide about \$150,000 per year in project funds as well as additional funding for larger initiatives. Over the past 25 years, Los Compadres has contributed more than \$3.5 million to support park programs and operations.
- In an effort to preserve the park's cultural landscapes, staff are removing non-native, invasive plants such as chinaberry, glossy privet, giant reed, and several grasses. Staff collaborate with other agencies to secure joint funding and other resources to combat invasive species. Staff also meet with local landowners to educate them about the park's restoration efforts.
- Constructed between 1768 and 1782, Mission San José is a model of Texas missions. The church, native quarters, mill, and granary were all fully restored in the 1930s, which allows today's visitors to take a step back in time to see how the missions looked more than 250 years ago, when they were fully operational.

#### ABOUT NPCA AND THE 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 policymakers, 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 NPCA's full report on San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, to get copies of reports on other parks, or for more information about the Center for State of the Parks, visit [www.npca.org/stateoftheparks](http://www.npca.org/stateoftheparks) or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president for the Center for State of the Parks, at [jnations@npca.org](mailto:jnations@npca.org).

For more information on San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, contact NPCA's Texas Field Office at 214.383.5381, or visit the park online at [www.nps.gov/saan](http://www.nps.gov/saan). To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of this park, visit [www.npca.org/take\\_action](http://www.npca.org/take_action).