



NPS Quick Assessment Guidance for Evaluating Visual Resources in Wilderness Character Assessments

October 2019

Including scenic features in Wilderness Character Assessments is an important step for advancing the protection of visual resources. For NPS wilderness areas, scenic features are based on scenic beauty as well as the cultural and historic value of a view to the visitor experience and the NPS mission. The condition of visual resources is the recommended measure for assessing deterioration or loss of scenic features. This guidance provides steps for the quick assessment approach to defining visual resources condition. A quick condition assessment of visual resources is available for cases where a baseline or representative inventory cannot be repeated every 5 years. For information about the representative inventory approach refer to *NPS Guidance for Evaluating Visual Resources in Wilderness Character Assessments* available online at: <https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2266844>.

The condition of visual resources is determined by rating: scenic quality and view importance. In the quick assessment approach, the park determines data values based on professional judgement of scenic quality and view importance for scenic views throughout the park/wilderness area, rather than a specific scenic view or selection of views. In the context of this quick visual resources assessment tool, “scenic views” and “scenery” refer to any view with aesthetic, natural, historic, or cultural values. Follow steps 1–4 to identify the condition, data adequacy, and significant change. See Appendix A for example text for the scenic features section of a Wilderness Character Assessment.

For questions and draft review, please contact at visual_resources@nps.gov or call Ksienya Taylor at (303) 969-2524.

Step 1: Determine scenic quality and view importance ratings

Read the descriptive statements for rating scenic quality and view importance Table 1. Select the rating category that applies to the majority of views throughout the park/wilderness area. Highlight the chosen rating and description.

Table 1. Criteria for selecting scenic quality and view importance ratings.

Rating	Description
Scenic Quality High	Most views include landscapes in good condition with very few, or minor, elements that detract from desirable visual characteristics. The majority of views are also aesthetically pleasing and memorable because of bold forms and colors.
Scenic Quality Moderate	Most views include landscapes in moderate condition with some elements that detract from desirable visual characteristics. The majority of views are somewhat aesthetically pleasing with forms and colors that add moderate visual interest.
Scenic Quality Low	Most views include landscapes in poor condition with many, or major, elements that detract from desirable visual characteristics. The majority of views are not aesthetically pleasing with forms and colors that lack visual interest.
View Importance High	Views are key to the purpose of the park and a primary reason that visitors come to the park/wilderness area. Views are highly publicized and extensive effort goes into facilitating the visitor experience for scenery.
View Importance Moderate	Views add to the visual experience but are not the primary reason for visitation. Views receive some publicity and moderate effort goes into facilitating the visitor experience for scenery.
View Importance Low	Views are not integral to the visitor experience. Views receive little or no publicity and minimal effort goes into facilitating the visitor experience for scenery.

Step 2: Derive visual resources condition

Use Table 2 below to combine the scenic quality and view importance ratings from step 1 to determine the visual resources condition.

Table 2. Matrix for deriving visual resources condition category.

Rating	View Importance High	View Importance Moderate	View Importance Low
Scenic Quality High	Very Good	Good	Fair
Scenic Quality Moderate	Good	Fair	Poor
Scenic Quality Low	Fair	Poor	Very Poor

Step 3: Assign Data Adequacy

Different levels of data quality and quantity are assigned based on the amount and type of information used to inform the condition assessment. Data adequacy is the sum of assigned data quantity and data quality scores.

Data values derived using the quick assessment approach described above have an overall data adequacy of *Low*. Data quantity is *Insufficient (score=1)* because inventory data were not available or used. Data quality is *Low (score=1)* because indicator ratings are solely based on judgment.

Step 4: Determine Significant Change

After the initial baseline determination, significant change should be determined on a 5-year frequency using the *Wilderness Scenic Features Reassessment Guide*. Any change in the scenic quality or the view importance rating in either direction from the baseline data value is considered significant. This threshold was developed by the NPS Visual Resources Program. The *NPS Reassessment Guidance for Wilderness Scenic Features* is available online at: <https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2266849>.

Appendix A: Example Text

2018 (Measure Baseline) Data Value:

2018 scenic quality rating of *High* and view importance rating of *High* resulting in a visual resources condition of *Very Good*

Year(s) of Data Collection:

2018

Background and Context:

Visitors often come to parks to take in spectacular views and marvel at the unique scenery of diverse areas. However, the views are sometimes obscured by air pollutants or spoiled by unsightly development. Visual resources are the visible physical features such as topography and landform, vegetation, water, structures, and other features that combine to create the visual landscape. Scenery is the combination of visual resources that creates a view which is often, but not always, pleasing to the viewer.

The Organic Act of 1916, which created the National Park Service (NPS), states that the agency's mission is "to conserve the scenery...and wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Scenery is key to the purpose and significance of many park units. Protecting natural landscapes is important for ecological, cultural, and aesthetic reasons. Visual resources are valued both for their pleasing aesthetic characteristics—often spectacular views—and also as an important means of enhancing visitor connections to cultural resources associated with historic or even prehistoric landscapes. Some important landscapes may not be considered highly scenic, but still have visual resources that require management to protect desired characteristics.

Important park views may extend beyond park managed property. For this reason, it is essential for the NPS to look beyond its boundaries when considering visual resources. People don't "see" management boundaries when they visit parks. It is the NPS's responsibility to document and evaluate visual resources in a way that reflects the visitor experience. Considering views that extend beyond NPS boundaries informs engagement with other agencies, neighboring communities, and stakeholders.

When development is proposed within shared viewsheds, the NPS has an opportunity to engage in local, regional, and national regulatory and planning processes. Engaging with others to advance park protection is also consistent with the direction of the 2006 NPS Management Policies in section 1.6 on *Cooperative Conservation Policies Beyond Park Boundaries* (pages 13–14). Information about existing visual resources, the level of visitation to park viewpoints,

and the potential for changes in the visual setting to alter the visitor experience can inform external planning and development proposals, and may help protect park scenic views. Petrified Forest NP is well recognized for its vast painted desert landscapes characterized by badlands, mesas, cliffs, deeply incised canyons and rolling hills with petrified wood. Among the most popular scenic views in the park include Blue Mesa Loop, Blue Forest/Puerco River Valley, Blue Mesa Pedestal Logs, Buena Vista, Chinde Point, Jasper Forest Overlook, Kachina Point, and Lacey Point Overlook. The ability to experience these views offers park visitors numerous opportunities for inspiration, solitude, and connecting with both past and present ecosystems.

Threats that may affect the aesthetics of Petrified Forest NP viewsapes include the infrastructure associated with the possible development of a potash mine, as well as the possibility of wind farms development, and cell phone tower construction on lands adjacent to the park.

[Other items to consider including in the Background and Context section:

- *Highlight the implications of existing land management plans, zoning ordinances, or other regulations that would allow land uses that could alter the visual landscape beyond park boundaries. Also, assess the implications of proposed changes from known projects. Consider scale, type of project, and other factors that would result in changes inconsistent with the existing visual landscape beyond park boundaries that is important to the experience of park visitors. The assessment of implications for the visual landscape can be based on available information from public records, park plans, park staff knowledge, and other sources.*
- *Suggest activities/strategies for protecting desirable visual characteristics of views]*

Measure Description and Collection Protocol:

The condition of visual resources is determined by rating: scenic quality and view importance. In the quick assessment approach, the park determines data values based on professional judgement of scenic quality and view importance for scenic views throughout the park/wilderness area, rather than a specific scenic view or selection of views. The criteria used to determine scenic quality and view importance ratings are shown in Table 1. Scenic quality and view importance ratings were combined using a matrix (Table 2) to derive the visual resources condition.

Methods used to determine 2018 data values are described in *NPS Quick Assessment Guidance for Evaluating Visual Resources in Wilderness Character Assessments* (NPS ARD 2019).

Table 1. Criteria for selecting scenic quality and view importance ratings.

Rating	Description
Scenic Quality High	Most views include landscapes in good condition with very few, or minor, elements that detract from desirable visual characteristics. The majority of views are also aesthetically pleasing and memorable because of bold forms and colors.
Scenic Quality Moderate	Most views include landscapes in moderate condition with some elements that detract from desirable visual characteristics. The majority of views are somewhat aesthetically pleasing with forms and colors that add moderate visual interest.
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Table 2. Matrix for deriving visual resources condition category.

Rating	View Importance High	View Importance Moderate	View Importance Low
Scenic Quality High	Very Good	Good	Fair
Scenic Quality Moderate	Good	Fair	Poor
Scenic Quality Low	Fair	Poor	Very Poor

Data Source:

Visual resources inventory data were not available or used. The park staff determined data values based on professional judgement of scenic quality and view importance for scenic views throughout the park/wilderness area.

Data Adequacy:

Low – Data quantity is *Insufficient* (score=1) because inventory data were not available. Data quality is *Low* (score=1) because indicator ratings were solely based on judgment. For an overall data adequacy of Low. Data quantity and quality scores were combined for an overall data adequacy of *High*.

Frequency:

Five years

Significant Change:

After the initial baseline determination, significant change should be determined on a 5-year frequency using the re-assessment form. Any change in the scenic quality or the view importance rating in either direction from the baseline data value is considered significant. This threshold was developed by the NPS Visual Resources Program.