



January 2007

# BIG HOLE NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD



A Resource Assessment



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

STATE  
OF THE  
PARKS®

# STATE ♦ OF THE ♦ PARKS®

## Center for State of the Parks

More than a century ago, Congress established Yellowstone as the world's first national park. That single act was the beginning of a remarkable and ongoing effort to protect this nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage.

Today, Americans are learning that national park designation alone cannot provide full resource protection. Many parks are compromised by development of adjacent lands, air and water pollution, invasive plants and animals, and rapid increases in motorized recreation. Park officials often lack adequate information on the status and trends in conditions of critical resources.

The National Parks Conservation Association initiated the State of the Parks program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks, and determine how well equipped the National Park Service is to protect the parks—its stewardship capacity. The goal is to provide information that will help policy-makers, the public, and the National Park Service improve conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

For more information about the methodology and research used in preparing this report and to learn more about the Center for State of the Parks, visit [www.npca.org/stateoftheparks](http://www.npca.org/stateoftheparks) or contact: NPCA, Center for State of the Parks, P.O. Box 737, Fort Collins, CO 80522; Phone: 970.493.2545; E-mail: [stateoftheparks@npca.org](mailto:stateoftheparks@npca.org).

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.

- More than 325,000 members
- 9 regional offices
- 35,000 activists

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## INTRODUCTION



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Big Hole National Battlefield 1

### "I WILL FIGHT NO MORE FOREVER"

For at least 11,000 years prior to Euro-American settlement, the Nez Perce people, or *Nimi'ipuu*, lived in the valleys of the Clearwater, Snake, and Salmon Rivers of the Pacific Northwest. They dug for camas lily bulbs, fished for salmon, and hunted buffalo and other game. Eventually, Euro-American trappers, traders, explorers, and miners moved west into Nez Perce country. In 1860, gold was discovered in the Bitterroot Mountains, and the Nez Perce

reservation, established by the U.S. government in 1855, was overrun with newcomers seeking mineral wealth. In 1863, in response to miners and settlers clamoring to gain title to Nez Perce reservation lands, the federal government put in place a new treaty, which reduced the reservation to one-tenth its original size and called for several Nez Perce bands living outside its borders to leave their homelands and settle on the new reservation. Not all of the Nez Perce bands signed the new treaty, a fact that divided the

Chief Joseph, an important Nez Perce leader, played a significant role in the Nez Perce War of 1877. He posed for this photo on July 4, 1901.



Nez Perce into treaty and nontreaty groups.

In 1877, the U.S. government forced the nontreaty bands to move to land within the reservation. About 600 Nez Perce people gathered on the camas meadows next to Tolo Lake, six miles southwest of present-day Grangeville, Idaho, two days before the June 14 deadline to move to the reservation. On June 15, young tribesmen angered by the death of Nez Perce at the hands of white men in the Salmon River country retaliated by killing four white men. This led to the first battle of the so-called Nez Perce War on June 17, 1877, near White Bird, Idaho. The U.S. Army was soundly defeated at this battle, but continued to pursue the Nez Perce and engage them in several other skirmishes and battles through the summer of 1877.

On the morning of August 9, 1877, a total of 183 U.S. Army troops and civilian volunteers launched a surprise attack on about 750 Nez Perce men, women, and children who were camped in the Big Hole Valley of Montana, a place where the tribe had traditionally gathered camas lily bulbs and other foods. Between 60 and 90 Nez Perce were killed during the Big Hole Battle, at least half of them women and children. Thirty-two soldiers and volunteers also died.

Nez Perce survivors fled the battlefield in search of a safe haven, eventually turning toward Canada. But on September 30, the



Chief Joseph poses with family members. This photo was likely taken around 1886.

army surprised them near the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana, just 40 miles south of the Canadian border. After five days of fighting and about 25 Nez Perce casualties—including the loss of all but two of their leaders—one of the remaining leaders, Chief Joseph, surrendered on October 5, 1877:

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed... It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.

At the war's end, nearly 800 Nez Perce men, women, and children had traveled almost 1,170 miles to escape the pursuing army of more than 2,000 enlisted men and volunteers. It is estimated that nearly 200 Nez Perce crossed the border to Canada, and 431 surrendered to the army at Bear Paw.

#### PROTECTING SHARED HISTORY

The federal government and the Nez Perce people have long recognized the significance of sites associated with the Nez Perce War of 1877. Many important locations such as Big Hole Battlefield received federal protection soon after the war's end. In 1883, the U.S. government established the site as a military reserve, and in 1910, it was designated a national monument. The site came under the care of the National Park Service in 1933, and in 1963, Congress increased the monument's acreage and established it

#### RESOURCE MANAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

- The park's new film, *Weet'uciklitukt: There's No Turning Back, Battle at Big Hole*, thoughtfully interprets the Nez Perce War of 1877 and the tragedy that took place on the Big Hole Battlefield. The film is made richer through commentary provided by Nez Perce tribal members.
- To commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Big Hole in 2002, the park hosted three days of events that included a dinner to honor the battle participants and their descendants, presentations by noted speakers, a screening of the park's interpretive film, and a display of luminaries that were placed in remembrance of the killed and wounded from both sides of the battle.
- Non-native invasive species are concerns at many parks, but through cooperation with the Yellowstone Exotic Plant Management Team, the park has controlled most of the problematic species.

as a national battlefield to preserve its historic features and sites. In 1992, federal legislation designated Big Hole National Battlefield as one of the sites included within the expanded Nez Perce National Historical Park, which includes a total of 38 sites in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana.

Big Hole National Battlefield, a 655-acre park located ten miles west of Wisdom, Montana, tells the story of the battle that took place there in 1877, which contributes to Nez Perce National Historical Park's larger goal of preserving and interpreting the entire continuum of Nez Perce culture and history.



## THE ASSESSMENT

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Big Hole National Battlefield



Interpretive panels teach visitors about the Big Hole Battle and the park's significance.

Recognizing Big Hole National Battlefield's significance to our shared national heritage, NPCA's Center for State of the Parks endeavored to determine the conditions of the cultural and natural resources protected within the park. Researchers gathered information and used established, peer-reviewed methodologies to assess and systematically rate conditions of both cultural and natural resources at Big Hole National Battlefield. These methodologies can be found online ([www.npca.org/stateoftheparks](http://www.npca.org/stateoftheparks)).

Current overall conditions of Big Hole National Battlefield's known cultural and natural resources rated "fair" scores of 70 and 74, respectively. This report contains descriptions of park resources and summaries of resource conditions.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Additional historical research would help park staff improve resource stewardship and interpretation by providing a broader understanding of the entire context of the Nez Perce War of 1877. Limited staff numbers and time constraints prevent Big Hole staff from conducting research so the park contracts outside researchers to complete studies. Two historical studies have been completed since the mid-1990s, and several more will be carried out in the next few years, if funds permit.
- The park's museum collection includes valuable American Indian and battle-related artifacts, but exhibit cases are difficult to move and clean, and light threatens to damage fragile items such as clothing. Limited funds currently prevent exhibit

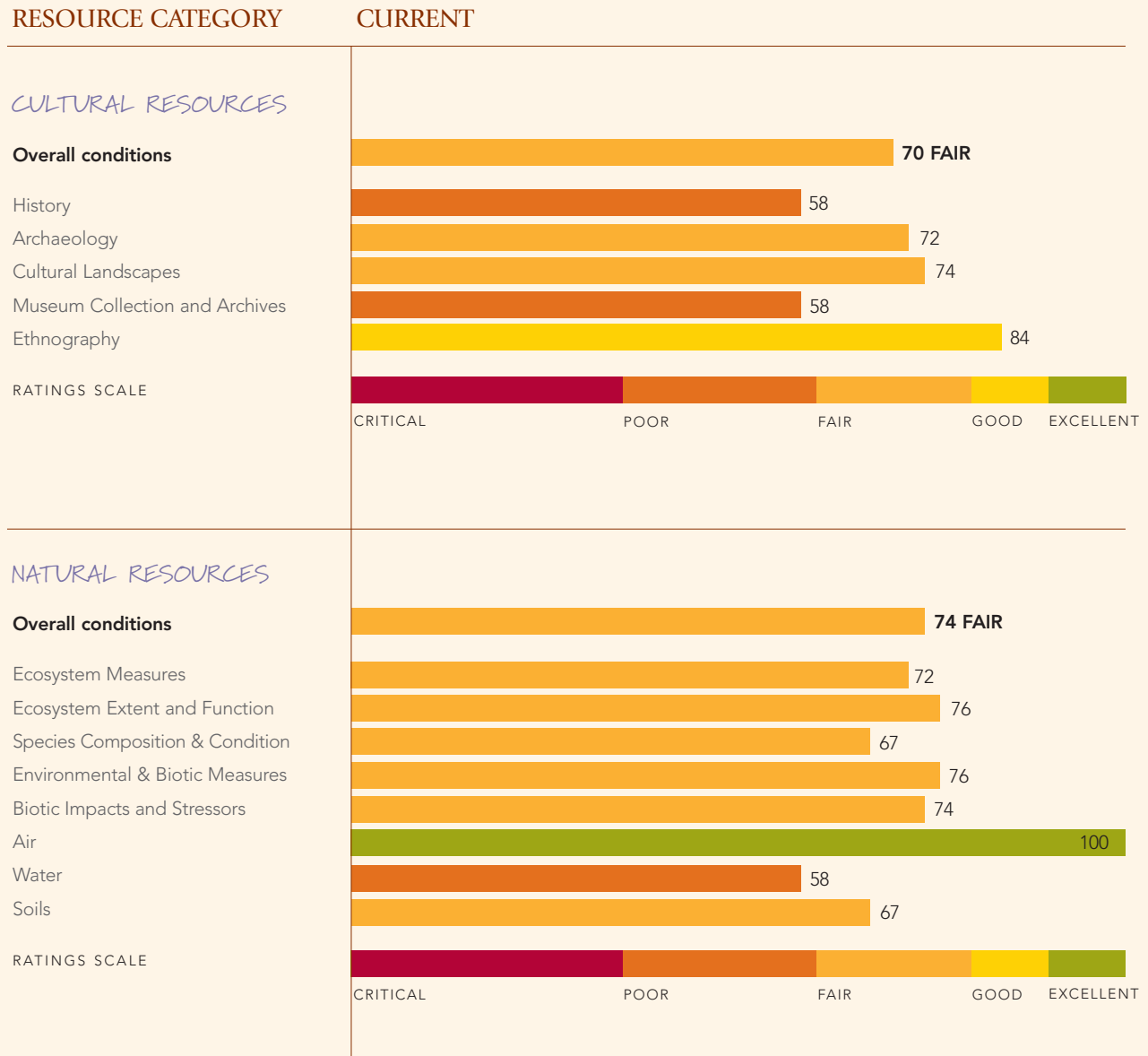
upgrades. Although visitors learn much from the museum's exhibits, many have been in place for more than 30 years. Rotating displays is difficult because the majority of the park's collections are stored 300 miles away at Nez Perce National Historical Park headquarters.

- An inventory of culturally significant landscapes within the park, which should be completed in early 2007, will help staff better understand the relationship between the Nez Perce and their environment at Big Hole, and will also explore the park's archaeological resources.
- For this assessment, little information was available to determine conditions of some natural resources. There are few staff to collect natural resources information, develop management plans, and implement management strategies. In fact, a single staff person is in charge of natural resources management with assistance from seasonal staff when funds permit. This shortage of staff and information has improved since Big Hole became part of the National Park Service's Upper Columbia Basin Network. Through the network, the park now receives assistance with natural resource inventories and monitoring, which contributes to resource knowledge and management efforts.
- Park staff are concerned about maintaining the health of the North Fork of the Big Hole River, which runs through the park, and controlling invasive non-native plants. They are also focused on the long-term health of the forest at Big Hole, which has been compromised as a result of altered historic fire patterns and the presence of Douglas fir bark beetles.



Nez Perce artifacts such as this beaded dress are displayed at the park's visitor center.

Note: When interpreting the scores for natural resource conditions, recognize that critical information upon which the ratings are based is not always available. This limits data interpretation to some extent. For Big Hole National Battlefield, just 45 percent of the information required by the methodology was available.



The findings in this report do not necessarily reflect past or current park management. Many factors that affect resource conditions are a result of both human and natural influences over long periods of time, in many cases pre-dating the park's creation. The intent of the Center for State of the Parks is to document the present status of park resources and determine what actions can be taken to protect them in the future.





### CULTURAL RESOURCES—STORIES PRESERVED AND PROTECTED

At Big Hole National Battlefield, visitors learn about Nez Perce culture and the 1877 battle by exploring exhibits that feature artifacts representative of the Nez Perce people and the military men and civilian volunteers who pursued them. Highlights include an eagle feather war bonnet, beaded paint pouch, and leather-covered war club that once belonged to Yellow Bull, a Nez Perce warrior; a Columbia River Plateau basket hat; military regalia and an army ledger detailing the war; Chief Joseph's coat; a bowie knife and photograph of a volunteer;

a beaded dress that may have belonged to Chief White Bird's wife; and the army howitzer that the Nez Perce captured and dismantled during the Big Hole Battle.

While these priceless artifacts are great teaching tools for visitors, most exhibits have been in place since the 1970s. Outmoded display cabinets are difficult to move and clean, and environmental conditions are not suitable for long-term preservation of fragile items such as clothing. In addition, there are no curatorial storage facilities at Big Hole National Battlefield, and the bulk of Big Hole's museum and archival collection is stored 300 miles away at the Nez Perce National Historical Park

Schoolchildren learn about Nez Perce history and culture through interpretive programs.

Tipi poles placed around the park help visitors imagine what the Nez Perce camp was like prior to the Big Hole Battle.



headquarters. Improving exhibit space to meet museum standards and rotating displays more frequently would provide better protection for artifacts and contribute to expanding interpretive programs.

As a protector of sacred Nez Perce sites, the Park Service at Big Hole National Battlefield works closely with the Nez Perce people to care for and appropriately interpret culturally important sites and other ethnographic resources for visitors. Although limited funds have prevented the park from conducting an ethnographic overview and assessment, an extensive body of research on Nez Perce culture and history already exists for staff to consult.

Additional historical research would help park staff improve resource stewardship and interpretation, but limited staff numbers and time constraints prevent Big Hole staff from conducting research. Instead, the park contracts outside researchers to complete studies. Two historical studies have been done since the mid-1990s, and several more are scheduled for the next few years, if funds permit.

Archaeological resources at Big Hole include evidence of Nez Perce activities pre-dating the war, battle-related artifacts, and remnants of homesteading and mining. All 655 acres of the battlefield have been intensively inventoried. The battle-

field site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Historical landscape architects from the Park Service's Pacific West Regional Office began a cultural landscape inventory of Big Hole National Battlefield in the summer of 2006. Scheduled to be completed in early 2007, this inventory will help park managers better understand the relationship between the Nez Perce and their environment at Big Hole. It will also explore the park's archaeological resources as components of the cultural landscape.

In winter, staff is limited to one superintendent, one full-time and one furloughed park ranger, one full-time and one furloughed maintenance worker, and one administrative technician. During the summer months, if project money is available, the park sometimes hires seasonal natural resource personnel. Two seasonal interpretive guides are hired with park base funds. One ranger manages natural and cultural resources, oversees the visitor center and its staff, and cares for the museum collection under the direction of the Nez Perce National Historical Park curator, who is stationed in Spalding. The broad scope of these duties leaves no time for additional work, but relevant research and interpretation could be accomplished with the addition of a base-funded cultural resource staff position.

The consequences of limited park staff are felt when resources are in immediate danger from threats such as fire or vandalism. Additional staff and stronger alliances with local law enforcement and other federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service would help ensure greater resource protection.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- **Support or become a member of groups helping to protect the park,** NPCA ([www.npca.org/support\\_npca](http://www.npca.org/support_npca)) and Friends of Bear Paw, Big Hole & Canyon Creek Battlefields ([www.friendsnezpercebattlefields.org](http://www.friendsnezpercebattlefields.org)). The friends organization was formed in 1992 to support the preservation and public education missions of the National Park Service. It promotes the history of the battle site and assists with maintenance and improvement of the grounds and facilities.
- **Volunteer in the parks.** To learn about opportunities at Big Hole National Battlefield, contact the park at 406.689.3155.
- **Become an NPCA activist and learn about legislative initiatives affecting parks.** When you join our activist network, you will receive Park Lines, a biweekly electronic newsletter with the latest park news and ways you can help. Join by visiting [www.npca.org/take\\_action](http://www.npca.org/take_action).



Commemorative ceremonies are held at the park to honor the Nez Perce who fought and died during the 1877 War.



Natural resources attracted the Nez Perce to the Big Hole Valley.

### NATURAL RESOURCES— PRESERVING CONNECTIONS

Before Euro-American settlers disrupted their traditional lifeways, the Nez Perce people were closely tied to the plants, animals, and natural features that surrounded them. Certain locations held spiritual significance, while others such as Big Hole Valley were valued for their abundant plant foods or hunting opportunities. Today the Nez Perce consider the Big Hole National Battlefield to be a sacred burial ground, and many families visit the location to pay respects to their ancestors who lost their lives there. The battlefield's natural resources play an impor-

tant role in Nez Perce culture and in telling the story of the battle.

The Park Service is charged with protecting Big Hole's natural resources for contemporary Nez Perce people and for all Americans. Although the park has a mandated emphasis on cultural resources, staff consider the best management of natural resources whenever possible. The National Park Service's Upper Columbia Basin Network has assisted greatly with research and monitoring, but additional staff members devoted to natural resource management at Big Hole would allow the park to better understand and address its threats and concerns. Currently, there is just one

full-time staff member to manage natural resources in addition to other duties.

Park management is geared toward preserving an environment similar to the one that was present at the time of the Battle of Big Hole. As a result of its early federal protection, which dates from 1883 to the present, and its relative remoteness and isolation in northern Montana, Big Hole remains much the same as it was in 1877. Air quality is excellent, and the park is buffered by Beaverhead National Forest and agricultural and ranch lands, which contribute to the expansive scenic vistas that help park visitors imagine the historic battle.

The park's 655 acres of grasslands, shrublands, wetlands, and forests provide habitat for as many as 201 bird, 58 mammal, 12 fish, and seven reptile and amphibian species. A number of these are federally protected, state listed, or considered "species of concern." They include gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*), wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), Canadian lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), western toad (*Bufo boreas*), and grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*). A survey of vascular plants identified 350 different native species, subspecies, and varieties, including Lemhi penstemon (*Penstemon lemhiensis*), which is globally rare and a state species of concern. This penstemon has been in decline, but the park is conducting experimental burning to reduce competition and improve conditions for it.

The health of the North Fork of the Big Hole River, which runs through the park, non-native plant management, and forest health are primary concerns for park staff. Montana's Department of Environmental Quality has listed the North Fork of the Big Hole River as "impaired" because of agriculture and dewatering, with potential effects on arctic grayling, which is federally listed as

endangered. Irrigation canals run adjacent to the river and through the park. Private individuals possess rights to these waters, limiting park management. The canals allow willow to grow in areas where it did not historically occur, and they may be lowering the water table. Through ongoing cooperation with the Yellowstone Exotic Plant Management Team, non-native plants are well managed and many have been removed, though the irrigation canals could be contributing to the spread of non-native plants as seeds can be transported in the flowing waters.

The long-term health of the forest at Big Hole is of concern, in part, because historic fire patterns have been altered. A century of fire suppression has led to densities of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) that could be fire hazards. Park staff have used prescribed burns to manage the growth of vegetation in the past, and may continue to do so when appropriate. Although they are native to the area, Douglas fir bark beetles (*Dendroctonus pseudotsugae* Hopkins), are killing some trees and further stressing the system.

The North Fork of the Big Hole River is home to arctic grayling, an endangered species.



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