



John Elk III



june 2003



LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

A Resource Assessment



NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

STATE
OF THE
PARKS®

LITTLE BIGHORN AT A GLANCE

- One of the National Park Service's most impressive museum and archival collections, with more than 7,000 letters and photos, more than 45,000 archival documents, and thousands of objects, such as uniforms and other personal effects pertaining to the battle.
- The only national battlefield with markers to show where both Army soldiers and Indian warriors fell. Home to a unique Indian Memorial, dedicated June 25, 2003.
- The battlefield is a small but valuable parcel of relatively undisturbed grassland. Much of it has been protected from grazing by domestic animals for more than 100 years.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Lack of adequate storage space jeopardizes the monument's valuable museum and archival collection.
- Lack of exhibit and visitor center space and a small 1950s parking lot cannot accommodate the influx of guests in peak season.
- Adjacent land development threatens the viewshed and the battlefield's historic character, affecting visitor experience.



OVERVIEW— A LEGEND PROTECTED

On June 25 and 26, 1876, Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors joined forces to defeat 12 companies of the U.S. 7th Cavalry at what is now Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in Montana. Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, one of the most controversial figures in U.S. military history, led the cavalry and was among the 263

soldiers and other army personnel, including Arikara scouts, who were killed as the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho fought to defend their traditional nomadic way of life.

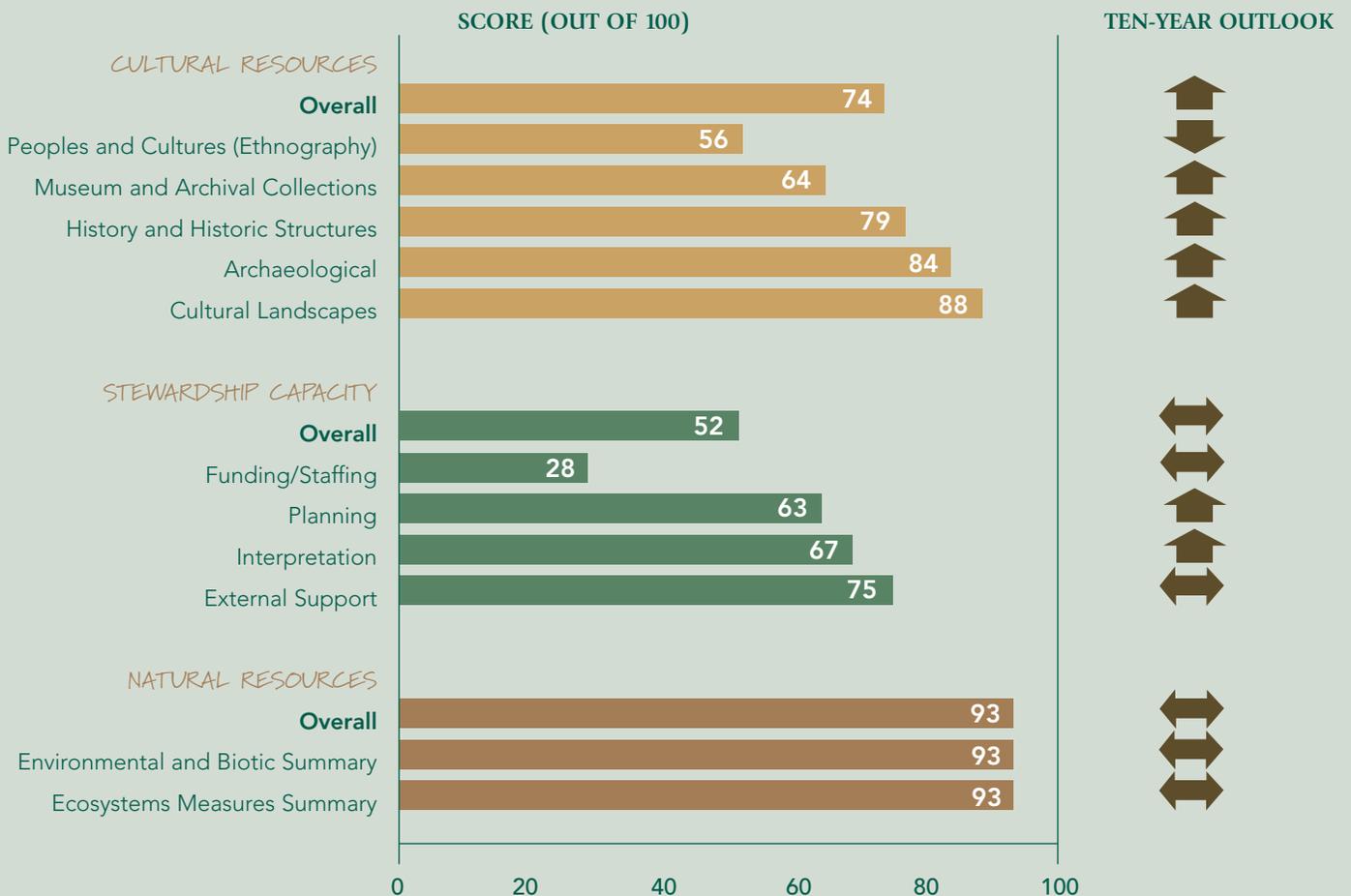
The Battle of Little Bighorn, as well as Custer and many of the Indians who took part, including Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, Lame White Man, and Two Moons, have become the stuff of legend—chronicled in countless books, articles, documentaries,

movies, plays, sculptures, paintings, and oral history. Just three years after the battle, Congress designated the site Custer Battlefield National Cemetery under the care of the War Department, and in 1881 a memorial was erected over the mass grave of the 7th Cavalry soldiers and scouts. In 1890, white marble markers were erected where individual members of the 7th Cavalry fell. In 1926, the government acquired the nearby Reno-Benteen Battlefield, and 14 years later both sites were turned over to the National Park Service. Connected by a 4.1-mile stretch of paved road, the two sites now comprise the 765-acre Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, renamed by Congress in 1991. In 1999 and 2001, red granite markers were erected on sites where Indian warriors were known to have died.

Located in south central Montana on the present-day Crow Indian Reservation, Little Bighorn includes a visitor center, museum, library, Custer National Cemetery, 7th Cavalry Memorial, Reno-Benteen Battlefield, and the new Indian Memorial dedicated in June 2003. In addition, the monument includes historic structures, archaeological sites, and one of the most impressive museum and archival collections in the National Park System.

This special place is one example of how people of different cultures can come together to understand the past and work toward a better future. Recognizing the significance of the monument, the National Parks Conservation Association's State of the Parks® Program assessed its resource protection. Through a peer-reviewed methodology, analysts evaluated the condition of Little Bighorn's cultural and natural resources and placed the results in context by examining "stewardship capacity"—funding, staffing, interpretive services, and external support. This evaluation is reflected in the scores contained in the chart.

CONDITIONS AT LITTLE BIGHORN NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD



Up arrows = resource conditions are likely to improve over the next ten years; **flat arrows** = no change is likely; **Down arrows** = conditions are forecasted to deteriorate.

For more information on the methodology and research that form the basis of this report, visit www.npca.org/stateoftheparks

*The Overall, Environmental and Biotic Summary, and Ecosystems Measures Summary ratings were based on 79 percent, 74 percent, and 87 percent, respectively, of the category information requirements of our natural resources assessment methodology.

HISTORY COMES ALIVE

Over the past 30 years, management and interpretation of the 765-acre Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument has evolved from a primary emphasis on the “white man’s” story to inclusion of all those who were affected by the battle. The monument is the only national battlefield with markers for

both fallen warriors and soldiers, and the new Indian Memorial represents a unique feature within the National Park System. The creation of the memorial is an outstanding example of collaboration among tribes and the Park Service.

The museum and archival collections at Little Bighorn are some of the most valuable

and significant in any national park unit. A strong multi-cultural emphasis is evident in the more than 5,000 pieces of correspondence and 2,000 photos related to the ethnically diverse 7th Cavalry and items from the Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Crow Indians. The collection contains more than 7,000 objects and specimens and more than

PAINTING THE BIGGER PICTURE

For years, management of Little Bighorn, first under the War Department and then the National Park Service, focused on the legendary battle from the “Euro-American” perspective. This perspective has broadened considerably in the last 30 years as park staff have included American Indians in park planning and programs. In 1991, the park was renamed by Congress from Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. New wayside exhibits and interpretive pullouts have been installed along the battlefield road and at other historic sites to update interpretation. Today, soldiers, Indian scouts, and warriors help tell the battle story to park visitors. Museum exhibits and interpretive brochures also have been revised to present a balanced story. Finally in 2003, after 12 years of planning and design, an Indian Memorial was constructed—a successful collaboration between American Indians and the National Park Service.



45,000 archival documents, including a vast grouping of 19th century photographs that document military forts and camps, the 7th Cavalry records, and the Elizabeth Bacon Custer, Dustin, Camp, Hammer, Thomas Marquis, and Gibson-Fougera collections. The museum collection includes a number of original silk battle flags, guidons, uniforms, medals, and other equipment from combatants on both sides of the conflict. All of these items need better storage and conservation treatment.

The lack of a fire suppression system as well as inadequate storage space are the most significant threats to the monument’s collections. Currently, the park lacks the funds to provide storage that would protect the collections from daily temperature and relative humidity fluctuations. Many items not currently on display are crowded into a small storage area and a tiny original artifact vault. Other items are stacked on floors or on top of cabinets; and a small curatorial work area makes caring for the collections difficult.

The monument has ten archaeological sites—nine pre-historic stone scatters and one site that includes the combined Custer and Reno-Benteen battlefields. All of the known archaeological sites are in good condition. Storage space is a challenge for more than 6,000 archaeological artifacts, most of them related to the battle, found during site

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FLAG OF OUR COUNTRY

Chief Two Moons
Northern Cheyenne,
Custer Battlefield National Cemetery,
June 25, 1916

excavations from 1984 to 1996. In addition, some of the battlefield sites are threatened by looting, erosion, trampling, and inadvertent damage caused by cars and recreational vehicles parking off-street when the lot is full. The park lacks funding for a traffic plan to alleviate some of these problems caused, in part, by an outdated parking lot. The lot was built more than 50 years ago, before recreation vehicles became common.

Most of the historic structures are made of stone and are in good or fair condition. The Stone House—originally the park superintendent’s home—has been put to good use as the repository for Little Bighorn’s library.



A new Indian memorial features bronze spirit sculptures honoring the American Indian tribes associated with the battle.

Constructed in 1894 by the War Department, the Stone House is among the oldest surviving structures in eastern Montana and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Restored in the mid-1990s, it retains its historical and architectural integrity.

Today, this site is managed as one large cultural landscape, boasting programs that exemplify the integration of peoples and cultures (ethnography) with the history and natural landscape of the monument. The assessment's relatively low score of 56 for the peoples and cultures category is somewhat misleading. It is based on National Park System requirements for a number of ethnographic plans and reports that do not exist at the monument, but for a good reason. Completing the required Ethnographic Overview and Assessment, for example, would be redundant, in part, because this information is so much a part of the day-to-day management. To enhance interpretation at the monument, park staff have scheduled an ethno-history project, an administrative history project, and are identifying and interpreting the different European ethnicities represented in the 7th Cavalry.

Although Little Bighorn is managed primarily for its historical and cultural values, the natural landscape plays a significant role in interpreting the events surrounding the

battle. Both Indian warriors and 7th Cavalrymen used the grasses and gentle slopes at the site to their advantage. Long fenced off from livestock, the monument is now a good example of regenerated and relatively undisturbed northern short grasslands, close to the conditions of 1876. Maintenance of the native vegetation is important to the monument's overall purpose. Available information indicates that natural resources are in good condition overall; however, additional studies are needed to provide adequate information for all resources.

Potential threats to native vegetation and the natural landscape of Little Bighorn include air pollution, invasive non-native species, and adjacent land uses. Air quality is good, but emissions from a number of coal-fired power plants in surrounding areas eventually could damage soils and vegetation. One study identified about 23 percent of all plant species at the monument as non-native invaders, some of which may have the potential to out-compete native vegetation. Vehicular traffic and visitors walking off designated trails also take a toll on vegetation. Only one road passes through the monument, which creates some pedestrian and traffic challenges, some of which could be alleviated by a shuttle system (part of the needed traffic plan).

TELLING THE STORY

The primary purpose of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is to protect the cultural and natural resources related to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Closely related is the goal of providing visitors with an understanding of the battle, the events that preceded it, and its historical consequences.

This is accomplished through interpretive programs at the monument and off-site outreach programs. In 2002, interpretive staff made 144,628 visitor contacts through formal and informal interpretation, conducted 18 off-site and outreach programs attended by 3,695 people, and taught 793 youngsters as part of the Junior Ranger Program. Staff led 37 on-site school tours and four off-site school programs for 390 students and faculty. The park's historian also conducts a "staff-ride" for U.S. military personnel who study the historic 1876 battle in modern warfare training.

The historian and museum curator regularly process hundreds of research requests and telephone queries throughout any given year. Assistance is needed to handle these requests so that the historian and curator have time for their resource protection responsibilities.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is a testament to what a small, determined staff and partnerships with external organizations can accomplish. The historical and cultural significance of the monument, as well as the natural landscape, are alive and well. To ensure that this legacy will be intact for future generations, NPCA recommends the following actions:

- Congress should heed the Park Service's repeated requests to fund a new, larger visitor center to accommodate increased visitation and provide adequate space for interpretive displays and staff work stations. Funding should include staff to operate the visitor center.
- Congress should provide funds to either remodel the existing visitor center or construct a new facility to house the monument's valuable museum and archival collections.
- Congress should increase the monument's annual budget so that additional resource management expertise and support can be hired to provide greater protection of resources and improved visitor services.
- Congress should provide money to complete a traffic plan and pay for a shuttle system and remote parking, which will relieve visitor frustration and reduce damage to resources from vehicles and trampling in the peak season.
- Although most of the monument's existing natural resource plans are up to date, at least two key documents are missing—a Weed Management Plan to help address invasive non-native plant species and an Integrated Pest Management Plan to respond to insect and rodent problems at the visitor center, in the museum collections, and in storage areas. Congress should increase funding to complete these plans.
- Congress should provide funding to complete an up-to-date Collection Management Plan, new item appraisals, basic photographic documentation, and other planning documents related to the care, preservation and interpretation of the museum and archival collections.
- Staff should continue monitoring air quality to document changes.
- Monument staff should continue to work with adjacent landowners, including the Crow Indian Nation and the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, to protect land adjacent to the monument. This land is part of the battle corridor and its historic, cultural, and natural integrity should be preserved.

In addition, the monument faces severe water shortages for drinking, running the park's sewage system, and irrigating the national cemetery and park grounds. Drought conditions in recent years have caused fluctuations in water table quality and availability.

More than 11,000 acres around the 765-acre monument are identified as part of the historic battle corridor, making continued cooperation with surrounding landowners essential to preserve those lands. Commercial and residential development has increased significantly over the past decade, and is a

serious threat to the battlefield's viewshed.

Many of the threats could be reduced through increased funding and additional staff. Currently, the monument does not have the staff to catalog a number of archival items, and a lack of funds has prevented the construction of a new storage facility and a visitor center. Only two full-time equivalent staff positions care for cultural resources. According to the 1999 internal Park Service study, Cultural Resources Management Assessment Program, Little Bighorn needs about 16 additional full-time equivalent cul-

NATURAL RESOURCE
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PROJECTS ARE OFTEN
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AND STAFF



tural resource positions.

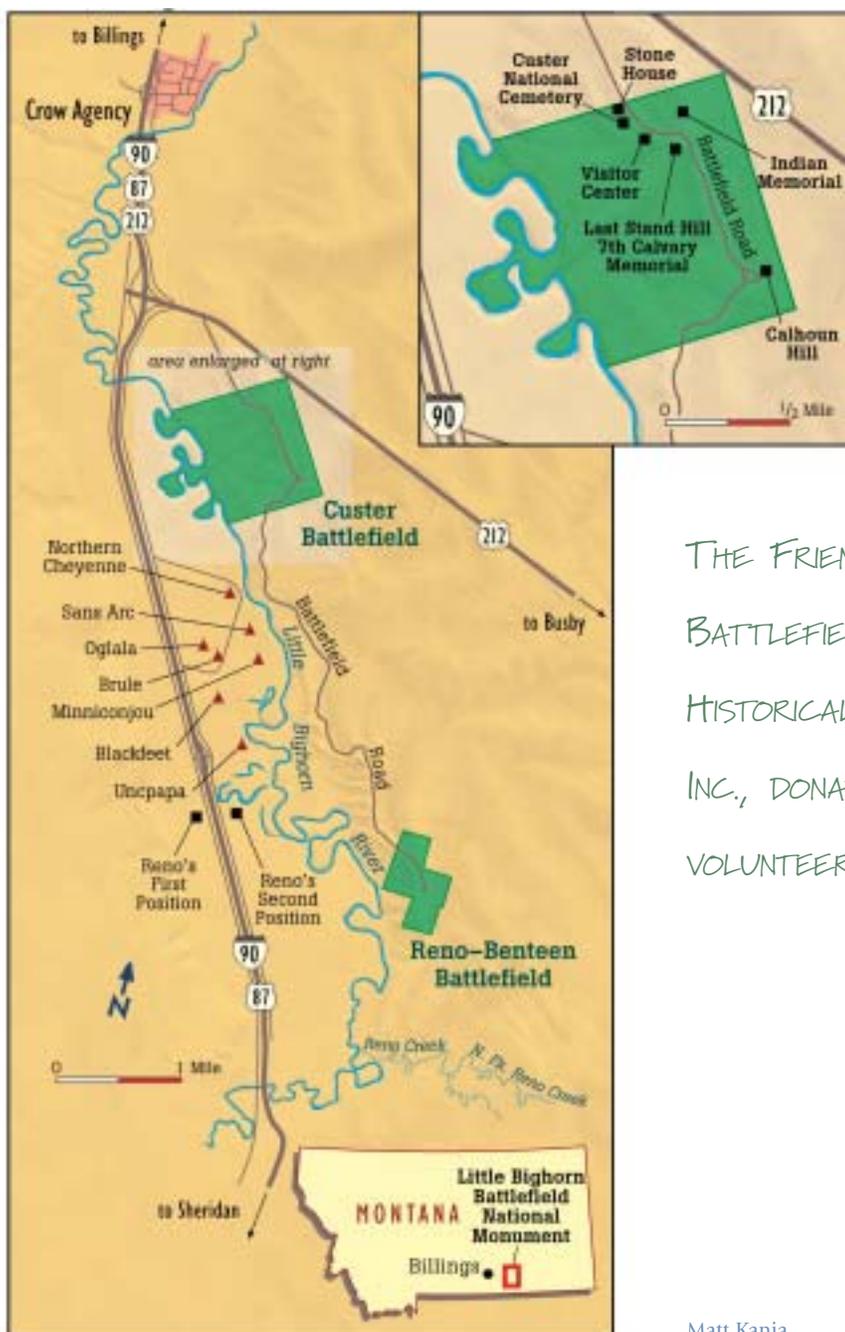
In addition, natural resource management projects are often deferred because of inadequate funds and staff. For example, one chief ranger is responsible for all natural resource issues and a number of other responsibilities. Less than 10 percent of the ranger's time is actually spent on natural resource management. The monument's Resources Management Plan recognizes the need for more resource managers—at the very least to maintain databases, prioritize and coordinate needed research, write fund-

ing proposals, and implement a program to deal with insects and rodents.

Little Bighorn has a difficult time accommodating the increasing number of visitors to its small, 1950s visitor center. A new center, outlined in the monument's General Management Plan 30 years ago and advocated by staff ever since, is on hold because of funding constraints.

Fortunately, financial assistance and other services are provided through a number of important partnerships with outside organizations. Among the partners is the Western National Parks Association, which operates a bookstore at the park and donates part of the proceeds from sales and additional funds to educational and interpretation needs. The Volunteers-In-Parks

Program and Student Conservation Association contribute volunteer services. The association's volunteers helped the curator process 8,000 museum and archival items. A total of 1,785 volunteer hours were contributed to the monument in fiscal year 2001. The Friends of the Little Bighorn Battlefield and Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association, Inc., donate both money and volunteer services, and the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee plans to donate 3,500 acres surrounding the monument to the Park Service, if Congress expands Little Bighorn's boundaries.



MAP OF LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

THE FRIENDS OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD AND CUSTER BATTLEFIELD HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM ASSOCIATION, INC., DONATE BOTH MONEY AND VOLUNTEER SERVICES

STATE OF THE PARKS® PROGRAM

On average, less than 6 percent of the National Park Service's annual budget is earmarked for management of cultural resources and just 10 percent is targeted for natural resources. In most years, only about 7 percent of permanent park employees work in jobs directly related to preservation of park resources.

The National Parks Conservation Association initiated the State of the Parks® Program in 2000 to assess the condition of cultural and natural resources in national parks, forecast future conditions of those resources, and determine how well equipped the National Park Service is to protect the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policy-makers and the National Park Service improve conditions in national parks and ensure a lasting natural, historical, and cultural legacy for future generations.

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

The National Parks Conservation Association, established in 1919, is this country's only private, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated solely to protecting, preserving, and enhancing the U.S. National Park System for present and future generations. NPCA identifies resource needs and generates the support needed to implement solutions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The National Parks Conservation Association thanks its members for generously supporting efforts to protect and enhance America's National Park System for present and future generations through publications such as this report.

Dr. Kenton Miller
World Resources Institute, World Commission on Protected Areas

Dr. Douglas Muchoney
U.S. Geological Survey

Dr. Douglas Schwartz
The School of American Research

Dr. Lee Talbot
George Mason University

W. Richard West
Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of the American Indian

Researchers:
Crystal White and Elizabeth Meyers

Writer/Editor:
Deanne Kloepper

Design/Layout:
Pensare Design

Photos Courtesy of National Park Service and John Elk III

STATE OF THE PARKS® ADVISORY COUNCIL

Bruce Judd, Chair
Architectural Resources Group

Dr. Sylvia Earle
National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence

Michael Finley
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1300 19th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036

p/ 202.223.6722
f/ 202.659.0650

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