



## FORT UNION TRADING POST NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



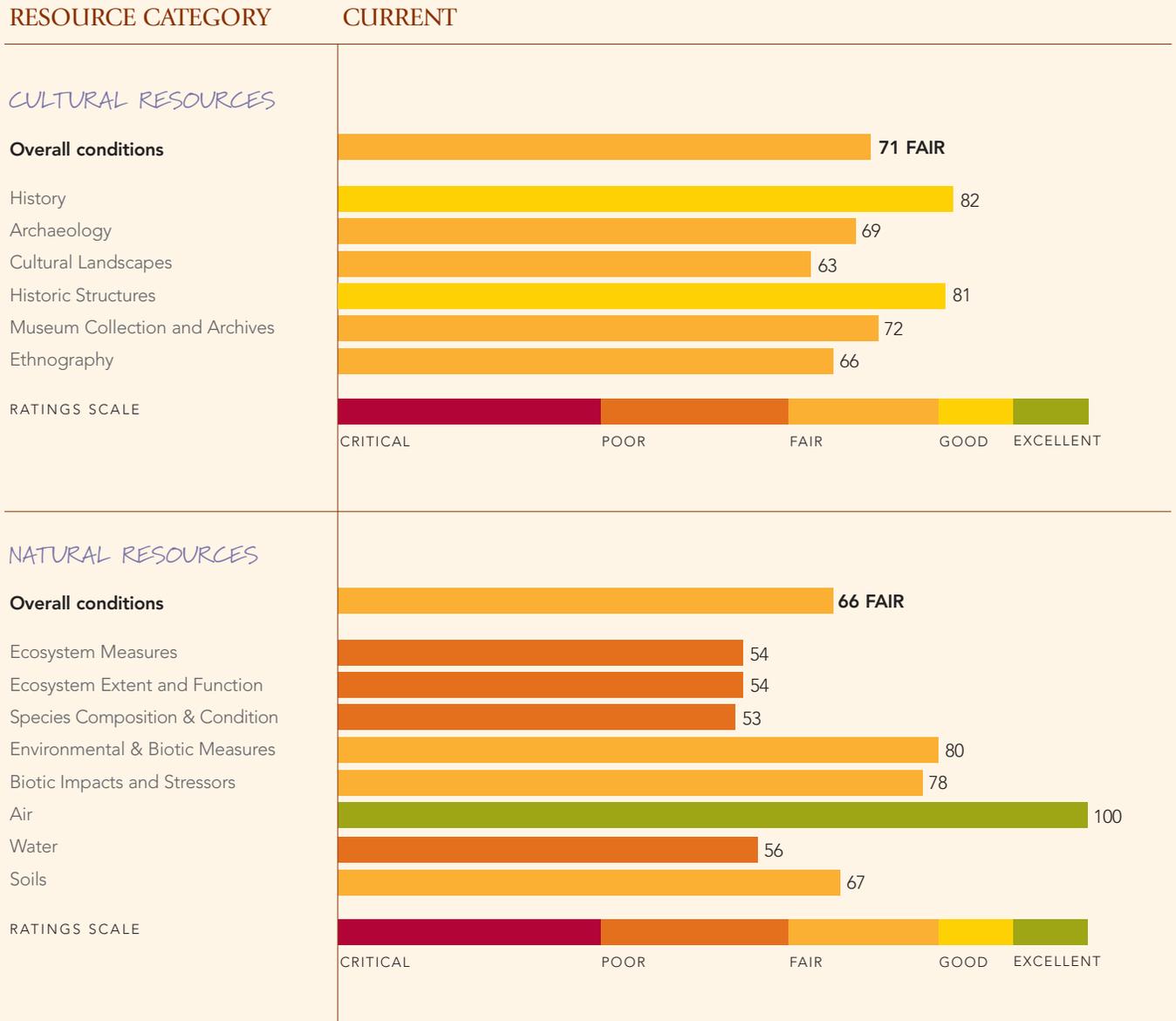
In late April 1805, Lewis and Clark reached the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, and they returned to the area in 1806 on their way back to St. Louis. President Jefferson had instructed the men to collect information on trapping and trade prospects, and this area provided access for exchange of goods with a number of American Indian tribes and access to transportation corridors along two of the west's most important inland waterways.

In 1828, the Upper Missouri Outfit of the American Fur Company capitalized on this strategic location and established Fort Union Trading Post on the Missouri River, three miles upstream of its confluence with the Yellowstone River. The post, sold to Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Company in 1834, dominated the fur trading business until 1867.

During its heyday, Fort Union Trading Post was an economic and social landmark. The  
*(continues on page 38)*

Fort Union Trading Post NHS includes a partially reconstructed fort located at the same location as the original, which was dismantled in the late 1860s. Archaeological investigations, historic paintings, and archival documentation guided reconstruction.

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 Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, 47 percent of the information requirements associated with the methods were met.



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 before a park was established. The intent of the Center for State of the Parks® is to document the present status of park resources and determine which actions can be taken to protect them in the future.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Fort Union Trading Post's remote setting has generally protected the park's cultural landscape, but human activities have affected the natural landscape. The land within and around the park is no longer home to bison, elk, wolves, and black-tailed prairie dogs; years of agriculture on and around the fort's site have leveled the ground; petroleum and gas production are increasing concerns; and the highway and railroad are the most prominent contemporary features beyond those created by the Park Service. Continued work with adjacent landowners will be critical in maintaining a landscape that reflects the fort's historic period. A cultural landscape report would increase the understanding of the landscape and could benefit other management aspects of the park such as archaeology, interpretation, and historic research.
- The park has one curator to care for its collection of 800,000 museum objects, half of which have yet to be cataloged. Additional curatorial staff are needed to catalog, inspect, monitor, and clean the collections.
- The park's museum collections are adequately housed, but archival collections have outgrown the library and there is limited space for visiting researchers.
- Additional reconstruction would enhance the past reconstruction efforts, which serve as a stage for historical interpretation. But the appropriateness of reconstructions remains highly controversial within the agency, as it was when the existing reconstructions were planned. Although reconstruction greatly enhances the visitor experience, it can also permanently damage archaeological resources. Park staff and partners support additional reconstruction.
- The top three natural resource priorities identified by park staff include invasive plant control, prairie restoration (soil structure, composition, flora and fauna composition), and riparian health. Efforts to address these issues include seeding former agricultural lands, prescribed burning, treating weeds, and riverbank stabilization.
- The overall effectiveness of the park's natural resources programs suffers from a lack of continuity because the park lacks funding to employ natural resources staff. The park needs funds to hire a natural resource specialist to oversee natural resources planning, compliance, field activities, and inventory and monitoring. A prairie vegetation management plan is also critically needed to guide restoration activities.
- Existing maintenance staffing will not be adequate for the long-term care of the wooden structures of the fort as they reach the end of their life cycle. Additional reconstructed buildings will exacerbate this shortfall.



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Living history programs teach visitors about the people who lived, worked, or traded goods at Fort Union Trading Post.

primary fur trading station in the northern Rocky Mountains, the fort also featured a blacksmith shop, dwelling range (employee quarters), storehouse, and bourgeois house—the components of a small, functioning community. Perhaps more importantly, Fort Union became a center of cultural exchange among European Americans and many American Indian groups.

As westward expansion of European Americans forced the American Indian tribes into a smaller area, peaceful coexistence deteriorated. Some of the American Indian tribes

became hostile to new settlers and the military. The overall trade network could no longer function. In 1867, the fort was sold to the U.S. Army, which dismantled the structure and used some of the building materials to construct Fort Buford a short distance away at the confluence of the rivers.

Interest in the historic role of Fort Union continued long after the fort was sold to the army and dismantled. Fort Union Trading Post became a state historic site in 1938, a national historic landmark in 1961, and then a national historic site in 1966. The 444-acre park straddles the North Dakota-Montana border. Although none of the original structures remained when the park was established, the site was rich in archaeological evidence of the fur trade and other post activities.

Today, a partially reconstructed fort exists at exactly the same location as the original, constructed from 1985 through 1991 with information gained through extensive archaeological investigations, historic paintings, and archival documentation. Visually accurate reconstructions of the palisade walls, Indian trade house, two bastions, and bourgeois house stand as a life-size stage to teach visitors about the site's significance. The entire fort is a large walk-through exhibit that provides visitors with the feeling of a frontier post.

Congress created Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site to “commemorate the significant role played by Fort Union as a fur trading post on the Upper Missouri River.” An assessment indicates that, overall, cultural and natural resources are in fair condition. Cultural resources scored 71 out of 100, while natural resources scored 66 out of 100. History and historic structures are the park's strongest cultural resources categories. Environmental and biotic measures scored well at Fort Union Trading Post, but it must be emphasized that the park's overall natural resources score is based on less than half of the information required by the Center for State of the Parks methodology.

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

### HISTORY—ADDITIONAL RESEARCH WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO INTERPRETATION

Historical interpretation at Fort Union Trading Post focuses on the reconstructed fort buildings, which are used to tell the stories of the fur trade, exploration of the American frontier, and relationships with American Indians. This multi-faceted approach appeals to diverse audiences including fur-trade enthusiasts and people traditionally associated with the region.

The role that steamboats played in establishing Fort Union Trading Post as the premiere trading post on the upper Missouri River deserves further interpretation at the park. Fort Union Trading Post's supremacy was largely the result of its location, which allowed furs to be easily transported down both rivers and gathered at the fort to await the May or June arrival of a steamboat from St. Louis.

Other viable interpretive themes include ecological history such as the role the river played in exploration and settlement and the cultural resource value of natural resources. Other needed research identified in the park's resource management plan include written accounts of Fort Union's military history, social history, ethnography, and scientific discovery. These projects would significantly increase the understanding of Fort Union Trading Post and its diverse history, and they would provide relevant material for interpretation.

### HISTORIC STRUCTURES—PARTIALLY RECONSTRUCTED FORT TRANSPORTS VISITORS BACK IN TIME

For visitors today, Fort Union Trading Post appears much as it would have to travelers in the mid-19th century. The white palisade walls, with the flagpole rising high above them, flag snapping in the wind, are impressive among the rolling hills and fields of the surrounding landscape. Except for a handful of nearby oil rigs

## RESOURCE MANAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

- The park initiated a prairie restoration project in 1987 that continues today. Staff have consulted with the Northern Great Plains Exotic Plant Management Team and the Washington Resource Division restoration specialist to greatly reduce non-native grasses on 125 acres surrounding the fort and have planted native vegetation. Soon they will begin to increase the diversity of the prairie by planting additional native species.
- The fort's extensive archaeological records and research library contribute to multi-faceted interpretation that appeals to people traditionally associated with the region, enthusiasts of the historical fur trade, and those intrigued by the American frontier.
- Partnerships significantly aid the park. The Friends of Fort Union support special events and have coordinated several land purchases on the south side of the Missouri River. These purchases help protect the park's viewshed. The Fort Union Association supports the park's interpretive program and operates a bookstore that provides interpretive resources and reproduction trade goods for the public. The Fort Union Muzzleloaders is a living history re-enactment group that provides accurate historic interpretation of life during the fur trade era.



The Bourgeois House serves as the park's visitor center, administrative offices, and bookstore.

As part of a prairie restoration project on 125 acres surrounding the fort, park staff have removed invasive species and seeded ten plots with native plants. The park is in critical need of a prairie vegetation management plan to guide this ambitious restoration program.

located on adjacent farm land, the recreated Fort Union Trading Post appears largely as it would have in the historical period.

When Congress declared Fort Union Trading Post a national historic site in 1966, no original buildings remained. Local citizens organized the Friends of Fort Union and strongly supported the reconstruction of the fort. Before any reconstruction began, researchers conducted extensive archaeological investigations and delved into the written record in search of clues to the building's past. These efforts, combined with historic images and a close working relationship between the historic architect and the archaeologist, provided incredible details that allowed the park to build a new fort at the exact location of the first, craft replica hinges and window shutters, and reproduce woodwork.

The reconstructed fort buildings and palisades are vital to the interpretation of the park. Panels around the fort explain the significance and purpose of the structures. The Bourgeois House serves as the visitor center, administrative offices, and bookstore. Displays

in the Bourgeois House, including a scale replica of the original fort and exhibits, inform visitors of the reconstruction and archaeological work. Permanent exhibits educate visitors about the fur trade and the lives of the diverse groups of people who lived and traded at Fort Union Trading Post.

#### CULTURAL LANDSCAPES— COOPERATION HELPS PROTECT VIEWS

The landscape that contains and surrounds Fort Union Trading Post reflects how humans used the environment and adapted to their surroundings. This cultural landscape, much of which is remarkably intact, is one of the park's most impressive features. Neighboring agricultural lands and the fort's isolation from major population centers have helped preserve the viewshed and invoke a sense of what the area was like 200 years ago. Intrusive, non-contributing elements in the park are the highway and railroad grade. Park Service development such as the road access and the housing and maintenance areas are



within the park's cultural landscape, but were designed and placed to barely intrude on the historic viewshed.

With the support of the Friends of Fort Union Trading Post, the park has purchased four pieces of land on the south side of the Missouri River since 1997. These purchases help protect the viewshed and integrity of the cultural landscape. Park staff have also worked with nearby landowners to establish vegetation that screens oil rigs and agricultural development, and their continued efforts to maintain and improve the cultural landscape include prairie restoration activities. Additional oil rig construction and intensified agricultural production with center-pivot irrigation remain a threat on adjacent lands, which means that park staff will need to continue to work with surrounding landowners to communicate the importance of maintaining the integrity of the landscape.

Park staff recognize the need for a cultural landscape report to help them define and better understand this resource and aid management and interpretation.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY—MORE THAN HALF A MILLION ARTIFACTS INFORM INTERPRETATION

Archaeological work, first begun in 1968, taught park staff much about the Fort Union Trading Post and provided critical information needed to accurately reproduce key fort structures. Of the fort's 15 archaeological sites, eight are in good or fair condition, four are in poor condition, and three are in unknown condition.

Over the years, excavations have yielded more than 559,000 artifacts related to every aspect of the fur trade. Trade goods, building remains, and everyday items such as dishware and bison bones provide a detailed, comprehensive understanding of life at the trading post. Artifacts tell of the exchange of goods and cultures at the fort, provide glimpses of the people who lived there, and inform interpretive exhibits and programs.



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Fort Union Trading Post's museum collections include items associated with the fur trade such as this buffalo coat. Many objects have not been cataloged; funds are needed to support this activity because items cannot be studied or used in displays until they have been cataloged.

#### MUSEUM COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES—ADDITIONAL EXHIBIT, STORAGE, AND WORKSPACE NEEDED

Archaeological artifacts are the centerpieces of the park's museum collection, which contains 800,000 objects. The park also has 71,000 archival items including a 3,000-volume collection of books on the fur trade and the American West. The park's museum collections are adequately housed, but only half the items have been cataloged. The curator is the only cultural resources staff person at Fort Union Trading Post; at current staffing levels, it will take more than 50 years to document the collection. Funds are needed to support cataloging activities because materials cannot be studied or used in interpretive displays until they are cataloged.

Book collections have outgrown the library, and there is limited space for visiting researchers to work. The park faces a dilemma because additional reconstruction/construction would provide needed spaces for exhibits, storage, and research, but such work is also the greatest

potential threat to archaeological sites and would result in a significant increase in maintenance requirements. Alternative solutions to limited archival space include construction of a storage unit near the other modern Park Service buildings (maintenance and housing) or offsite storage at the Midwest Archeological Center or a university. Park staff, the friends groups, and the cooperating association support more reconstruction/construction with the understanding that appropriate research and planning must be completed before more work is done.

#### ETHNOGRAPHY—PARK EVENTS FOCUS ON TRADITIONALLY ASSOCIATED GROUPS

Relationships with surrounding American Indian groups are critical elements of Fort Union Trading Post's history and remain key to

interpretation today. At least eight groups played a significant role in the fort's history: Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Crow, Hidatsa, Mandan, Plains Chippewa, Plains Cree, and Sioux. These groups lived in the region before establishment of the fort, interacted socially and economically at the fort, and continue to inhabit the region long after the fort's closure. Although the park has not completed much ethnographic work, events and programs such as the Fort Union Rendezvous, Indians Arts Showcase, and "This Long Wished For Spot: Lewis & Clark at the Confluence" have encouraged participation by American Indians and have generated increased interest in the ethnic diversity of the region. The park is currently working on an ethnographic study that should enhance interpretation and understanding of American Indian connections to Fort Union Trading Post.

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## NATURAL RESOURCES

### RESOURCE MANAGEMENT—STAFF TARGET KEY NATURAL RESOURCE CONCERNS

Largely because the park was established for its cultural significance, natural resource management has played a secondary role; there are no staff positions dedicated to managing natural resources. Natural resource management is a collateral duty of other park staff who collaborate with experts from nearby Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the Northern Great Plains Inventory and Monitoring Program, the Northern Great Plains Exotic Plant Management Team, and the Washington Office Technical Experts located in Fort Collins, Colorado. The overall effectiveness of the park's natural resource programs suffers from a lack of

continuity. The park needs funds to hire a natural resource specialist to oversee natural resource planning, compliance, field activities, and inventory and monitoring.

Despite competing management priorities and the limited number of staff—the park has just seven full-time employees and one employee subject-to-furlough—several important efforts have been made to protect and enhance natural ecosystems. The top three natural resource priorities identified by park staff include invasive plant control, prairie restoration (soil structure, composition, flora and fauna composition), and riparian health. Efforts to address these issues include seeding former agricultural lands, prescribed burning, treating weeds, and riverbank stabilization—actions that generally complement the goal of restoring the historic setting of the fort.

Prescribed burns help restore native prairie and the fort's historic setting.

The prairie restoration program will provide an example of a vanishing ecosystem present during the 1800s. Recent inventory studies and active ecosystem management should provide a solid foundation for monitoring future progress toward improved biological health.

#### NON-NATIVE PLANTS—PARK USES SEVERAL TOOLS TO COMBAT THEM

Non-native plants are a continuing threat at Fort Union Trading Post, but intensive treatments that involve pesticides, mowing, tilling, haying, and biological controls are making some headway. Park staff are most concerned about invasive smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), and Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), and treatments focus on these species. Vigilant monitoring and treatment is required

because adjacent lands provide a ready source of non-native plant seeds. Partnerships could help limit the spread and reinfestation of invasives on treated areas.

The control and eradication of invasive species, when possible, are parts of the prairie restoration process. Prescribed burns can also be useful tools, though they must be carefully managed and timed to avoid unintended damage. The park has ten restoration units that have been treated for invasive species and seeded with native plants. Some native prairie species have been established, but there is little species diversity so far. The park is in critical need of a prairie vegetation management plan to guide this ambitious restoration program.

Dams and resulting changes in water flows have contributed to accelerated riverbank erosion. Park staff monitor erosion and share information with other federal and state agencies.



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## RIPARIAN COMMUNITIES—AFFECTED BY DAMS, EROSION, AND RIVERBANK MIGRATION

Riparian health at Fort Union Trading Post is of critical concern because most of the park's 90 breeding bird species rely on the diverse riparian and wetland habitats that include young and mature cottonwood stands, emergent wetlands, scrubby and mature willow riparian thickets, seasonal ponds, grasslands, meadows, and remnant sagebrush and scrublands.

Dams and resulting changes in water flows have contributed to accelerated riverbank erosion and loss of cottonwood stands and associated undergrowth, preventing natural regeneration. These problems, coupled with migration of the river southward, affect the historic landscape as well as the natural landscape. Today's park visitors do not see the same vistas because cottonwoods have been lost and the river location has shifted. Park staff monitor erosion and share data with other federal and state agencies. Riverbank stabilization may need to be considered in the future if erosion becomes too severe.

## LAND USE—OIL AND GAS PRODUCTION ARE INCREASING CONCERNS

Historic and contemporary land uses affected and continue to affect natural resources at Fort Union Trading Post. In addition to a history of human occupation, the land within the park has witnessed a loss of native animals such as bison, elk, wolves, and black-tailed prairie dogs, as well as grazing and agricultural use. Today, the park is largely surrounded by agriculture, although petroleum and gas production are increasing concerns. The park's air quality is good, but pumping units dot the landscape a few miles from the park, and at times the engines of drilling machines and production activities can be heard from within the park. Western North Dakota is experiencing increased mineral and energy development, there are numerous oil wells in the area, and a natural gas



pipeline and a major oil pipeline pass near the park. The National Park Service Geologic Resources Division is currently examining the potential impacts of mineral development within and adjacent to the fort.

## WATER QUALITY—MORE MONITORING NEEDED

Very little park-specific information is available about some resources, particularly water quality and aquatic systems. At Fort Union Trading Post, potential sources of water contaminants include municipal discharge, industrial wastewater, agriculture, ranching, oil development, gravel mining, runoff, and atmospheric deposition. Baseline assessments of water quality (focusing on dissolved oxygen, pH, and specific conductance) within the region's national parks are just beginning, so only limited data are available. The Northern Great Plains Network's Vital Signs Monitoring documents note that the Missouri River is listed as impaired because of flow alterations and thermal change. Surrounding agricultural practices, especially fertilizer and pesticide uses, also likely affect water quality, but no quantitative data are available.

The park's diverse riparian areas include cottonwood stands, seasonal ponds, and meadows that provide important habitat for breeding birds.

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