

California Condor Re-establishment in Pinnacles National Monument

Finding of No Significant Impact

Purpose

The National Park Service (NPS) proposes to assist in the California condor recovery effort by participating in a release program. The NPS, in cooperation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Ventana Wilderness Society (VWS), proposes to construct temporary release facilities and an ATV trail in Pinnacles National Monument on Grassy Canyon Ridge and a long-term feeding station within Pinnacles. The release facilities would be used to re-establish condors in Pinnacles, allowing the birds to imprint on the land. After a sufficient holding period, the birds would be released from the pen and their movements in and around Pinnacles would be tracked. The VWS, in conjunction with the NPS, would manage day-to-day operations at the Pinnacles release site. The proposed action would release birds for at least 3 years, potentially up to 15 years, as needed, to maintain a free-flying population of approximately 20 to 30 individuals.

Need

NPS participation in this project at Pinnacles is consistent with NPS laws and policy, and will enhance visitor experience at the park. The Organic Act of 1916 directs NPS units to conserve the natural resources in perpetuity for the benefit of future generations. The California condor experienced drastic declines in population throughout its range during the last century when the species was extirpated from Pinnacles. The proposed project would return this species to the park, providing visitors the opportunity to view the largest North American flying bird and one of America's most endangered species in its historic range, an excellent recreational and education experience for park visitors.

Section 7(a) of the Endangered Species Act of 1969 calls for federal agencies to take action to further the recovery of listed species. The proposed re-establishment project would return the California condor to its historic range and breeding area and would further the goals outlined in the USFWS recovery plan and ultimately aid in the condor's recovery. The Wilderness Act directs federal agencies managing designated wilderness to preserve wilderness character and wilderness resources in an unimpaired condition as well as for the purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, education, conservation and historical use. The restoration of the condor into the Pinnacles Wilderness would return a piece of wilderness character currently missing. The proposed condor release project furthers the recreational and scenic values of the Pinnacles Wilderness and provides an excellent opportunity for scientific research and education in and about wilderness.

Selected Action

The National Park Service will implement Alternative E. This project would require the installation of an on-site temporary holding pen, observation station, ATV trail, water system and solar array. The holding pen would be 33' W x 52' L x 20' H including a flight pen, observation blinds, and walled roost areas (Fig. 2). The observation station would be a maximum of 12' W x 16' L x 8' H. A feeding location, a large clearing, would be established close to the release facility. Until the issue of lead poisoning can be resolved, the Condor Recovery Team is recommending that feeding

of guaranteed lead-free food be a part of condor management. It is expected for the foreseeable future that Pinnacles would be a feeding site.

The release facilities would be constructed on Grassy Canyon Ridge, a non-wilderness area. A system of water tanks on the ridge and in Grassy Canyon would be used to supply water to condors. Solar-powered video cameras would be attached directly to the release facility and would be positioned looking into the flight pen to provide the public remote access to the condors via a website. A solar array attached to a set of six poles outside the observation station would be needed for the cameras. The array would stand 8.5' high and have a 7' by 25' footprint. Primary access to the release site would be via an ATV trail approximately 1 mile long and 8' wide built from the bottom of Grassy Canyon to the observation station.

A 3 to 15-year effort to complete this re-establishment project is anticipated. The first phase consists of releases and intensive management of young birds. The second phase focuses on monitoring with less hands-on management. The date at which the first phase is completed would depend upon the cumulative number of birds successfully released (target number is 20 to 30), and the survival of the reintroduced condors. The release facilities used for this project (holding pen, observation station, water system and solar array) would be temporary and would be removed following completion of the release program. Any impact to the site associated with these structures would be restored and revegetated upon the removal of the facilities, contingent on securing restoration funding. The ATV trail will not be removed at the conclusion of the release phase of the project, as active feeding of the condors with lead-free food may extend beyond the 3-15 year window, in which case the access route could provide safe access to an established feeding station. Potentially, the ATV trail could be used as a public trail at the conclusion of the release phase of the project.

Other Alternatives Considered

Four additional alternatives were identified and analyzed in the environmental assessment. Each of these would be implemented the same as the chosen alternative, the differences being either location or method/route of access.

Alternative A – No active recovery action would be undertaken at Pinnacles. Instead, Pinnacles would wait until condor populations to the south and west moved into the Monument. Even without an active release program condors are expected to eventually return to Pinnacles on their own.

Alternative B – A condor release site would be established within Pinnacles at North Chalone Peak. The release facilities would be constructed 525 feet inside the wilderness boundary. Access to the release site would be via the North Chalone Peak Trail (an 8-mile hike round-trip) or helicopter.

Alternative C – A condor release site would be established within Pinnacles on Grassy Canyon Ridge, a non-wilderness area. Access to the release site would be via a 2-mile round-trip hike or helicopter.

Alternative D – A condor release site would be established within in the same location as Alternative C. Access to the release site would be via ATV on a new 1.5 mile trail or a 2 mile round-trip hike

Alternatives Considered and Rejected – An additional site in the Grassy Canyon area was considered but dismissed because of concerns that there were not enough trees for roosting. A second release site at Mount Defiance was considered but dismissed due to the difficulty of accessing the area and impacts to wilderness.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

Alternative C is the environmentally preferred alternative because it would reintroduce condors to Pinnacles with the least amount of impact. Alternative C does not require the construction of an ATV trail as proposed in Alternatives D and E. In addition, Alternative C would construct all release facilities outside of wilderness areas while Alternative B would build facilities within wilderness boundaries.

Basis for the Decision

Pinnacles National Monument elected to implement Alternative E because it addresses logistics, safety and environmental impact in the most sustainable way. Although other alternatives considered having hiking access only, these are problematic due to safety hazards to condors and biologists in the event of an emergency. These options also present significant operational limitations resulting in increased work time for biologists and decreased effectiveness. Although both Alternative D and E require the installation of an ATV trail for access, the trail created by Alternative D would be longer and therefore impact a greater area. The trail design in the selected alternative would be more sustainable and cause less erosion than the other alternatives with access routes. In addition, the selected alternative would build the release facilities outside wilderness.

Mitigations

The mitigations for Alternative E include securing access agreements with affected landowners prior to facility construction, minimizing use of ATVs to the extent practicable to meet the project's logistical requirements, and minimizing the visibility of the release facilities from public use areas by careful siting and design. Also included in this alternative is bolstering the park's education program in adjacent communities and on-site through special programs, website information, and publications. When the condors are in the flight pen, visitors will be able to view them over the internet via a "condor cam" that will allow visitors real-time access to view condors without disturbing the birds.

Impact/Mitigation Matrix

Impact Issues	Potential Impacts	Mitigation	Responsible Party
Private Property	Portion of ATV access trail crosses private land. Secondary emergency egress route also requires access across private land	Affected landowners have approved access; signed access agreement will be in place prior to construction of any facilities	NPS – Pinnacles Management, lead for primary access from park land Ventana, lead for secondary emergency access from private land
Air Quality, Traffic, & Noise	Minor increase in dust and noise during construction. Increase in noise from use of helicopter during construction. Minor increase in ATV generated dust/noise on access route. Potential increase in air pollution/traffic from increased visitation.	Helicopter used for initial construction and emergencies only, limited duration. Dust/noise from construction negligible. Increase in air pollution from increased visitation negligible. Visitor education about visitation times and use of condor cam will mitigate increased traffic.	NPS – Pinnacles Resource Management, lead Ventana, partner
Special Status Species	No impact to existing special status species. Returns endangered condor to Pinnacles National Monument.	N/A	N/A
Vegetation & Non-native Species	2 acres of chaparral disturbed, potential increase in non-native vegetation in disturbed area.	Site restoration upon completion of reintroduction effort. Monitoring for non-native species at release site.	NPS – Pinnacles Resource Management
Geology	Potential erosion from creation of new access route, trenching, and anchoring release facilities	ATV trail designed to minimize erosion, use of BMPs in construction. Construction scheduled during dry season. Release site restored upon project completion.	NPS – Pinnacles Resource Management/Maintenance oversight of trail construction Ventana – trenching project monitoring
Visitor Use and Experience	Power lines in park more visible and release facilities visible from some visitor use areas. Potential for increased crowding with visitors coming to view condors.	Intensive education program to inform visitors/public about condor reintroduction effort through public programs, website, and written information. Visitors will be encouraged to visit during less crowded times (weekdays, summer, fall, winter) and “virtually visit” to view condors on condor cam.	NPS – Pinnacles Resource Management and Visitor Services
Cultural Resources	No Impact	N/A	N/A
Wilderness	No impact to wilderness. Release facilities visible from wilderness areas.	Facilities sited to reduce visibility from park trails. Reintroduction of condors will improve character of Pinnacles wilderness.	NPS – Pinnacles Resource Management
Cumulative Effects	No Impact	N/A	N/A

Public Review and Consultation

Issues and concerns affecting this proposal were identified initially through public and internal scoping, consultation with scientists and experts in the field, and input from state and other federal agencies. Public scoping included six public meetings in May 2001, letters to interested parties and local landowners soliciting comments, press releases, and a section on the park's web page soliciting comments. The comment period was open for more than 45 days and numerous letters and emails were received as part of the scoping period for the first environmental assessment (EA) for this project. The need to evaluate an additional release site required a second EA. Additional public scoping was not initiated for this EA since the impact topics are the same.

A notice of availability for the EA was mailed to 101 members of the public in April 2003, including local, state and federal agencies. Approximately 10 copies of the EA were mailed to concerned citizens, organizations, and agencies. Copies of the EA were made available to the public at local libraries and visitor centers on both sides of the Monument at the same time. The EA was also posted on the Pinnacles website. The EA was available for public comment from April 1, 2003 until May 9, 2003, allowing for a 39-day review period. The public meeting was May 1, 2003. Five citizens provided comments at this meeting and ten written comments were received. Comments received at the public hearing supported the reintroduction of condors and suggested efforts to support local ranchers by assisting with disposal of carcasses and providing incentives. Nine of the written comments supported the implementation of Alternative E and commended Pinnacles for trying to reintroduce condors without disturbing wilderness areas. One written comment supported the no action alternative.

The National Park Service has developed this document in collaboration with the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), who participated in scoping, proposal pre-planning, development of release site suitability determinations, and development of project alternatives. The USFWS concurs with the actions and mitigations proposed, and the proposal is consistent with other release projects in the Recovery Plan. Since there are no listed species affected by this proposal (except the condors, which are not presently found here) no formal consultation with the USFWS was required.

An Errata is being prepared to respond to public comments and to correct minor errors found by staff in the document. The corrected information and clarifications in the attached Errata do not result in any substantive changes to the selected action and mitigations.

Impairment

No project is allowed to "impair" National Park resources or values, according to the NPS Organic Act of 1916, and NPS Directors Order #55. The National Park Service may choose to take an action resulting in some impact, ranging from measurable to significant, but "impairment" is strictly prohibited. Alternative E, the selected alternative, contains elements with the potential to have short-term minor impacts that are limited in context. However, implementing any portion of this project will not impair National Park Service resources and values.

Decision

Based on the environmental impact analysis, the capacity of the mitigation measures to reduce or eliminate impacts, and with due consideration of the public input, the NPS has determined that the proposed action is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the human environment. There are no adverse cumulative effects or indirect effects foreseen. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared, and the proposed action may be implemented subject to the provisions of the mitigation plans described herein.

Recommended:

Cicely A. Muldoon, Superintendent
Pinnacles National Monument

Date

Approved:

Jonathan B. Jarvis, Regional Director
Pacific West Region

Date

Errata – California Condor Re-establishment Project

Pg. 6. first paragraph, Clarification – Captive condors will be fed in the holding pen while free-flying condors will be fed at a separate site outside the holding pen.

Pg. 6. third paragraph, Clarification – A short hiking trail (200-300ft) would connect the observation station to the condor holding pen.

Pg. 10. first paragraph, Clarification – Even though the length of the ATV trail in Alternative D is only 0.5-mile longer than the trail in Alternative E it requires the removal of an extra 1000 cubic yards of material. This is because building a safe trail along the ridgeline (Alternative D) would require the high points on the ridge to be topped to reduce road grade.

Pg. 10. first paragraph, “3000 cubic yards of soil to be moved” changed to “4000 cubic yards of . . .” due to calculation error

Pg. 10. second paragraph, “1000 cubic yards of . . .” changed to “2000 cubic yards of . . .” due to calculation error

Pg. 11. Alternative D Geology, “~3000 cu yd of soil . . .” changed to “~4000 cu yd of soil . . .” due to calculation error

Pg. 11. Alternative E Geology, “~1000 cu yd of soil . . .” changed to “~2000 cu yd of soil . . .” due to calculation error

Pg.23. Geology, “approximately 3000 cubic yards . . .” changed to “approximately 4000 cubic yards . . .” due to calculation error

Pg.24. Geology, “approximately 1000 cubic yards . . .” changed to “approximately 2000 cubic yards . . .” due to calculation error

Clarification of affected areas:

Alternatives B – E require the construction of release facilities, which would disturb 1 acre of ground and vegetation. The 1-acre of disturbance includes everything that would be constructed or installed except the access trail. Alternative B uses an existing hiking trail for access and so would disturb only the 1-acre required for the release facilities. Alternative C would build a hiking trail that would disturb an additional 0.25-acre for a total of 1.25-acres impacted. Alternative D would build an ATV trail that would disturb an additional 1.5 acres for a total of 2.5 acres impacted. Alternative E would build an ATV trail that would disturb an additional 1-acre for a total of 2 acres impacted.

Clarification of ATV trail:

Though the ATV trail would be constructed on steep, sandy terrain it is designed to work with these elements. The average grade of the trail is 7% with only a few areas exceeding this average for short distances. The trail is designed to maximize drainage (using a 1% outslope) while minimizing erosion and maintenance (trail placement, swales and water bars). Pinnacles consulted the NPS, Geological Resources Division regarding the installation of the proposed ATV trail. Park staff also consulted with Hollister Hills State Vehicle Recreation Area staff, who has extensive experience constructing ATV trails in this terrain. The proposed action is consistent with 2001 NPS

Management Policies and United States Forest Service Best Management Practices (used for NPS standards) and thus received approval for construction as described in the EA.

Clarification of accessing release site via private land:

As stated in the EA an access agreement granting access across private property will be in place prior to the start of any project work. An easement will be pursued as well.

Clarification of cattle grazing:

Cattle grazing was not discussed in the EA because it will not be affected by the project. Cattle will not be impacted by the presence of condors and there is no expectation that cattle will seriously affect the reintroduction project.

Clarification of shooting range:

The NPS shooting range in Grassy Canyon will not be decommissioned as a part of this project, however, shooting will not be allowed when condors are being held at the release area.

Clarification of managing visitors:

As stated in the EA, Pinnacles already experiences maximum visitation (all available parking spaces are full) at certain times of year. When this occurs the monument allows vehicles to enter on a one-in one-out basis. Pinnacles would continue to manage visitation in this manner when condors are released. Pinnacles would encourage visitors to visit the monument during non-peak times (summer, fall, winter, and mid-week) and view condors through a virtual visit using the condor cam.

Clarification of project management:

Pinnacles is committed to two years of funding for the condor reintroduction. The park is seeking additional project funds to continue to participate actively in the project for an additional two years. The park is also pursuing a permanent operating increase to support the condor reintroduction effort. If Pinnacles does not secure additional funds, and if the park is unable to use existing operating funds to support the condor reintroduction, Ventana Wilderness Society will manage the project without financial assistance from the NPS in the future.