

Banning State Park Management Plan Amendment

Rock Climbing



Bouldering along the Kettle River. Photo courtesy of Brenda Piekarski



**MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF PARKS AND TRAILS**

JUNE 12, 2014



For more information on this management plan, please contact the DNR Division of Parks and Trails at (651) 259-5600.

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Division of Parks and Trails Approval of Banning State Park Management Plan Amendment – Rock Climbing

The Division of Parks and Trails develops plan amendments to update management plans to reflect the current development and operational proposals for a state park or state recreation area. The plan amendment process assists in formulating, evaluating, and documenting these proposals.

This amendment to the 1980 Banning State Park Management Plan addresses the addition of rock climbing to the park, and development of appropriate facilities to support climbing. Impacts of this new use to current park users and natural and cultural resources are addressed. The amendment recognizes existing recreational activities in specialized management area 3. These changes are consistent with the Division's strategic direction of Connecting People to the Outdoors, particularly youth and young adults.

The amendment received input and feedback both within the Department of Natural Resources and from the public. It went through a public review period and an open house was held near the park. The amendment has been reviewed and approved by the Northeast Regional Management Team.

Erika R. Rivers

Erika Rivers, Director
Division of Parks and Trails

June 12, 2014

Date

PURPOSE

The purpose of this management plan amendment is to update the Banning State Park management plan (1980) to allow rock climbing as a new use within the park and identify potential facilities and access points to support this use.

The Banning State Park Management Plan from 1980 zoned several areas of the park as specialized management areas. During the planning process it was found that several recreational activities in the park were incongruent with the description for management area 3. This amendment acknowledges those activities as appropriate uses for that area.

Management plans are required for state park units. *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 4 requires that the construction of facilities and other development conform to the management plan. This amendment will bring the management plan into accordance with the current programming and development proposals for the park.

BACKGROUND

Banning State Park is located in central Pine County, approximately halfway between North Branch and Duluth. The park entrance, about four miles north of the City of Sandstone, is off Interstate 35 and Minnesota Highway 23. The park is located in the Mille Lacs Uplands ecological subsection and the surrounding landscape includes hardwood and conifer forests, tamarack wetlands, and aspen-birch forests.

Banning State Park includes the historic Banning townsite and Kettle River Sandstone Company Quarry, which once employed 500 people. Business at the quarry suffered when the great Hinckley forest fire swept through this area in 1894. Work at the quarry recovered for a period after the fire. Ultimately the use of structural steel for construction decreased demand for sandstone and work at the quarry ceased in 1905. Subsequent fires wiped out nearly all remnants of the village.

Ten miles of the Kettle River, a state Wild and Scenic River, bisect Banning State Park. Several rapids here offer some of the most challenging river experiences for canoeing or kayaking in the state. The river flows through broad and shallow valleys before transitioning into a narrow gorge at Hell's Gate. Here, sheer sandstone cliffs rise 40 feet above the water. These are some of the very cliffs that draw the interest of climbers.

Current park facilities include the contact station and park office, picnic area, campground with 33 semi-modern sites and a camper cabin, 4 canoe campsites, 3 public water access sites, and ruins of the Banning townsite. Trails in the park

include 14 miles of hiking, 11 miles of skiing, and 5 miles of snowmobile trails. Current park facilities are shown on Figure 1.

Rock climbing is currently allowed in 4 state parks: Blue Mounds, Interstate, Tettegouche, and Temperance River. The cliffs in Interstate State Park are probably the most visited climbing areas in Minnesota due to its proximity to the Twin Cities.¹ Providing climbing opportunities at Banning State Park should be pursued because of its proximity to the Twin Cities, relative to other state park climbing opportunities.

DESCRIPTION

Rock climbing will be allowed in designated areas within Banning State Park. All types of climbing will generally be allowed where rock features accommodate it. Identification of climbing areas in Banning will be conducted in conjunction with climbing user groups. An analysis of park resources and visitor services impacts may result in restrictions of climbing areas or types of climbing within the park.

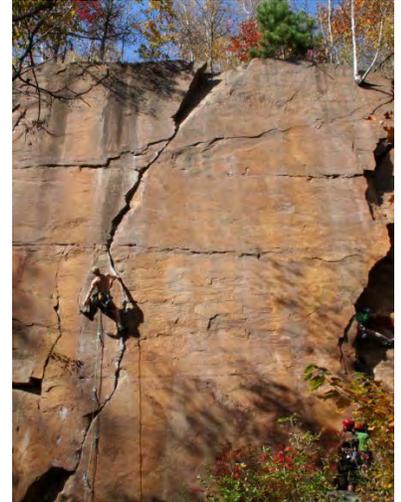
The following improvements to park infrastructure may be made to support climbing:

Climbers will be encouraged to access rock features through current park roads and trails. New access points to the park will be developed as needed. Additional parking may be necessary to serve popular climbing access points. Existing parking areas may be expanded to accommodate new demand and any new parking areas should be developed in already disturbed landscapes.

Initially, it is anticipated that dispersed trails will be sufficient to access most climbing sites. As climbing routes are established, new trails may be developed and maintained. Trail hardening, concentration of use, and route modification will be considered as needed based on volume of use, conflicts with other trail users, and impacts to resources.

Sanitation facilities may be developed to serve climbers due to the remote nature of climbing sites in relationship to current park facilities. Bathroom facilities would be vault toilets or temporary portable toilets. It is not recommended that running water be provided at these sites.

Climbers will be encouraged to use existing camping facilities in Banning State Park. Additional primitive campsites could be developed if demand for camping increases in the future. These sites should be located so they serve climbers, hikers, and canoe and kayakers. If demand for traditional camping opportunities increases significantly, an additional campground could be developed, according to the 1980 management plan.



A climber ascends 'Sigma' in Sandstone's Robinson Park. Photo courtesy of Sean Foster

¹ Farris, Mike. (2012) *Rock Climbing: Minnesota and Wisconsin 2nd edition*. Guilford, CT: Falcon Guides.

The need to provide orientation and interpretation signage will be evaluated by DNR staff as climbing areas are established in the park. Orientation signage will be developed in conjunction with trail development and access routes. Increased access to certain areas in the park may provide an opportunity to interpret unique park resources. The need for additional interpretive services will be evaluated by park staff.

Informal staging areas may develop near climbing areas over time. Decks, benches, picnic tables, or interpretive/orientation signage could be provided at these locations. However, it is recommended that all user groups continue to use the established day-use areas within the park for gatherings.

Designation of Climbing Areas

Climbing will be restricted to portions of the park until the specific on-the-ground impacts are better understood. More information is needed about many potential climbing areas before additional recreational activity is promoted.

It is the Division of Parks and Trails' procedure to conduct resource assessments for proposed projects, operational activities, or special events that may impact natural or cultural resources. A resource assessment is a decision making tool that identifies potential natural and cultural resource impacts. Possible outcomes of the assessment include: allowing the activity as proposed, modifying the activity to mitigate impacts, or not allowing the activity if resource impacts are unacceptable. The Division will conduct resource assessments of any new proposed climbing areas before the activity is allowed. Resource assessments will also aid in monitoring and managing impacts in the future.

Members of the climbing community will assist the DNR in identifying potential climbing areas. DNR will prioritize assessment of potential climbing areas based on known resource concerns and visitor service impacts. Designated climbing areas will be communicated to climbers. Climbers may be involved in monitoring and maintaining climbing areas within the park.

NATURAL RESOURCE IMPACT

Natural Resources in Banning State Park

The original vegetation of the park was composed primarily of red and white pine interspersed with aspen and birch. Today the forests are dominated by aspen and birch as a result of past logging and forest fires. Significant plant communities in the park include northern hardwood forests, aspen birch forest, and old-growth red pine forest. Current land cover in the park is shown in Figure 2.

The sandstone cliffs found in Banning State Park are a rare resource. Hinckley sandstone bluffs only occur along 15 miles of the Kettle River. Outcrops of this ancient sandstone with vertical faces large enough to support cliff flora are restricted to a 6 mile portion of the river which is located almost entirely within the park.

These sandstone cliffs harbor several rare plant species that reach the edge of their range in the park. Plants found here and on cliffs in northeastern Minnesota include rusty woodsia (*Woodsia ilvensis*), fragrant fern (*Dryopteris fragrans*), and the uncommon Nahinni oak fern (*Gymnocarpium jessoense ssp. parvulum*). The rare cliff goldenrod (*Solidago sciaphila*) can be found on cliffs in southern Minnesota and on cliffs in the park. These cliff face plant communities are sensitive and efforts should be taken to prevent any impacts to them.

The majority of potential climbing areas lie within red pine/white pine woodlands, which is a native plant community of statewide significance and contains a number of rare plant species. Areas of the park with new or additional access should be monitored to ensure that there are no significant impacts to rare species.

One-hundred and eighty-four species of birds inhabit or visit Banning State Park each year. Also, 17 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 34 species of mammals can be found here. Common species include deer, black bear, fox, raccoon, snowshoe hare, and ruffed grouse.

A hibernaculum in the park is known to host northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*), which is being proposed for listing as a federally protected species.² Disturbances near the hibernaculum should be avoided in the winter and minimized during the spring staging and fall swarming dates. Several plant communities may provide important habitat for this species. Delineation of important habitat could result in restrictions on recreational activities in the future.

Potential Impacts of Climbing Activities

Rock climbing has the potential to cause impacts to vegetation occurring on cliff faces, cliff tops, and at the base of cliffs. Climbers may dislodge plants or organic matter from cracks and recesses in the rock face. Climbers tend to be attracted to cliffs that are already devoid of vegetation, and most vegetation removal that occurs is inadvertent. In a study of impacts to cliff systems in Minnesota State Parks, it was found that lichens are most vulnerable to



A raccoon (*Pryocyon lotor*) climbing a tree in Banning State Park. ©MN DNR

² U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (2014) *Northern Long-Eared Bat: Myotis septentrionalis*. <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/angered/mammals/nlba/>

climbing.³ Impacts to trees could occur as a result of being used as climbing anchors or from soil compaction. Use of fixed protection will be considered and could be used to reduce some impacts.

Staging areas are often the most heavily impacted areas used by climbers.⁴ These staging areas are commonly located at the base or top of rock features where climbers gather before or after climbs. Activities in these areas could result in compaction of soil and impacts to surrounding vegetation. Concentration of use, surface hardening, signage, or barriers may be appropriate responses to mitigate impacts in staging areas.

New and changing trail use patterns are expected in the park. Park staff should monitor established park trails and dispersed trails to detect any impacts that take place. If any unsustainable trail use is found, solutions may include concentration of use, surface hardening, closure, or re-routing of trails. Additional trail management methods are described in section 6 of *Trail Planning, Design and Development Guidelines*.⁵

CULTURAL RESOURCE IMPACT

A portion of the Kettle River Sandstone Company Quarry, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is located within Banning State Park.⁶ The other part of the quarry is located in the City of Sandstone's Robinson Park, where climbing on the historic quarry face is allowed. Management strategies similar to those used in Robinson Park will be adopted to prevent impacts to the historic nature of the quarry.

Additional cultural resources may be present within the park and a cultural resource assessment will be conducted in proposed climbing areas. Potential cultural resource sites could include rock art on the face of exposed sandstone, or archeological sites at the base of cliffs or along the river. This assessment will be conducted as described in 'Designation of Climbing Areas.' Climbing activities that negatively affect significant cultural resources will not be allowed.

³ Farris, Michael A. (1995). *The Effects of Rock Climbing on the Cliff Flora of Three Minnesota State Parks*. Saint Paul, MN: Hamline University and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

⁴ Access Fund. (2008). *Climbing Management: A Guide to Climbing Issues and the Development of a Climbing Management Plan*. Boulder, CO: Access Fund. <http://www.accessfund.org/atf/cf/%7B1F5726D5-6646-4050-AA6E-C275DF6CA8E3%7D/CM-web.pdf>

⁵ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. (2007). *Trail Planning, Design and Development Guidelines*. Saint Paul, MN: Division of Trails & Waterways.

⁶ Minnesota Historical Society. (2009). *Kettle River Sandstone Company Quarry*. <http://nrhp.mnhs.org/NRDetails.cfm?NPSNum=91000877>

RECREATIONAL USE AND VISITOR SERVICES IMPACT

This amendment will result in a new user group in the park. The addition of rock climbers is expected to cause few, if any, impacts to existing park users.

Park infrastructure may need to be upgraded if climbing draws a significant number of new users come to the park. Additional parking, camping, and sanitation structures may be developed as needed. These facilities would serve all users and would result in better service for all park visitors.

The addition of climbing areas will cause a change in trails within the park. New trails may be constructed and current trails may experience different usage patterns. Signage and park maps will be updated as needed to communicate any changes that take place.

INTERPRETIVE SERVICES IMPACT

The addition of climbing at Banning could create an opportunity to hold programs like I Can Climb! at the park. In a 2011 survey, two-thirds of I Can Climb! program respondents indicated their primary home is in the seven-county Twin Cities metro area.⁷ This may indicate that future programs near the metro area are warranted.

As access to climbing areas is developed or improved, there may be opportunities to provide interpretation of unique natural or cultural resources. Interpretation at additional sites within the park may be provided where unique resources are present and where it is appropriate from a visitor services perspective.

MANAGEMENT PLAN TEXT REVISIONS

The 1980 management plan did not include rock climbing as a recreational activity that the park was intended to serve. This amendment supplements the 1980 management plan, specifically the list of activities and experiences, from pages 19-22, and the Physical Development and Recreation Management chapter, beginning on page 53.

Portions of the park were designated as specialized management areas in the 1980 plan. The area east of the Kettle River and between Highway 123 and the railroad was included as *Management Area 3*. The description for the area is as follows:

Because of the undisturbed nature of this area, only resource management which enhances the original wildlife or vegetation

⁷ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. (2012). *2011 Minnesota State Parks and Trails Programs Study Report*. Saint Paul, MN: Division of Parks and Trails and Division of Operations Services.

communities will be allowed. No trails or recreational development will be located in this area.

This paragraph will be amended to:

Because of the undisturbed and remote nature of this area only dispersed recreational development and uses are appropriate. Additional development or access to this area will be determined by an analysis of impacts to resources and visitor services.

Since the management plan was completed some development has taken place in this area. A snowmobile trail runs through this area parallel to Highway 23 and two canoe campsites are located near Blueberry Slide. Additionally, there is a youth hunt held in this area every fall. This amendment recognizes that these are appropriate uses for this management area.

Additional dispersed recreational development, including climbing, may be allowed in this area if it is deemed appropriate after a resource assessment and an analysis of visitor service impacts.

PUBLIC REVIEW

The management plan amendment was released for public review on March 6, 2014. The review period was announced in a news release and the amendment was available on the DNR website for review.

An open house was held Thursday, March 13 at East Central High School in Finlayson, MN. DNR staff were present to answer questions about climbing in state parks. Several members of Minnesota Climber's Association were also in attendance to talk about their sport. The majority of comments received during the public review period were supportive of extending climbing access to Banning State Park.

FIGURE 1: SUMMER MAP OF BANNING STATE PARK

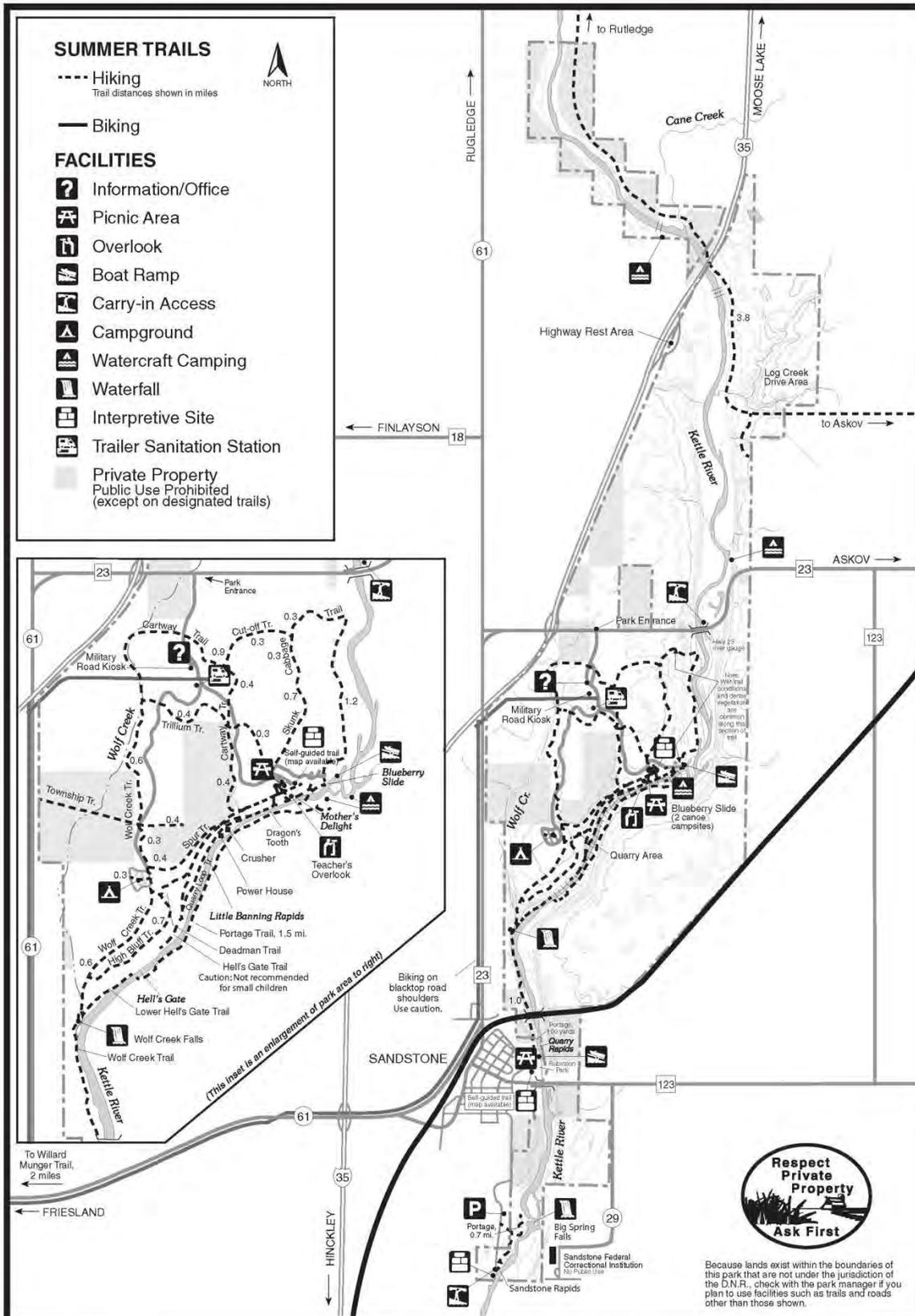
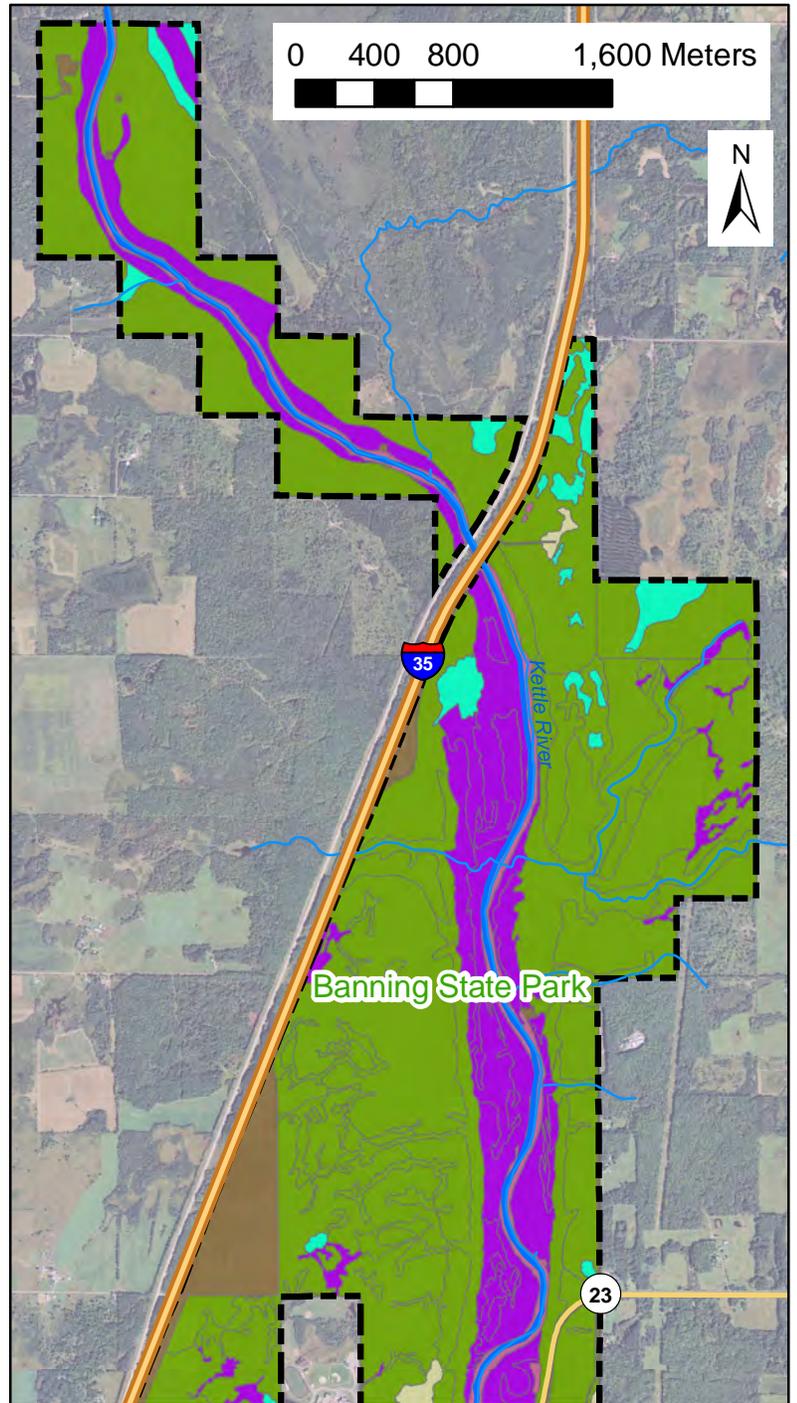
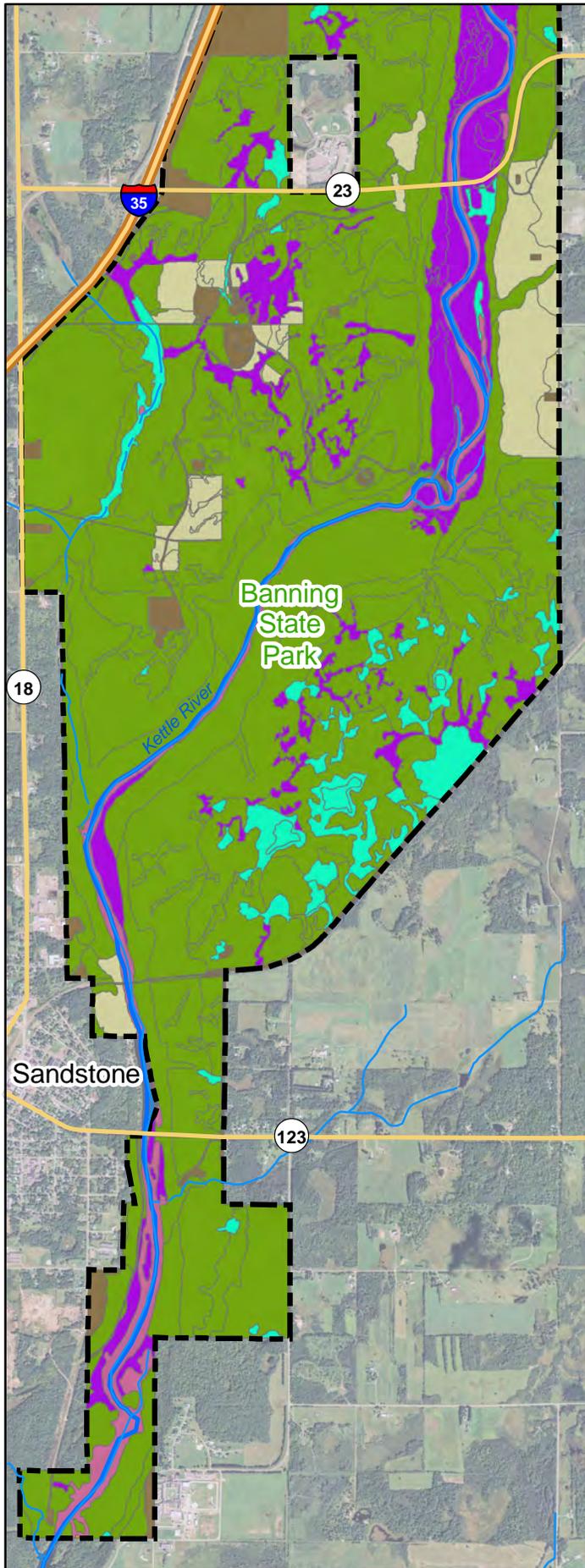


Figure 2: System Level Land Cover

3/3/2014



Legend

- State Park Statutory Boundary
- Developed Areas
- Non-Natural Community
- Other Natural Communities
- Unclassified
- Upland Forests and Woodlands
- Wetland Forests
- Wetland Grasslands, Shrublands, and Marshes