

Wilderness Management Planning in an Alaskan National Park: Last Chance to Do It Right?

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Abstract—Like many wilderness areas, Denali National Park and Preserve faces a variety of challenges in its wilderness management planning. As an Alaska conservation unit that has been significantly expanded by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA), Denali faces the additional responsibility of acknowledging that its management of controversial issues affects how other wilderness areas are managed throughout the state. Advocates of managing Denali as wilderness in its purest sense encourage the park to see its wilderness management planning as the “last chance to do it right.” Other individuals and organizations advocate activities such as continued motorized uses in Denali wilderness. As a result, Denali’s backcountry management plan addresses such issues as aircraft overflights and landings, snowmachine use, other motorized uses, and commercial and recreational uses. Wilderness management planning in Denali requires proper interpretation of ANILCA and accurate definition of types and levels of use. Success requires working with the public to develop innovative approaches to allocating uses, minimizing conflicting uses, and protecting remote yet accessible backcountry resources.

The National Park Service initiated a backcountry management plan for Denali National Park and Preserve in 1998, gathering information on levels and types of use in the backcountry and on the legal parameters for planning. Based on this initial data collection, the agency determined that additional scientific information is essential to the planning effort, as is the need to deal with potential threats and continue with studies and monitoring. Public understanding of planning constraints determined by laws, regulations, and policies is also needed. Questions for the planning process include:

1. What are the legal parameters for planning, and what range of management options should be considered?
2. What are the most appropriate and effective methods for public involvement?
3. How does the plan proceed if scientific information is limited?

Establishing the legal parameters for planning sets the context for discussing potential alternatives and management options in the public arena and helps prevent legal

challenges. Identifying the highest priority data needs and addressing these first can be a strategy to overcome limitations in previous studies. Since Denali National Park receives considerable attention from the public in Alaska and in the context of environmental issues nationwide, public involvement strategy is crucial.

Educating, involving and enlisting the support of the public is essential to successful backcountry management planning for the Park. Protected areas in Alaska have been viewed as a “last chance to do it right” by environmental organizations. However, other groups view the large protected areas in the state that are relatively new to the landscape, at least in terms of political boundaries, as viable opportunities for continued resource extraction and expanded tourism. The resulting controversy affects the planning process for the wilderness and backcountry of Denali.

Background

Denali National Park and Preserve is located in south central interior Alaska and includes over six million acres, of which approximately two million are designated wilderness. (See location map.) The Park is slightly larger than the state of New Hampshire. Development is limited to visitor facilities, maintenance and administrative support facilities and an employee housing complex near the entrance area of the Park at mile 237 of the George Parks Highway. The Parks Highway connects Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska’s two largest cities. Additional visitor facilities exist at several locations along the 90-mile Denali National Park Road that extends from the Park entrance to Wonder Lake and the former mining community of Kantishna. Lodges and a campground are located in the Kantishna and Wonder Lake area near the end of the park road. Automobile traffic on the park road is restricted beyond the Savage River at mile 14.8. The primary access into the Park’s interior is on a tour bus, visitor transportation shuttle bus system, or by bus to a Kantishna area lodge. This controlled access system has been in place since 1972 after the George Parks Highway was completed. Controlled access is a significant factor in protecting resources, especially wildlife, and the visitor experience in Denali.

Denali National Park and Preserve is an internationally significant protected area that has been proclaimed a biosphere reserve under the United Nations Man and the Biosphere program. Wilderness is a fundamental value identified with Denali at its establishment, and this value has been reaffirmed throughout the administrative history of the Park. The philosophy and policies for managing the wilderness and backcountry areas of the Park are intertwined with and have constantly influenced the

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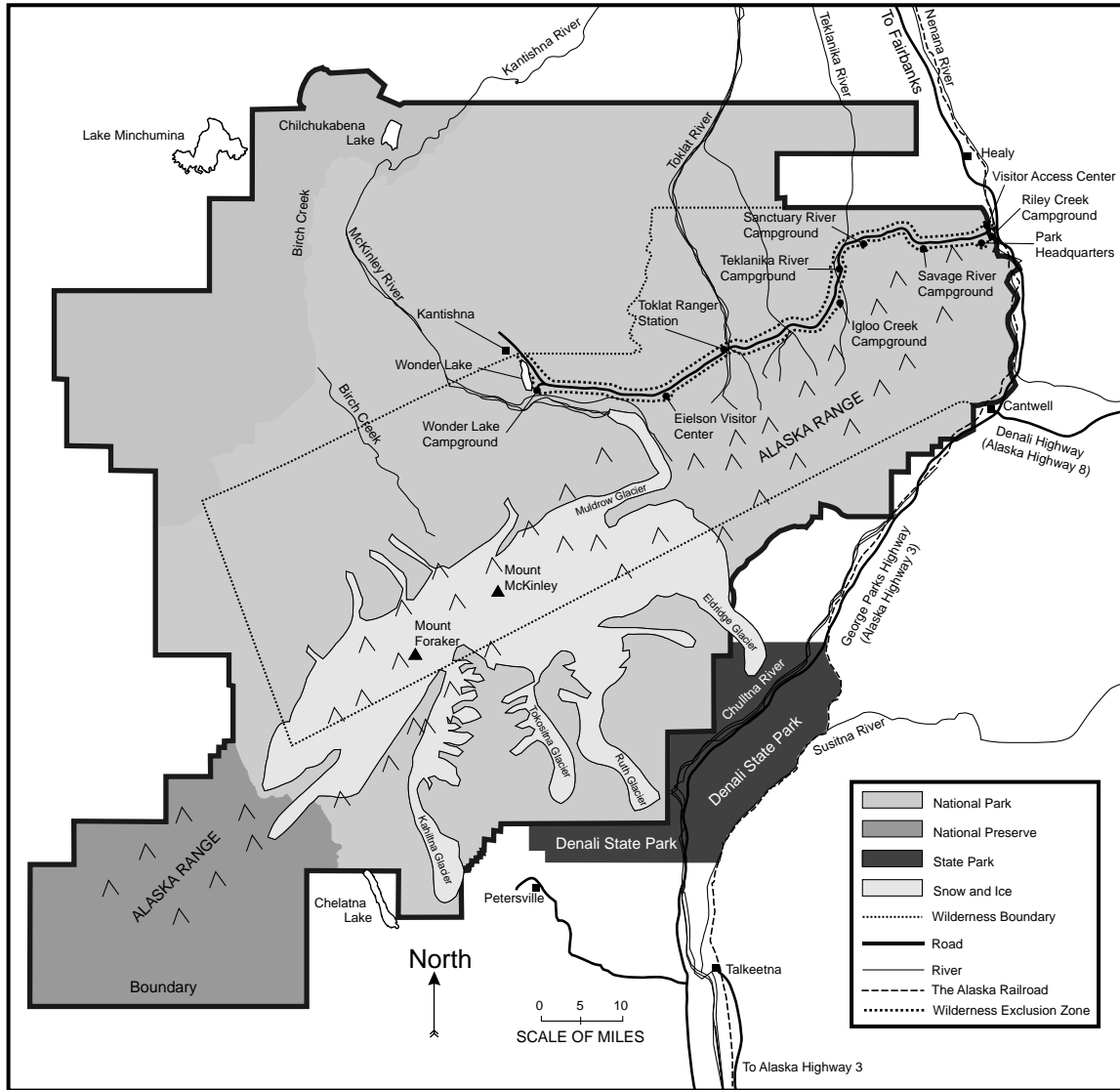
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management of the more developed and heavily visited regions of the Park. Denali still exemplifies the intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act and provides an opportunity for the public to experience wilderness values.

The Park (fig. 1) contains large areas where trails and evidence of human use are minimal to nonexistent. Approximately one-third of the Park is designated wilderness. Of the other four million acres, most is proposed for wilderness

designation, and almost all of it is suitable. National Park Service policy mandates that it be managed as designated wilderness.

The purposes of Denali are specified in the enabling legislation for the original Mount McKinley National Park and in ANILCA. The Park's purpose is also tied to the traditions of the other national parks and preserves added to the system through ANILCA. Denali includes several administrative



PARK/REGION
Denali National Park and Preserve
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Figure 1—Denali National Park and Preserve.

subsets with different legislative histories and legal mandates (original national park, national park additions, national preserve and designated and proposed wilderness). It is a place where special uses related to subsistence and a frontier-type way of life continue, subject to regulation to ensure they do not jeopardize the integrity of park resources.

Denali's administrative history clarifies its purposes. The Park's origins are loosely linked to the large, Western national parks established during the first two decades of this century, since the original Mount McKinley National Park was established in 1917 and since early development included railroad access and a hotel. Because of its early designation within the National Park System, Denali has evolved to become one of the most well-established national parks. Because of its outstanding natural resources and accessible wilderness, Denali has become one of the most heavily visited of the national parks in Alaska. Still, development and use have been limited because of the Park's remote location (compared with the lower 48 states) and by management decisions and park plans to achieve its legislative purposes.

The legislative mandates and administrative history of Denali place the Park with others that can be characterized as wild, rustic and expansive. Denali rests somewhere between the extremely remote, lightly-used Alaskan national park units and the large, wilderness parks of the lower 48 states that are highly accessible and more developed. This blend of largely pristine conditions and an intense focus on use and access in a relatively small but critical portion of the Park, coupled with the unique provisions of ANILCA, creates unusual management challenges and is often at the core of most controversial issues (Brown 1993).

Backcountry management planning in Denali National Park and Preserve involves many similar challenges to wilderness management planning in other protected areas. Because of its importance to the tourism industry in Alaska and its symbolic importance as a wilderness park, Denali receives considerable attention in the media and is often at the forefront of park management issues in Alaska. Decisions made in Denali may affect wilderness and backcountry management planning in other parks in Alaska and elsewhere.

Legislative Mandates

An understanding of fundamental park purposes from the Park's enabling legislation and ANILCA is critical to determining appropriate alternatives in management plans. In 1917, Congress established Mount McKinley National Park to "set apart as a public park for the benefit and enjoyment of the people . . . for recreation purposes by the public and for the preservation of animals, birds, and fish and for the preservation of the natural curiosities and scenic beauties thereof . . . said park shall be, and is hereby established as a game refuge" (39 Stat. 938). ANILCA contains language defining the broad purposes of the new national parks and preserves in Alaska as well as the specific purposes of each conservation unit including Denali.

The enabling legislation from 1917 and the Park purposes under ANILCA are referenced in management plans for Denali National Park and Preserve and provide the basis

from which vision statements and strategic planning goals are derived. Along with the Park's administrative history, legislative mandates set the course for the backcountry management plan.

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) doubled the size of the area administered by the National Park Service, adding several new units and extensive areas of designated wilderness throughout the nation's largest state. A total of 104.3 million acres of national parks, national wildlife refuges and other protected units were designated by ANILCA (Williss 1985), and more than 56 million acres were added to the National Wilderness Preservation System (Landres and Meyer 1998). The former Mt. McKinley National Park was expanded from two million acres to six million acres and renamed Denali National Park and Preserve. Almost all of the former Mt. McKinley National Park was designated as wilderness.

Many aspects of backcountry management planning in Denali are unique to the Alaska conservation units that were created or significantly expanded by ANILCA. The primary purposes of the new and enlarged national parks and preserves in Alaska are included in Section 101:

- Preserve lands and waters for the benefit, use, education, and inspiration of present and future generations.
- Preserve unrivaled scenic and geological values associated with natural landscapes.
- Maintain sound populations of, and habitat for, wildlife species.
- Preserve extensive, unaltered ecosystems in their natural state.
- Protect resources related to subsistence needs.
- Protect historic and archeological sites.
- Preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities.
- Maintain opportunities for scientific research in undisturbed ecosystems.
- Provide the opportunity for rural residents to engage in a subsistence way of life.

ANILCA also includes language specific to Denali National Park and Preserve:

- To protect and interpret the entire mountain massif and the additional scenic mountain peaks and formations.
- To protect habitat for, and populations of fish and wildlife including, but not limited to, brown/grizzly bears, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves, swans, and other waterfowl.
- To provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities.

ANILCA includes provisions for subsistence use, which continues in national park additions and preserves throughout Alaska regardless of wilderness designation. Motorized uses not traditionally associated with wilderness are also permitted by Section 1110 (a):

Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act or other law, the Secretary shall permit, on conservation system units, national recreation areas, and national conservation areas, and those public lands designated as wilderness study, the use of snowmachines (during periods of adequate snow cover, or frozen river conditions in the case of wild and scenic rivers), motorboats, airplanes, and nonmotorized surface transportation methods for traditional activities (where such activities are permitted by this Act or other law) and for travel to and from villages and homesites. Such use shall be subject to reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units, national recreation areas, and national conservation areas, and shall not be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing in the vicinity of the affected unit or area, the Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area.

This section of ANILCA has been interpreted as an “ANILCA-guaranteed right of access” by some advocates of motorized use (Gauna 1999). Extensive debate between motorized use groups and environmental organizations has ensued over terms such as “traditional activities,” “reasonable regulations” and “detrimental to resource values.” Defining these terms has been critical to managing the uses specifically mentioned in the law. Management actions such as the regulations prohibiting snowmachine use in the designated wilderness in Denali National Park include definition of these terms.

Planning for the Backcountry and Wilderness of Denali National Park and Preserve

The need for a comprehensive backcountry management plan for Denali National Park and Preserve rises from the exponential growth in motorized uses during recent years, the rapid increase in proposed commercial activities and the accelerated use of areas such as the Ruth Amphitheater on the south side of the Park for individual recreational activities. ANILCA does not include direction for dealing with these types of changes, and there is evidence in the legislative history indicating such changes were not anticipated. A 1979 U.S. Senate report stated that:

The transportation modes covered by this section are float and ski planes, snowmachines, motor boats, and dogsleds. The adverse environmental impacts associated with these transportation modes are not as significant as for roads, pipelines, railroads, etc. both because no permanent facilities are required and because the transportation vehicles cannot carry into the country large numbers of individuals. (U.S. Senate, 1979)

Establishing the legal parameters for management alternatives is another essential component of the Denali National Park and Preserve backcountry management plan. ANILCA does not replace the NPS Organic Act, which directs the agency to:

...promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations...by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of said park, monuments and reservations; which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein and to provide for the

enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

The Organic Act was amended by the Redwood National Park Expansion Act of 1978, in which Congress explained that the promotion and regulation of the National Park System shall be consistent with the protection of park resources, and shall not be exercised in derogation of these values except as may have been specifically provided for by Congress (Bader 1999).

The challenge at Denali is to provide for backcountry uses consistent with the resource protection goals in the Organic Act, the Park’s enabling legislation and ANILCA. Major issues in the backcountry management plan include:

1. Levels and types of use: individual uses, group size, commercial uses
2. Visitor experience
3. Research and resource protection
4. Facility development, use and maintenance
5. Administration of backcountry management program
6. Coordination with other land management agencies, cross-boundary issues, land exchanges
7. Access

The most contentious issues that are expected to arise in backcountry management planning discussions relate to aircraft overflights and landings, snowmachine use, other motorized uses and commercial and recreational uses. The planning process requires accurate interpretation of ANILCA, following established procedures for interpreting legislation (Meyer 1999), and defining appropriate types and levels of use. Developing a comprehensive plan that can be effectively implemented will require working with the public to come up with innovative approaches to allocating uses, minimizing conflicting uses and protecting remote yet accessible backcountry resources.

Case Law Affecting Backcountry Management Planning

Two primary concepts emerge from an analysis of case law involving the National Park Service that have a direct bearing on how issues in backcountry management planning are to be addressed: (1) the allocation of recreational uses and (2) the National Park Service responsibility to act affirmatively to protect resources. These concepts were fundamental in a recent finding supporting closure of most of the designated wilderness in Denali National Park and Preserve to snowmachine use (National Park Service 1999).

Allocation of Recreational Uses

The administrative discretion granted to the National Park Service for managing national parks allows for allocating limited recreational opportunities among competing user groups. For example, in *Bicycle Trails Council of Marin v Babbitt* (1996), the Ninth Circuit Court upheld the NPS action of prohibiting bicycle use on 36% of the recreational trails in the park. Bicycles were allowed on the remaining trails so were not excluded from the Park. The court ruled that there is nothing in the Organic Act that

requires the National Park Service to allow unfettered use of a unit if that use is inconsistent with other recreational uses (Bader 1999).

This case may apply to Denali National Park and Preserve in that permitting motorized uses in winter in all parts of the Park is inconsistent with other types of recreation, such as dog mushing and cross-country skiing, where natural sounds may be an important part of the experience. If motorized use were not restricted, other uses would be compromised.

National Park Service Responsibility to Plan and to Manage Proactively

In carrying out its preservation mission, the National Park Service need not wait for actual damage to occur before taking action to protect wildlife and other natural attributes. The National Park Service decision was upheld in *Wilkins v Department of Interior* (1993), a case involving Carlsbad Caverns National Park. The National Park Service had removed deer to study whether they were a potential threat, and the agency's decision was upheld by the court (Bader 1999).

The National Park Service may also plan proactively for potential threats (*New Mexico State Game Commission v Udall*, 1969). In *Kleppe v New Mexico* (1979) the agency decision was upheld after removing an exotic species—wild horses—because of a potential threat to ecological integrity (Bader 1999). Language in ANILCA providing for regulation of access such as "...Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area" is consistent with the theme of planning proactively identified in the above case law.

The Public Process

While the National Park Service has been given broad discretion by the courts in determining types and levels of uses of park resources and in allocating recreational uses, what happens in the public and political arenas is also crucial to park management. Recent progress in planning efforts at Denali National Park has been possible because the agency exceeded the public disclosure requirements in the National Environmental Policy Act. The public scoping process is critical to successful wilderness management planning and should include numerous informal meetings with agencies, organizations and individuals affected by proposed management alternatives. Formal scoping meetings provide an additional forum for discussions. Meeting with known and potential adversaries can help ensure that there are no surprises in public documents that result in unfavorable headlines. Denali National Park receives considerable support from Alaskans and other interested individuals throughout the United States and the world. The Park must continue finding new ways to enlist this support for meeting its mandates to provide for an outstanding visitor experience and to protect its internationally significant resources.

Public expectations of Denali National Park and Preserve are determined from visitor surveys and unsolicited visitor comments. Information on desired visitor experiences in protected areas is essential to conducting the National Park

Service Visitor Experience and Resource Protection program (VERP), Limits to Acceptable Change (LAC) or other methodology to deal with carrying capacity. Addressing carrying capacity is now required in NPS general management plans and will be included in the backcountry management plan for Denali. Information on visitor experience is equally important to scientific information on wildlife and other park resources. For example, many of the comments addressing the desired level of traffic on the park road during a 1996 planning process mentioned visitor experience instead of or in addition to wildlife concerns as a reason to hold traffic at existing levels (NPS, 1997a; Miller and Wright, 1998).

Conclusion

While ANILCA presents unusual challenges for wilderness management in Alaska, it also outlines the need for land managing agencies to "do it right" by protecting the integrity of the outstanding resources recognized by that law. Planning for the backcountry along with other management actions affecting Denali National Park and Preserve follows the guidance provided by the fundamental purposes of ANILCA. The park has developed a vision statement consistent with the general purposes of ANILCA:

Denali National Park and Preserve is a vast area that provides visitors of all abilities with opportunities for superlative, inspirational experiences in keeping with its legislative mandates. Over the long term, preservation of the wilderness and its continually evolving natural processes is essential to providing the opportunity for outstanding resource-based visitor experiences. (National Park Service, 1997)

The backcountry management plan for Denali National Park and Preserve will follow this general vision and the direction of ANILCA to continue the tradition of providing for outstanding opportunities to experience wilderness established early in the 20th century. The National Park Service will encourage public involvement at every step during this planning process, recognizing that informed debate on controversial issues often results in creative solutions to difficult challenges.

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7. Dialogue Session Summary

