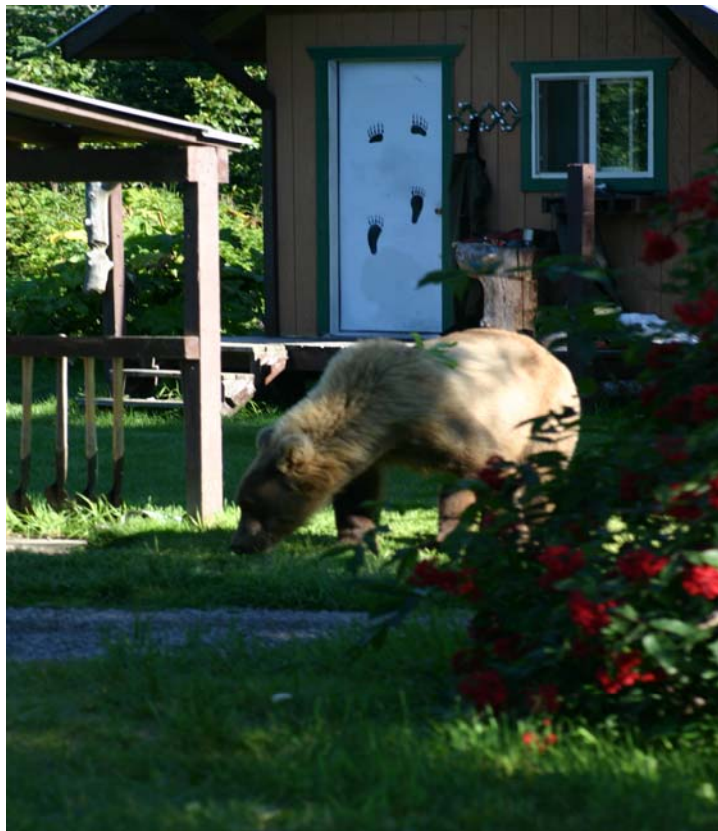


**THE SILVER SALMON CREEK AREA, LAKE CLARK NATIONAL PARK AND
PRESERVE:**

**ASSESSMENT OF THE MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC
INVOLVEMENT OPTIONS**



prepared by

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Introduction

This document proposes a process to facilitate public involvement in management of the Silver Salmon Creek area (SSC) of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. The document includes a brief background of SSC; an assessment of the current management environment based on qualitative interviews conducted with a variety of key stakeholders; and concludes with recommendations for involving the public in the management of this area.

Background

The Silver Salmon Creek area (SSC) is a small community on the coast of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. Within this small area (approximately 3,750 acres), are 8 private inholdings. Two of the inholdings are being used for commercial operations, lodges that offer guided fishing and bear viewing. The other 6 are used as seasonal residences or recreational sites by landowners. In addition, Southcentral Foundation, a nonprofit organization under Cook Inlet Region, Inc., maintains a camp in SSC that is used as a recreational site for Foundation supporters.

Because of the abundance of fish and bears as well as relatively easy access to SSC from Anchorage and the Kenai Peninsula, commercial interest in SSC is increasing. Approximately, 17 Incidental Business Permit (IBP) holders use this area as part of their business operations. From 2002 to 2004, visitors to SSC, including guided and unguided, increased from approximately 1,000 to 2,300. To meet the growing demand for bear viewing and/or sport fishing opportunities, the two on-site lodges have begun offering day visits; three other “guest houses” are marketing their services to profit from the visitor demand; charter boat trips to SSC are becoming more frequent; and helicopter operators are transporting anglers on state land below mean high tide.

National Park Service (NPS) staff and stakeholders are increasingly concerned about impacts due to growing numbers of visitors. Demonstrable impacts from growing visitation include: (1) increased ATV crossing of Silver Salmon Creek; (2) increased potential for negative human-bear interactions (e.g., a result of bears being food conditioned); (3) active and passive displacement of bears and other wildlife because of human activity; and (4) compromised quality of life/experience for residents and visitors.

NPS is interested in improving public input and participation in the management of SSC with the goal of minimizing impacts to habitat and wildlife, while allowing for human use of the area. NPS believes that stakeholder collaboration is critical to ensure the success of conservation efforts for SSC.

Management Environment Assessment

Prior to initiating stakeholder interviews, I met with NPS staff (Colleen Matt, Becky Brock, and Joel Hard) to discuss the history of SSC, the current management environment, and NPS’s interests and concerns regarding the area. In addition, I met with Kevyn Jalone, the on-site park ranger, to tour SSC and gain insight about key stakeholders and issues/concerns from her perspective.

Between July 21 and September 12, 2005, I conducted interviews with 41 stakeholders representing a diversity of interests in management of SSC. These stakeholders included, non-commercial landowners, on and off-site lodge owners, Southcentral Foundation, air taxi owners, guides, other employees, and visitors. Interviews were conducted on-site as well as via telephone. Interviews ranged from 10 minutes to one hour. Interviews were recorded, and those over 15 minutes were transcribed. The purpose of these interviews was fourfold. First, the interviews offered insight regarding the nature of key issues and concerns regarding SSC from the perspectives of the stakeholders most affected by management of SSC. Second, information from the interviews provided input regarding public perception of NPS management of the area and recommendations for improvement. Third, the interviews offered information on stakeholders' plans for change and how change may impact their businesses/quality of life. Finally, the interview data revealed stakeholders' attitudes regarding the importance of public involvement in management decisions for the area. Data from these interviews provided the basis for an assessment of the management environment at SSC and facilitated identification of a process that would be most appropriate and effective for involving the public in management of SSC.

The following is a summary of stakeholder responses to each of the questions asked during the interview process. Key points are illustrated with data as appropriate.

What are the major issues regarding use of the SSC?

All of the interviewees identified SSC as a unique area that has had relatively few problems in the past. However, nearly all interviewees were concerned to varying degrees with the growing number of visitors to the area and the subsequent impacts to their businesses, quality of life, or the environment. Most of the businesses stated that their customers were interested in a "pristine," "wilderness" experience, and that overuse and human congestion would impair their business opportunities in the area. Although they are responsible for much of the increase in visitors to SSC, two lodgeowners expressed concern about this trend. One lodgeowner stated:

It's becoming almost too busy in some respects. You know, we're taking a real good look at ourselves. If you care about the area—I mean, this is our livelihood, this is our home and we—we're very concerned and I know we have quite a bit coming in ourselves with the half day trips that we offer, and maybe we need to take a better look at that, you know, I think, and talk about maybe just doing away with the half day, just eliminate some of the constant influx of people, like a revolving door kind of.

Another landowner described SSC:

Yeah, I mean, we care about the area a lot and, over the years, we've actually seen an increased bear population in the area here. I mean, they've been thriving and doing well and we just want to make sure that we don't impact them negatively...I think probably the air traffic has gotten people's attention more than anything. There's kind of a bigger change or, I mean, just a lot of planes coming in and concerns whether that would affect the wildlife here.

All of the visitors that I interviewed reported having a positive experience at SSC, and few had substantive concerns. However, one couple, that was staying at one of the lodges said that although SSC was "awe inspiring," they were concerned about the future of the area. They

suggested that it was “better to close the area totally than allow carte blanche access.” They warned “don’t make a mistake with this area!”

The majority of businesses that do not own property in SSC identified concerns about congestion but noted that if SSC became more congested, they would find other areas to take their customers. The only business that did not identify concerns about congestion was one air taxi operator who drops off unguided customers and occasionally lodge guests.

Related to the increasing number of people, is a concern about the expansion of the commercial operations to new areas, particularly the south side of the river. One landowner summarized his frustrations as follows:

...they got airplanes landing in front of their houses all day and all night. They got them on the outer beach out here landing all day and all night, and they got four-wheelers running up and down the place, now they got boats. Now they’re dragging boats all the way down the south side to the river that’s six or seven miles from here so that they can cross down there... They take three four-wheelers full of people and boats down there so they can cross down there because they are bored, you know, and it’s like that, you know, and they’re having bonfires down here and it’s just like this is the last place where you can go without these people and now you can’t even go there.

Another landowner summarized her concerns: “We love it here, but then we’re also frustrated. I think that when we finally leave, it won’t be because we’re too old, it will be because we can’t handle all of the people.”

Most interviewees expressed concern about unguided visitors being dropped off at SSC. Subsequent problems included lack of education regarding how to act appropriately around bears; lack of facilities (e.g., restrooms, fish storage/cleaning areas, shelter if needed) on-site for unguided visitors; the potential that people or bears would be shot; air traffic; and lack of knowledge about the area, including where private property lines begin and end.

A variety of concerns were raised regarding unguided visitors. This is an area of fairly widespread agreement among SSC users. Not surprisingly, the few businesses that drop people off unguided were the only interviewees supportive of this activity. One air taxi operator described his concerns regarding unguided visitors as follows:

....they don’t have a, you know, a modicum of an idea how to act and that’s what’s probably going to need to be controlled at some point because where your problem arises—it’s not going to be from the two people that are there that have their people guided—it’s going to arise from people that are just dropped off that pay \$29.95 and they get picked up at 5:00 o’clock and they’re out there with lunches and, you know, interacting with the bears and really maybe not knowing how interact with them.

A landowner noted that an increase in the number of very brief visits is a concern for him. He described one air taxi operator’s actions: “He landed three times yesterday, I guess. And he took groups of people in. Flew around, found a bear, landed and walked this group of seven in and then they viewed the bear for 10 minutes, the bear walked away and left.”

Most noncommercial landowners identified concerns with unguided visitors trespassing and using private property. One landowner described his frustrations:

...but the big problem is they just drop their people off and leave. They don't give them instruction, they don't have anyone to show them where to fish and where not to go. If the fishing isn't any good, then the fish people start to wander through the buildings here.

Another landowner said that he had to build a gate and put up signs to stop people from trespassing on his property. Other interviewees described instances where unguided visitors had used their outhouses, boats and other property without permission.

Many interviewees stated that they liked the "status quo" and were concerned about the possibility of restrictions on certain activities. For example, most of the private landowners thought that it was essential that they were able to continue the lifestyle with which they had grown accustomed:

...we have used it [SSC] in the past before it was a park and—not saying that we've abused it but we've actually taken very good care of the area we live in—we just want to be able to just continue to pick the berries and cut down our firewood and do the things we've done before. We need to continue to be able to visit our neighbors, get water from them.

Other stakeholders expressed a variety of concerns but did not want further restrictions to be imposed.

Safety issues related to airplane traffic were mentioned by stakeholders ranging from air taxi operators, to guides, to lodge owners. The primary concern was that with increased visitation and subsequent air traffic, safety measures must be instituted to minimize accidents (see recommendations). It was noted by some interviewees that the air taxis had agreed that they would minimize the number of plane landings on the inner beach in front of the lodges.

Other concerns related to airplanes include noise and disturbance to bears. One guide noted:

The only problem we have as far as the bears with private people is when they fly over, they're coming right down on the deck, I mean, 30 feet off the deck buzzing bears, you know...or landing on top of bears.

Some private landowners thought that the behavior of the bears in the area had changed due to more contact with humans and because landowners may be allowing bears to become human food or garbage-conditioned. One landowner said that bears are more likely than they were before to bluff charge anglers to get fish. Another individual noted: "You know, I think that the bears are just getting too used to people, and something bad is going to happen one of these days...they're not afraid of people. I mean, they should be afraid of us, very afraid."

Only a minority of people mentioned concerns for the welfare of bears or habitat, even when probed with follow-up questions. Instead, people familiar with this area seemed highly habituated to bears, recognized the pros (mostly business owners) and cons (mostly noncommercial landowners) of having bears in the area and were amenable to living in close

proximity to them. One stakeholder captured the essence of the relationship between bears' welfare and commercial interests:

Well, I think that, you know, the potential for a bad situation with a bear, you know, ending up having to be killed or shot or whatever— I mean, it's already happened down in Shelter Creek. The thing that concerns me the most if there ever happened to be a situation where there was a mauling or whatever, that's going to seriously hamper any of us, any photography people from being able to access these areas.

Another interviewee observed:

I think right now, the bears are being pushed out of the area which just amazes me because the people that are over there are making money with bear viewers but yet they're getting so many people in there that they're pushing the bears out.

Additional issues/concerns mentioned were:

- more NPS presence to ensure that guidelines are followed and laws are enforced
- people with firearms who don't know what they are doing
- additional rules/restrictions needed
- increased recreational ATV traffic and noise
- CIRI competing with lodges
- camping issues at Shelter Creek
- private landowners denying access to a fishing hole that is on public property
- too many bears
- increased restrictions/requirements (e.g., permits to land planes)
- airplanes circling low/buzzing bears
- lodges expanding
- airplane safety
- unruly visitors ("debauchery")
- concentrated versus dispersed visitors
- unreasonable ranger
- not knowing what other landowners are planning (e.g., private property becoming commercial)
- habituation of bears
- food conditioning of bears (i.e., to fish)

- trail maintenance
- displaced bears
- access to property/neighbors/water because of trails being “cut off”
- NPS pays more attention to commercial interests than private (e.g., more likely to have trails used by businesses surveyed than those used by residents)
- dogs running free
- fish cleaning
- lack of communication
- NPS moves too slow
- illegal hunting/trapping
- habitat and aesthetic impacts due to new ATV trails and subsequent scarring of land
- Southcentral Foundation plans (e.g., will it become a commercial operation?)
- trespassing, property damage, and theft
- important to balance the needs of people and wildlife
- potential for increased restrictions for ATVs (status quo is good)
- people following or getting too close to bears
- coolers unattended
- discourteous guides who scare bears or ruin experience for others
- environmental degradation
- customer complaints because of crowding
- stream bank degradation
- illegal fishing practices (e.g., use of eggs)

Are there any changes related to management of the area that you would recommend?

On the whole, interviewees had few concrete recommendations regarding how to improve management of SSC. Many individuals mentioned the idea of increased restrictions on use. However, most of those people were unsupportive of too many restrictions because of how those restrictions would impact their businesses or quality of life. One landowner said:

We don't want a lot of restrictions, but we want to be really responsible in the use of the area... We just want everybody to be on the same page too, you know, we really have the best interest of the land and the wildlife.

Later in the interview, her spouse noted:

I would like to see a cap on IPB holders that are based here. I know we can't stop air traffic from coming in. They land low mean high tide and that's open to the public, but in terms of people who are based out of here with ATVs, I think as soon as possible, a cap on that would be warranted.

One guide warned that limiting the number of guests would not matter unless the number of IBPs was limited as well. He noted that any of the private property owners could subdivide their property, thereby increasing the number of potential landowners and businesses operating in the area.

Other individuals who voiced concerns about increasing numbers of visitors were entirely unsupportive of increased regulations in the park. One off-site lodge owner said: "If someone wants to be dropped off over there unguided, fine. It's a free country."

Not surprisingly, noncommercial property owners were more likely than commercial business owners to believe that limitations should be set on the number of people allowed to visit the area. One landowner said:

They need to put a cap on how many people can come over here. You know, I don't think there should be a cap on how many lodges can be here. They could have a dozen lodges but there should be a cap on the amount of people that can come here and use this area because they're loving it to death. They are killing this place.

Similarly, another resident noted: "I'm hoping they'll step in and put some limits, you know, like over in the Katmai area, there's limits on how many guests can go through the Brooks Camp, how many guests can go to certain areas."

An opinion held by some interviewees was that the NPS ranger on-site should have authority to enforce laws and give tickets. One private landowner said: "Well, just having a presence here most of the summer is great. I think it would be nice if we had the presence of a fish and game warden that was able to write citations to people during the month of August." Some private property owners wanted "stronger policing" of tourists, guides, and air taxi operators because of concerns about trespassing, theft and safety.

The topic of voluntary guidelines or parameters emerged. Many people thought that voluntary guidelines alone or in concert with some regulations would help minimize problems. One private landowner felt strongly that guidelines were necessary, particularly for the lodges: "I really think that the lodge people—and, again, not the personalities but the—but anybody who owns a lodge out here needs to have some very strict guidelines about how they're affecting the area." A related concern was regarding day visitors and how they would be informed about guidelines. One visitor suggested that "guidelines/rules should be given to everyone, so everyone is held to the same standard."

Skepticism about voluntary guidelines was expressed by an employee of one of the businesses: "You know, the guidelines have always been there...when it's convenient, they're followed." A private landowner echoed this sentiment:

Next year, you'll have 200 people coming in here, you can split it up whatever way you want to but this is the way it's going to be and it's no more Mr. Nice Guy because ...we're not going to regulate ourselves. We can talk bullshit all you want, you know, and I can tell you hey, Cindi, yeah, I'll regulate myself. I promise that I won't get off of the trail....I promise that I won't do this and I won't do that and I won't have more than, you know, 35 people come in at one time but, you know, as soon as you leave or Kevyn leaves or Shea leaves or Lee Fink leaves or whoever has got some kind of control, hey, I'm going to do whatever I want to do and that is the way of the world.

Conversely, the guides that I interviewed thought that guidelines for proper conduct around bears as well as a maximum number of visitors (6) per guide would be useful.

A representative from Southcentral Foundation stressed that rules are necessary to help her and other camp hosts ensure that visitors behave appropriately.

I have to say to people, 'Oh, I'm sorry, there's no rule that says that we can't be here,' you know, and how could I tell the rest of the group 'you should have respect and not get too close to bears'—for everybody who's trying to take a picture. So, for it to become a rule helps us for us to be able to say you can't do that.

Some interviewees thought that aircraft safety issues should be addressed. For example, one air taxi operator suggested that a traffic control frequency common to that area should be used:

I think there should be a specific one [frequency] used because there are people being dropped off on the beach and it's kind of uncontrolled...and the aircraft always make a pass which is what they should do, but I think it's important that maybe we have a discrete frequency that everybody knows if they're going to land there on that beach that that's the frequency they can be on.

Another person thought that measures should be taken to prevent accidents between planes (e.g., a windsock should be use on the beach, debris should be removed). One private landowner suggested that there should be one drop-off point for air taxis.

Other recommendations included:

- require visitors to be guided
- require guides to be trained/certified
- increase the distance from which you can fish near a bear from 75 to 300 feet
- NPS should maintain the existing ATV trails or allow businesses to make repairs
- no new ATV trails
- blaze a trail up Slope Mountain to disperse visitors
- NPS should provide bear-proof fish and gear lockers
- build an outhouse for day visitors

- businesses should be required to haul their garbage out
- build a boardwalk to minimize damage to bank

Are there any changes that are occurring in this area that could impact your business/quality of life?

Most businesses anticipated that increased restrictions were inevitable, mostly due to increasing numbers of people frequenting SSC. Business operators were concerned to some degree that increased regulations could negatively impact their businesses. The nature of impacts mentioned depended on the type of business. For example, the on-site lodges were concerned about restrictions on ATV use because such restrictions could hamper their ability to, for example, transport guests with heavy photographic equipment. Some air taxi operators were concerned that increased restrictions, including additional permitting requirements, would make SSC a less desirable location.

Although increasing restrictions were a concern, most businesses were worried that growing numbers of visitors have and will continue to negatively impact their business. One landowner described how air traffic and numbers of people affected his customers' experiences:

.....you're watching the bear—you know, you're like wow, this is great, you know, it's quiet. You know, there's not a lot of people around. You're standing down there watching a bear and then three planes land on the beach and two dozen people come running up and down the creek fishing and is—and it kind of cheapens the experience.

Similarly, an air taxi operator noted:

If there is an increase of the number of people that I've seen in the last five years, I probably won't go there because I think you lose what we call the wilderness experience. There's just too many people and there's too many fishermen on the creek. It's like the Kenai. You know, they're starting to get elbow to elbow.

Other interviewees were concerned that negative human-bear interactions could impact their businesses. An employee for one of the air taxis predicted: "If they have to start killing bears because there's an incident with people, everybody's business is going to be way down."

Private landowners were particularly concerned that more visitors change the area and negatively impact their quality of life. One private landowner said that the "mentality" of SSC has changed and that people are now more likely to "leave trash, disrupt bears, and take more than their limit of fish." She said SSC is a "special place, and any misuse is taken seriously."

Private property owners were concerned about lodge expansion, both in terms of numbers of people and the areas to which lodges bring their guests. In reference to one of the lodges, a private landowner noted: "He's now bringing these people across the river and getting on our side of the river which he never used to do."

Are there changes that are occurring in this area that could impact fish, wildlife, habitat, or the park in general?

Most people, particularly private landowners, did not specifically mention concerns about environmental impacts. As mentioned previously, most business owners did not express overt concern about the environment from a biocentric perspective, but some were concerned from an anthropocentric viewpoint. For example, one landowner said:

It's the people, I think, that are raising their concerns a little bit. The bears are incredibly tolerant but it's a magical number somewhere, up to a scale of tens, 20s, 30s, 40s, hundreds, who knows, where the bears are going to start probably getting more resistance to coming out in the open.

He went on to say that fewer visible bears would have negative impacts for his customers, particularly photographers.

Two individuals expressed concern about increasing impacts to habitat from human activity: "I think there are way too many three-wheelers with carts on the back running up and down hither and yon. They don't stick to the trails. The trails get muddy so they find a new one...And that meadow, that bear meadow over there is fragile."

Are there any changes that you will be making to your business operations/property or landowner status that could impact the area?

Both on-site lodge owners contended that they were interested mainly in catering to extended stay customers in the future. One owner, whose clients had primarily been day visitors, was interested in attracting more extended stay visitors. He suggested that moving in that direction was ideal for visitors, the quality of experience, and for his business: "The three-day stays are real pleasant for everybody and people are more relaxed and if you don't see a bear right now, no big deal, they'll go out later." One air taxi operator noted that he could not bring 100 people without ruining the experience for visitors. This operator also said that he did not want to see SSC "become another Wolverine Creek."

Some of the air taxi operators and the two off-site lodges thought that the area was becoming too congested, and if this trend continued, they would no longer include SSC as one of their destinations. Some stated that they had not been out there during the 2005 season for that reason. "If it gets to where I find that the higher percentage of trips are more and more crowded—it's an expensive and logistically difficult trip—I might go elsewhere. There is a pretty high chance of it not being a great trip." Air taxi operators noted a variety of other locations (Cape Douglas, Chinitna, Crescent Lake) that are more appealing to their visitors, particularly anglers.

Most private landowners stated that they do not plan on making changes to their property, although a few wanted to ensure that they would not be restricted if they wanted to do so in the future. One couple expressed their views on future changes:

Husband: Well, it's our private property. We can do that anyway on our property, we just...

Wife: Yeah, but they're limiting how many people can operate businesses out there.

Husband: ...something we're not thinking about right now but we've always got in the back of our minds so...

One lodgeowner summarized what he believed to be the future of the area:

The level of interest and demand to visit the area is escalating. It's peaking. We've had successive years of higher volume now for five years. It's a lot more so we're very busy. I don't see it turning backwards. Silver Salmon Creek is getting higher on the radar screen in terms of editorials written about it, magazines, photography and we've created some of that ourselves, you know, with photographs being taken of the area...and people are very interested in that so we're getting a lot of interest in that. The service of photography and bear viewing is probably spiking faster than the fishing.

How important is it that the National Park Service involves landowners/businesses/users in the management decisions for the area?

Nearly everyone I spoke to thought that it was important that NPS use stakeholder input to help them make management decisions. In answer to this question, one landowner said:

Colleen was talking about getting a group together and all of us talking with each other. It would be great because then we're seeing eye to eye and if anybody's brave enough, they could say something that bothers them, you know, that maybe we could all address.

Some interviewees believed that the public should participate in discussions and provide input to NPS, but NPS should continue to be the ultimate authority. One air taxi operator stressed:

Without having everybody at the table talking—and working out a problem—if you just involve commercial guys—then you're not going to get the cooperation from private landowners and everybody needs to be at the table. Everybody has to have equal weight and the Park Service, unfortunately, has to be the moderator and they're going to have to make the ultimate decisions because it is in the Park.

A private landowner thought that public input was important as long as certain interests don't outweigh others in terms of decision making. She said:

I think that you should talk to the people and get input but then that shouldn't be the only way that you make policy for the area. The park didn't want three-wheelers going down the middle of these woods. The park didn't want three-wheelers on the edge of the creek. I know that and yet then to say it's the lodges who have decided, I really disagree with that kind of message, I guess.

Some stakeholders do not feel like they have a strong voice in determining the future of the area, and one private landowner was frustrated that commercial businesses seem to have inordinate influence with NPS. When discussing NPS's responsiveness to concerns about trail surveying, one landowner said:

Our trails get used 10 or 15 times a year and their trail gets used 150 to 200 times a year, and I tried to explain to these people that just because we don't wear the thing out, that our trail is just as important to us as theirs is to them. But because they're making money and money talks and bullshit walks and they make the money and they have the bigger

voice and we're over here...In answer to your question, we don't think that we're players at all.

Although specific questions regarding NPS presence, staff, the new cabin, etc. were included as part of my interview guide, I was able to gain some insight into how stakeholders perceived NPS relative to SSC. Stakeholders were overwhelmingly supportive of NPS presence at SSC and were—with the exception of one interviewee—glad to see that the cabin had been built. Regarding NPS presence, a Southcentral Foundation representative commented that having a ranger on site is helpful to her:

She [Kevyn] comes and talks to our camp every year ahead of time because there are new rules, it's the boundaries, this is what's happening and then she'll come and talk to me or whoever's here...and say oh, by the way, we're noticing this or this or that, someone was leaving trash.

Similarly, an air taxi operator stated “The Park’s presence makes people say ‘hey, wait a second, you know, we’re not going to get away with anything down there, we got to mind our Ps and Qs,’ and I think that’s a good thing.”

A private landowner said: “I like the cabin. Finally, the park has showed that they think they’re going to own the place and they’re spending money on making a permanent display of being here.”

Interviewees were very positive about Keyvyn Jalone, particularly her demeanor and professionalism.

She [Kevyn] would kind of be paying attention and what they do for us is help us keep the rules with our groups in this way. They're very pleasant, come and talk with us and remind people about the rules so we enforce the rules and then they double enforce the rules just by coming and reminding people, you know, ‘don't forget to pick up your trash’ and ‘don't keep fishing if you see a bear.’ I mean, they actually don't tell us don't do this or don't do that, they say this is our suggestion.

The only substantive concern, as previously mentioned, is that the on-site ranger does not have authority to enforce laws.

Most interviewees had interacted with other NPS staff, and the majority of the comments were positive. However, some interviewees were frustrated that their concerns had not been addressed. These concerns included, trail maintenance, trespassing, disproportionate trail surveying (i.e., more commercial and less private trails surveyed), and illegal camping. One interviewee mentioned an altercation with an NPS law enforcement ranger.

Stakeholders noted significant improvements since the Park was established. A landowner commented

Yeah, there's been much less of that now because of the fact that it's a park, an established park, there are a few more controls. For example, you can't use bait in the

creek anymore, that we pushed for...It was a real wild west here in the eighties, a real wild west.

In describing NPS's role in the management of SSC, one stakeholder said: "People can do whatever they want to their own property but not to yours [the Park] because yours belongs to everybody...and you guys have an obligation to keep it right for everybody."

Need for increased public involvement and communication

Overall, the SSC community is relatively small and has a demonstrable common interest in maintaining the quality and uniqueness of the area. Although many stakeholders have concerns about existing problems, the majority of concerns are in regards to increasing numbers of people using the area. That is, the most significant concern seems to be about the future of SSC.

The majority of interviewees, particularly the property owners, spoke positively about each other. One landowner said: "...anybody out here would help anybody here." Another property owner said: "I'd be down there as quick as I could to help Mr. X if he had a problem. I mean, just like that even though we have real issues with [him]." However, there were concerns expressed about the behavior of the Cook Inlet Region Incorporated (CIRI) guests—although some noted that it has gotten better now that they are mostly Southcentral Foundation invitees. There were questions about what will be done with that property in the future. Resolution of these questions could improve relationships between local residents, Southcentral Foundation, and NPS.

Many interviewees said that they rarely communicated with other users, except in passing. When asked about communication among users of SSC, one landowner said:

On a scale of one to 10, I would say the level of communication is about a five meaning that there's no open hostilities or any negative interactions...but there's not a lot of parallel discussions going on in terms of working together towards common goals...There used to be more of a cohesiveness.

Although some communication is occurring among users, it is clear that it is inconsistent, somewhat ineffective, and likely perpetuates rumors and misinformation among stakeholders. Based on interviews with NPS, some interviewees were uninformed or misinformed about Park-related issues and plans (e.g., the Southcentral land swap, future plans of private and commercial landowners).

Many interviewees stressed that it was important to involve all users of the area in discussions about SSC. One person hoped that stakeholders would participate in regular meetings to discuss and agree on guidelines for the area:

I am hoping that there will be a meeting, you know, a couple times a year where everybody could be together so that when we're in this relatively small area approaching bears, we're all in agreement on how it's done, you know, and who's going to do what.

Another interviewee noted the importance of involving users that have a history with and vested interest in SSC. She emphasized: "...there is a tremendous amount of knowledge and history that you'd want to tap into."

Although there was mention of at least one agreement made among users (i.e., that planes do not land on the inner beach), communication among users seemed inconsistent and limited to only a few individuals at a time. It was clear that the interviewees are relying on NPS to initiate an effort to address stakeholder concerns. One landowner observed:

I think, in our hearts, we're looking at the Park Service with us and [other businesses], as you say, primarily to really formulate a cohesive plan together now...that would just have so much more strength as other people came into the area to maintain something that was already agreed upon by...the biggest forces here which is the park and us.

Some individuals were disappointed regarding NPS efforts to initiate meetings in the past. One private landowner expressed her frustration:

...then other things are kind of wishy-washy like the—[Mr. X] said to us just this—in a conversation that the park people told him—and, again, it's all hearsay but the park people told him that the lodges got together and said that they didn't want any three-wheeler traffic going down the creeks. Well, I for one know that the lodges don't get together. They tried—Kevyn tried to get them to have a meeting together and they wouldn't have a meeting together. So, it's not straightforward. It's like that's what the park wants. The park should say that...Instead it is like this landowner wants to set up a meeting with that landowner to get together and then so Kevyn tries to do it, and they can't figure out a time that they can get together. It seems to me like the Park should be able to say 'this is mandatory, we need a meeting,' you know?

Most interviewees wanted the opportunity to provide input on regulations that NPS would consider for SSC, and most were interested in being involved in discussions about guidelines or other voluntary agreements regarding appropriate behavior around bears, respect for property, expansion, ATV trails etc. One air taxi operator described his recommendation for increasing public involvement:

Lake Clark National Park was not being managed for visitor use prior to maybe the last couple years and then, I think, the coastal section is showing an elevated level of interest in people coming to visit it, so it calls for protocols, I think, to be at least set in motion for open discussion for things down the road. There needs to be boundaries set and restrictions—not that I'm advocating any at this moment—but I think we should have open dialog and moving in that direction, to be visionary and to look down the road to see what's best for the Park 10, 15, 20 years from now.

Another business owner believed that it was important to plan for the future of SSC, and that all users were needed to make compromises to ensure an ideal future for the area. He said: "We need to be visionary and proactive in helping institute some parameters that might be good for the area down the road and realizing that sacrifices have to be made on all ends, and that we're not excluded from that." His employee later said: "whatever you do, make sure it is fair to all users."

Summary and Conclusions

Based on my interviews with users of the SSC area, I offer the following conclusions:

- The major concern to most SSC stakeholders is the increasing number of visitors coming to the area, particularly unguided visitors. The impacts of concern are different depending on individuals' interest in the area.
- Some restrictions/regulations will likely be acceptable to most people, but voluntary guidelines are preferable to address most issues.
- Overall, stakeholders have a positive perception of NPS, its on-site presence, the cabin, and staff. NPS presence on site is desired, but law enforcement authority would give the on-site ranger more credibility and would likely result in greater compliance from users. However, it may alter the relationship that exists currently with the on-site ranger and SSC community.
- The SSC community is relatively cohesive and shares a common interest in maintaining the quality of the area. Tensions exist among some stakeholders. A mechanism for constructive communication will help facilitate relationship building.
- Communication among the SSC community is relatively poor and inconsistent, and the SSC community is interested in and would benefit from facilitated communication opportunities. NPS leadership in a public participation process will enhance its relationship with the community and increase the likelihood that stakeholders will cooperate with the NPS regarding regulations and guidelines.
- If a public process is initiated, it is likely that most, but not all, users will participate to some degree. Those that have a more vested interest in the area will be most likely to participate.

Process Recommendation

For the most part, SSC is a community with a common interest in maintaining the quality of the area. Thus, a participatory stakeholder involvement process that engages this community in management decisions for the area would be appropriate and likely successful. Further, key users can be identified and will likely participate. However, it will be difficult to engage individuals who have less of a vested interest in the area (e.g., businesses that seldom use the area, private individuals).

The process that I recommend is a modified *Search Conference* with at least one, but preferably two, subsequent regularly structured stakeholder meetings per year. A Search Conference is a participatory process that enables a group of stakeholders to collectively create a plan focused on long-term strategic visions; achievable goals; and concrete action strategies that can be implemented with help from stakeholder members (Emery and Purser 1996). The Search Conference is distinct from other planning processes because it provides a unique mechanism for group formation based on creation of a shared history and identification of common vision for the future. I recommend a modified Search Conference as a first step to engage SSC stakeholders because the area has a long and unique history, so combining stakeholders' experiences into a shared history provides an opportunity to establish or strengthen their bond and brings them to a common starting place from which to begin discussions and agreements

about the future. Because of the small number of people and the fact that it is a relatively “friendly” community, a modified (i.e., shortened from three days to two, omit some steps in the process) Search Conference approach is appropriate for SSC. Following the Search Conference, regularly scheduled, facilitated meetings will help ensure consistent communication and that stakeholders continue to be engaged in SSC management.

Process

The following three-phased process is meant to serve as a general framework to be modified throughout the planning period.

Phase I: The modified Search Conference

Phase I involves all activities necessary to organize and convene a one-time, two-day Search Conference with participants including key members of the SSC community (i.e., users of the area). The Search Conference, sponsored by NPS in spring 2006, would be facilitated by a neutral third party with demonstrable experience with this method. Appropriate NPS employees would be participants in the Conference. Direct outcomes likely include agreement on voluntary guidelines for the area; input on NPS policies/regulations and improvements for the area; a vision or plan for the future. Indirect outcomes will likely include an improved and enhanced relationship between NPS and stakeholders; improved relationship among stakeholders; a mechanism for communication regarding issues and concerns; and increased incentives to work together toward common goals, including conservation of the area.

Phase II: Implementation

After the Search Conference, participants will work together to implement recommendations. NPS will need to be the leader in most implementation tasks and some may involve significant time to institutionalize. It will be critical to have at least one NPS staff person coordinating the implementation and communication effort.

Phase III: Regular, facilitated public meetings

The Search Conference is one way to initiate public input and involvement regarding management of SSC. Based on my interviews, many members of the SSC community would be receptive and interested in regular, structured communication opportunities. NPS could facilitate meetings prior to and at the end of each season, recognizing that some members will be unable to attend every meeting. Meeting summaries could be posted on a web site and/or sent to committee members to ensure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to participate.

Reference

Emery, M. and R.E. Purser. 1996. *The search conference: a powerful method for planning organization change and community action*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.