

SNOWMACHINES IN DENALI – WILDERNESS LOSES GROUND

by Charlie Loeb

On December 9, 2013, the National Park Service issued a press release that has been routine for about a decade. It was entitled, "All Southern Portions of 1980 Park Additions to Denali National Park and Preserve Now Open to Snowmobiling for Traditional Activities," and the first sentence read, "The Superintendent of Denali National Park and Preserve has determined that there is now adequate snow cover for the use of snowmobiles for traditional activities in areas of the 1980 park and preserve additions that are south of the crest of the Alaska Range."

Picking up the press release, on December 10 the Fairbanks Daily News Miner reported that "the south side of Denali National Park and Preserve is open to snowmachines," and KTNA radio in Talkeetna announced that "part of the southern portion of Denali National Park are now open for snowmachine use." Note the change from the press release to the news stories – the dropping of the words "for traditional activities."

The missing three words mean that the public is also missing an important part of the story. Typically in national parks throughout the U.S., snowmachines are prohibited unless specifically allowed. But the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) included language that allowed snowmachine use "for traditional activities" within conservation system units in Alaska, including national parks like Denali. This ANILCA exception to the "normal" national park rules necessitated a successful effort to close the former Mount McKinley National Park to all snowmachine use in 2000. The "Old Park" had been closed prior to 1980, but after years of confusion it was determined that ANILCA had inadvertently opened it. The status of snowmachine use in the park additions and preserve lands remains unchanged.

However, neither the statute nor the implementing regulations gave blanket permission for snowmachine use in the newly-created national parks, contrary to what a reader might believe from perusing the news reports. As noted above, ANILCA qualified the acceptable reason for snow-



NPS photo showing snowmachines on Denali Park's southern flank

machine access, which must be "for traditional activities." Unfortunately, however, the term has never been defined in regulation for the park additions, so NPS has no way of deciding which snowmachine users are there for "traditional activities" and which are there for something else. As a result, no one gets turned away as long as they do not cross the Old Park boundary. This issue was not resolved in the 2006 Backcountry Management Plan, and remains unresolved today as various agencies and interest groups have been deadlocked over whether Congress intended that "traditional activities" be related to traditional rural uses of the land or whether the intent was to include sightseeing, photography, wildlife watching, and other recreational pursuits as "traditional activities."

Back in 2000 and leading up to the 2006 Backcountry Management Plan, there was much discussion at public meetings and in the media about "traditional activities" in the context of snowmachine use at Denali. However, in the ensuing years public consciousness of this qualifier has faded. Increasingly, the reality on the ground is becoming simply that the park additions are "open."

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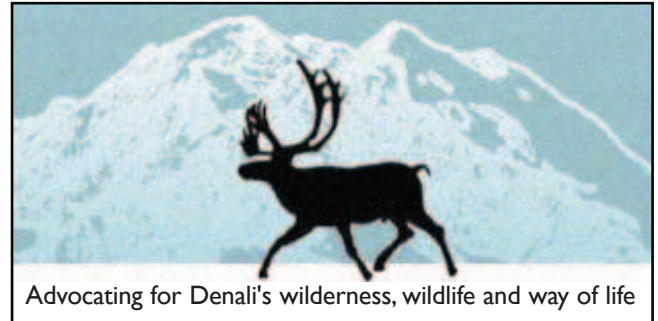
FROM THE BOARD

by Nan Eagleson

The recent, annual DCC Board Retreat was held at my house over the weekend of Nov. 2nd and 3rd and was particularly gratifying for me. The newer members on the board, Sarah Bartholow, Brian Napier and Michael Raffaelli, bring a fresh enthusiasm and valuable perspectives to issues new and old and make discussions lively and productive. The more long-term members have an important historical memory and experience that allows DCC to be the effective organization it has grown to be in this State. If I were not on this Board I would find it hard to recognize

the level of personal commitment and dedication that Nancy Bale and Charlie Loeb have shown in their roles as presidents of DCC. The fundamental reason this organization thrives is because of the incontrovertible stamina and determination their leadership has shown and the support given by generous donors who recognize this.

It is not often that going over finances for an organization is terribly engaging, but the process is gratifying when you see friends, neighbors and businesses that have high regard for DCC's mission and are willing to support it financially. So many things in the Denali community have changed over the years, more people, more development, new challenges as big as climate change and as complicated as gas pipelines. Which one are they proposing now, what size pipe? At any rate, we in this community are fortunate to have board members like Hannah Ragland and Barb Brease who tackle issues with integrity and deep knowledge and Erica Watson who puts a human face to our newsletters with her literary skill and personal investment in this community. DCC's involvement with local issues is significant and it couldn't happen without the membership which supports this Board. The future of Denali has consequences for both our economic and our ecological well-being. I am fortunate and thankful to be part of a community and an organization that shares a common regard for the long-term interests of this special place. Happy Holidays to everyone and thank you. ☞



Advocating for Denali's wilderness, wildlife and way of life

SARAH BARTHOLOW JOINS THE DCC BOARD

Sarah Bartholow joined the Denali Citizens Council board after the longest audition ever – participation in the annual weekend-long board retreat. We are thrilled to have Sarah join us, as she brings a tremendous amount of experience and great connections to our organization.

Sarah presently works in Fairbanks with Arctic Research Consortium placing teachers on research expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic. Before that, she worked at the Murie Science and Learning Center at Denali, where she developed strong connections to the community and the park. Sarah has an undergraduate degree in Geography with a focus on Women, Culture, and Development, and a Masters in Science Education. She has worked in environmental education in Northern and Central California, Colorado, Vermont, Washington, and Alaska. Welcome Sarah!

Sarah writes of herself:

“First and foremost, I am a naturalist - hoping to always develop my sense of place in the natural world. I have a passion for justice, equality, and creative solutions in communities that bring people together through a love of 'place'. I hope to combine my knowledge with my passion to help create active citizens with students I teach and adults I share my time with. There is positive light in our world and I see it in my Denali community. My intent with Denali Citizens Council is to cultivate and foster our relationships with one another in a place we can all call home in our hearts.” ☞



Photo courtesy of Sarah Bartholow

SEASON'S GREETINGS, MEMBERS & DONORS

by Nancy Bale

As we near the end of 2013, I'm happy to report that DCC is as strong as ever. Our diverse board, now composed of nine individuals, is ready to tackle a number of priority goals, established at our recent retreat. Your generous donations will enable us to close our Healy Gas Legal debt in 2014, and we hope to start putting funds away for additional paid help and projects.

We welcome two new members since the last newsletter - Daniel Senner, son of members Pat and Stan Senner, and Steve Deering. Doris Castanares has made a generous Christmas donation gift for her daughter-in-law Kris Sullivan. One member in particular deserves special mention here. Wallace Cole, a long time DCC donor and local resident, spent hours this fall doing needed rehabilitation projects at the cabin we use for office and storage near McKinley Village. Now, with the fuel supply system and Toyostove fixed, the place is again warm and ready for business. Thanks, Wally!

And happy holidays to all!

DONATIONS SINCE OUR LAST NEWSLETTER

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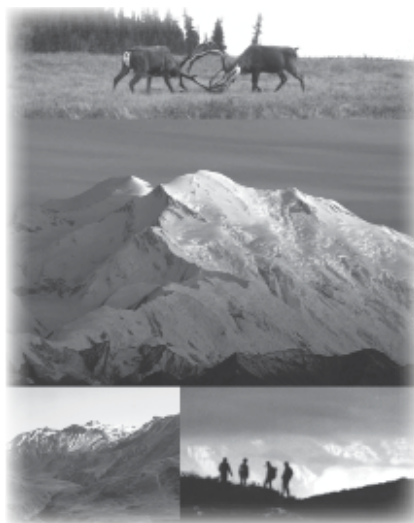
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SNOWMACHINES IN DENALI - AN UNRESOLVED ISSUE

continued from front page

The National Park Service is losing this argument by default, along with those members of the public who are concerned about preserving places for non-motorized recreational activities, protection of wilderness values, prevention of snowmachine impacts on wildlife, and so forth.

It is time to monitor snowmachine activity in the Denali additions

DCC has separately argued that Denali's 2006 Backcountry Management Plan (BCMP) contains standards for encounter rates, motorized noise, and signs of modern human use among others that should be applied to the snowmachine use in park additions. If standards are not being met, NPS should use the tools in the Backcountry Management Plan to regulate that use, even if the use is "for traditional activities." However, since 2006 NPS has not reported whether snowmachine use in Denali has resulted in violations of the BCMP standards except for some limited information from the sound monitoring program.

The large increase in snowmachine use within national park boundaries was a major issue during the 7-year BCMP planning process. Seven years after the plan's completion, snowmachine use in the Denali additions remains virtually unmanaged, save for the one tool that NPS claimed from ANILCA that has not been challenged, a parenthetical statement that snowmachines should be permitted "during periods of adequate snow cover." Thus, every winter there are press releases declaring when snow cover is sufficient to "open" the park additions for snowmachine use for traditional activities and when snow cover has declined to the point where it is no longer adequate for such use, which is then prohibited. The adequate snow cover determination is a useful tool for reducing damage to vegetation, but the larger issues of snowmachine use go unaddressed, and now the misquoted and under-explained press releases have become a rhetorical tool reinforcing the public consciousness that Denali is simply open to such use. This outcome is tragic, since snowmachines can have tremendous impacts, and neither Congress nor the National Park Service has ever clearly determined that a snowmachine free-for-all was intended by ANILCA or consistent with the purposes of Denali. The extent of snowmachine use in the park and preserve should not be resolved by default. 


* The regulation that closed the former Mount McKinley National Park (36 CFR 13.950) contained a definition for traditional activities that applies only to the Old Park and only to snowmachine use, where ANILCA referred to snowmachines, airplanes, and motorboats. It reads:

"A traditional activity is an activity that generally and lawfully occurred in the Old Park contemporaneously with the enactment of ANILCA, and that was associated with the Old Park, or a discrete portion thereof, involving the consumptive use of one or more natural resources of the Old Park such as hunting, trapping, fishing, berry picking or similar activities. Recreational use of snowmachines was not a traditional activity. If a traditional activity generally occurred only in a particular area of the Old Park, it would be considered a traditional activity only in the area where it had previously occurred. In addition, a traditional activity must be a legally permissible activity in the Old Park."

NPS PUBLISHES ACOUSTIC MONITORING REPORT FOR 2012

In November, NPS researcher Davyd Betchkal published the Acoustic Monitoring Report for Denali National Park and Preserve for 2012. The report summarizes the measurements taken at automated sound stations placed at 11 locations around Denali in 2012, and may be downloaded at <http://irmafiles.nps.gov/reference/holding/485326>.

This document is very important for understanding the extent of aircraft, snowmachine, and other noise in the Denali Wilderness and elsewhere in the backcountry, and for assessing whether the park's Backcountry Management Plan standards are being achieved. If you are curious about noise in a particular location, this report may also provide that information.

Nine summertime locations included Cathedral Mountain, McKinley River, the upper West Branch of the Toklat, Kichatna Mountains, and the toe of the Kanikula Glacier among others. Winter locations included Hines Creek and the Dunkle Hills. NPS also gathered baseline data at Bison Gulch to be compared to conditions after the start-up of the Healy 2 power plant. 



Alaska Native Knowledge Network

THE FENCE

by Barbara Brease

This last spring I joined friends for a four-day ski trip out the Stampede Trail. We stayed at a friend's cabin along one of the rivers that runs through the rugged terrain of Denali and into the state land known as the "Wolf Townships."

A tranquil stay at the cabin is a chance to immerse ourselves in the wilderness, ski across the quiet landscape and watch for signs of wildlife. The first night we took our sleeping bags out to the nearby frozen river, lay on our backs and stargazed while we watched a cloud layer come in from the north. The stillness was occasionally broken by the sound of distant wind in trees, far away. I waited in vain for the sound of a wolf's howl.

The next day we strapped on our skis and set out to explore. We looked forward to weaving our way through the living landscape, impacting it only with our tracks, scents and voices. Quite suddenly the euphoria was halted when we saw something out of place. There, next to the trail, was a block of animal flesh attached by wire to a tree. I knew a trap was under the snow.

My companion and I continued to ski the trail as it winded its way adjacent to the park boundary, hoping that we would not see any more signs of traps. But as we ventured down the trail, we saw evidence of many more traps hidden in the snow, as well as snares, lying only inches from the trail. A trapper had expropriated an existing trail and turned it into his trapline. I dreaded what I might see beyond every turn in the trail.

I was dismayed to learn that this particular trapper runs a lucrative guided predator trapline and hunt, on the border of the park. The website for Midnight Sun Safaris advertises a network of over 300 miles of trails. The commercial operator sets traps and snares right along the park boundary for his clients, and uses a snowmachine and sled to haul the pelts. Clients carry high caliber guns, predator calling devices and ride snowmachines. It is easy to catch the habituated Denali wolves and other wildlife as they funnel out of the park through the river systems. The extensive network of trails and traplines on the park boundary is a fence of death for wolves trying to reach prey that winters on adjacent state lands.

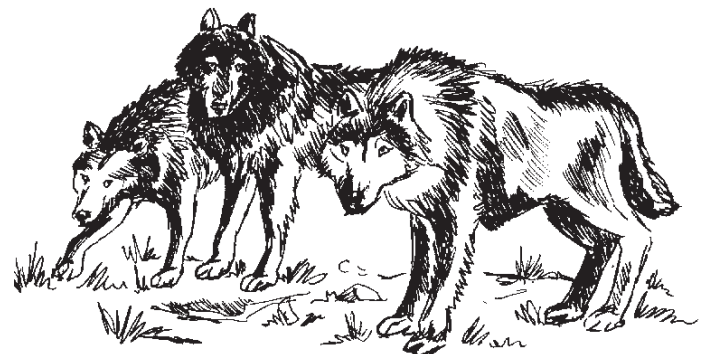
Back at the cabin, I nestled into my sleeping bag, headlamp on, and started to read from a book on the shelf, *Alaska's Wolf Man: The 1915-55 Wilderness Adventures of Frank Glaser*. Normally I would not be interested in reading about trapping, but I became intrigued by Mr. Glaser's experience in these same lands and his skill to survive in this place without modern technology and gear from Cabela's.

I was struck by the difference between Glaser's methods (including an attempt to conserve) and the trapper on the powerful Ski-Doo, sled and clients in tow, buzzing across the tundra.

New faces arrive in the Denali community eager to glamorize trapping out of a reverence for a traditional way of life. But times have changed. Today, trappers access their traplines by car, truck, aircraft and snowmachine. GPS helps pinpoint location. Clients are booked over the internet. The impact is potentially far greater than ever before. Along the Denali boundary, it isn't about an old grizzled guy mushing along on the trapline anymore or about the back-country off-the-grid Alaska lifestyle. It is a lucrative business catering to wealthy outsiders.

Change is desperately needed, as the modern, commercial model of efficient destruction in the Wolf Townships imperils the vision of Denali as a place that protects an intact, naturally-regulated ecosystem. As detailed in an accompanying article, NPS recently issued a news release alerting the public that wolf sightings by park visitors are down dramatically. In response, a number of individuals, organizations and government officials have proposed a conservation easement to Alaska Governor Sean Parnell and United States Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to protect the wolves. An accompanying article in this *DCC News* features an update on Denali's wolves and the new conservation strategy that could change the conversation about how best to protect them.

As my friends and I skied back towards Healy, we passed mushers, a few snowmachiners and skiers heading out for trail adventures. These people love the land without killing it. But as the light fades and the temperature drops, there is an uneasy silence in the night. There are no wolf howls, just the high-pitched whine of snowmachines, a trapper and his clients checking the "fence." ❧



Alaska Native Knowledge Network

NPS SOLICITS WINTER VEHICLE TOURS

by Charlie Loeb

Following on its commitment to plow the park road to Mountain Vista Rest Area (mile 12) on an experimental basis, NPS is now advertising commercial use authorizations (CUAs) to tour operators who might want to offer vehicle-based tours to the rest area between mid-February and May 10. CUA holders must abide by a page-and-a-half list of special stipulations, some of which address concerns brought up during the EA process such as preparation for emergencies. CUA holders will be able to stop and visit Headquarters and the Kennels, and visitors may disembark at any plowed pull-out. The full list of stipulations is available on the NPS Alaska Region website at http://www.nps.gov/akso/management/concession_docs/documents/Stipulations-CUA/DENA-Winter%20Vehicle%20Tours.pdf. As of press time, Japan Airlines had announced that it plans 18 round trip flights to Fairbanks, beginning in mid-December and running through April 3rd. Denali is likely to be a new point of interest for Japanese tourists, who already enjoy mushing, hot springs and aurora-watching in the Fairbanks area.

DCC will be watching carefully to see what the impact of the plowing is on non-motorized recreational opportunities traditionally available along the unplowed road. We encourage our members to share your experiences, either positive or negative. We remain concerned about impacts to wildlife, which were not evaluated during the Environmental Assessment for this policy change. ☞

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT EVALUATES EXTENSION OF HORSESHOE LAKE TRAIL

by Charlie Loeb

The Horseshoe Lake Trail in Denali's entrance area is one of the busiest trails in the park, used by over 200 people per day at peak season and often selected for interpretive walks because of the diversity and interest of its features. While the trail itself formally ends at the north end of the lake after a steep descent from the railroad tracks and a ramble through the riverine forest, visitors often continue on, investigating the beaver lodge on the peninsula that juts into the middle of the oxbow, or pushing through the trees out to the bank of the Nenana River. The wandering visitors have created many social trails, use the beaver dam at the north end of the lake as a bridge, and walk across the beaver lodge.



Horseshoe Lake, with the Nenana River in the distance

NPS photo

The National Park Service has published an Environmental Assessment proposing to extend the trail and create a loop that would replace existing social trails. The loop would go all the way around the lake and out to the river. The social trail to the overlook on the ridge above the lake would also be formalized. NPS would revegetate other social trails and close off access to the peninsula.

Comments on the EA are due by January 22, 2014. NPS prefers comments to come through the PEPC website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/horseshoelake>, where you can also find the EA, but you can also fax comments to (907) 683-9612 or send mail to Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve, ATTN: Horseshoe Lake EA, P.O. Box 9, Denali Park, AK 99755. ☞

THE ALASKA CONSERVATION SUMMIT 2013

DENALI CITIZENS COUNCIL GATHERS WITH OTHER ALASKA CONSERVATIONISTS

by Brian Napier

Every year, as many Alaskans are hunkering down for a welcomed respite from the frenzied months of summer and fall, the conservation community in Alaska and its indefatigable champions convene to discuss the most pressing environmental issues facing the state. The purpose of the summit, to quote the organizers, is “to build a more strategic, focused and collaborative conservation community”. The Alaska Center for the Environment (ACE), a non-profit environmental group based in the Anchorage area, both organizes and hosts this important two-day event.

This year over 20 groups from all over Alaska, including groups from as far away as Sitka, Juneau and Fairbanks, gathered for the summit on the campus of Alaska Pacific University. Participants included conservationists of all stripes, from street canvassers to staff lawyers and student interns to executive directors, all bringing unique and vital perspectives on getting the message of conservation values out to Alaskans and assuring our voices are heard in the public process.

Two special guests from the state of Washington joined the summit, Lisa Remlinger from the Washington Environmental Council and Sharon Murphy from the Washington Conservation Voters. The guest presenters provided information and examples on how the Washington conservation community creates and maintains coalitions and executes campaigns in a large and both geographically and culturally diverse state like Washington. The Washington conservation community sets a high bar in regards to both running campaigns and building coalitions, giving us in the Alaska conservation community an opportunity to improve without having to learn all of the same lessons from scratch.

During the summit some state-wide campaigns were presented and analyzed by the group, including campaigns focusing on Pebble Mine, Chitna Coal Mine, Susitna-Watana Hydroelectric Dam and House Bill 77 (see article on page 11 of this newsletter), bringing to light the number of conservation issues facing our community at present. The summit also focused on refining conservation campaigns by setting realistic goals, mapping out timelines and planning out the steps towards solutions--all crucial elements in any successful campaign.

By the end of two days with a head full of knowledge, a laundry list of new contacts and the comfort of knowing there is an articulate and enthusiastic group of Alaskans working in concert with each other, even the weariest of conservationists feels rejuvenated.

A big thank you to the folks at the Alaska Center of the Environment for putting on such a great summit and generating a stronger conservation community here in Alaska. 

DCC HOPES TO SPONSOR LOCAL STUDENTS TO ATTEND AYEA CIVICS AND CONSERVATION SUMMIT

For several years now, DCC has helped one or two Denali Borough students to attend the Alaska Youth for Environmental Action Civics and Conservation Summit, held in Juneau during the legislative session. The dates for this year's Summit are March 17-21, 2014.

At the Summit, youth learn how a bill becomes a law and how to approach members of the legislature on selected, conservation-oriented bills. They do a little sightseeing in Juneau and enjoy the company of high school students from around the state.

We are actively searching for this year's candidates. Deadline for applications is January 9, 2014. Email Hannah Ragland at hbragland@hotmail.com with your suggestions for candidates. 



Alaska Native Knowledge Network



A PRECIPITOUS DECLINE IN PARK WOLVES AND A NOVEL RESPONSE

by Barbara Brease

The National Park Service recently released new figures showing a sharp decline in wolf sightings by visitors in Denali National Park. In 2013, only 4% of park visitors saw wolves. By contrast 44% saw wolves in 2010. NPS also reported a spring count of 55 wolves in the park, which is the lowest number documented since counts began in 1986.

The steep decline in wolf numbers and viewability followed the removal of the Stampede Closed Area in the Wolf Townships in 2010. This “wolf buffer” established by Alaska Board of Game regulation in 2002 prohibited the killing of wolves on state lands west of the Savage River. Scientists know that wolves that spend a majority of their time in the park frequently cross the east and northeast park boundaries on forays into traditional caribou wintering grounds. Particularly vulnerable are the groups that are most commonly seen by park visitors along the road corridor. Last spring the most-viewed pack (Grant Creek) disintegrated following the trapping death of the pregnant alpha female next to the boundary.

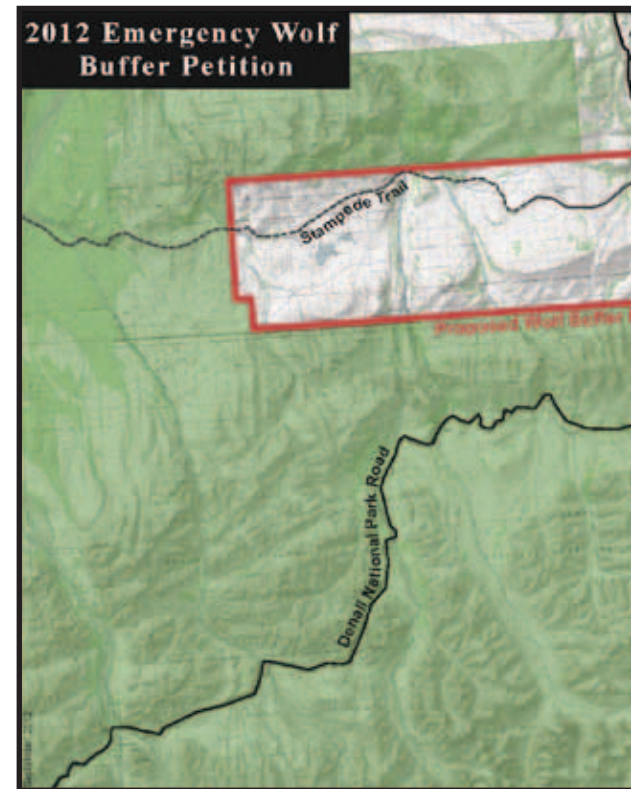
Alaska writer Marybeth Holleman, co-author with the late Gordon Haber of *Among Wolves: Gordon Haber's insights into Alaska's most misunderstood animal*, points out in a December 2nd *Anchorage Daily News* editorial that Haber predicted this possible outcome from hunting and trapping on the park boundary. As she described Haber's conclusion, “hunting and trapping of park wolves on these state lands often kills the alphas of the family group, thus causing the entire group to fragment and disintegrate – resulting in fewer park wolves, and fewer park visitors seeing wolves.”

Responding to the wolf numbers, Ted Spraker, chair of the Alaska Board of Game, asserted that a reduction in prey is behind the decline of wolves in the area. However, NPS officials disagree. An article in the *Alaska Dispatch* cites Dr. Philip Hooe, Assistant Superintendent for Resources, Science and Learning at Denali, in reporting that “numbers of both moose and caribou have slowly but steadily risen in the park,” with the caribou herd recently measured at its highest population in two decades. Hooe also notes that the relationship between wolf viewability and wolf population depends on the particular animals. “If you take out a breeding pair close to the road, you're going to have dramatically larger impacts than if you take out dispersing individuals (that roam all over the park).” Hooe makes the same point in broader terms in a November 27 NPS press release, stating, “We are just beginning to learn about the factors, such as pack disruption, that play a role in magnifying the impacts of individual wolf losses on viewability.” The same press release also points out that:

- research data shows the decline of wolf numbers has not translated to larger numbers of viewed prey species;
- the proportion of bus trips where bears, moose, caribou and sheep were seen varies by year, but none shows the steady decline found with wolves.

Restore the “Wolf Buffers”?

The Board of Game established the Stampede Closed Area and another closure along the Nenana River in 2002 to protect wolf-viewing opportunities in the national park. While helpful, some biologists and wolf advocates like Haber argued that they were not large enough to protect Denali's wolves. The buffers sunset in 2010, at which time the National Park Service, DCC and others proposed expanding them. Instead, the Alaska Board of Game voted against all the buffer proposals, let the existing buffers expire, and placed a six-year moratorium on discussing new buffer proposals except in the event of an emergency.



Potential boundaries of the easement proposal are the Board of Game in 2012, as shown above.

The primary functional units of wolf biology are far sophisticated forms of cooperation known to vertebrates, especially the primary alpha breeding pair, typically as a family unit. They commonly stand out near the forefront as leaders or with other family members, and are vulnerable to ground and aerial shooting. Although young wolves are particularly vulnerable to trapping losses, the behavior of the core adults leaves them less vulnerable. High-ranking adults commonly try to help other family members avoid being caught in nearby traps and snares themselves. Also, in a park situation, a higher proportion of older, experienced wolves are more likely to avoid trapping. Their frequent exposure to humans along the road corridor, human activity or scent, and thus less likely to avoid trapping.

DECLINE IN PARK WOLVES - A NOVEL SOLUTION

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Environmental advocates unsuccessfully petitioned the State last year for protection of the wolves arguing that increased trapping after the loss of the buffer had in fact created an emergency decline in the wolf population. The Board of Game refused to take action.

Economic Value of Wolves

The decline of Denali’s wolves should not only concern conservationists, but also the Alaska visitor industry, which is a significant contributor to the state’s economy. According to a letter from the National Parks Conservation Association to Governor Sean Parnell, “conservative estimates put the impact of Alaska’s National Parks at \$208 million in direct visitor spending with Denali providing almost 75% of that amount (\$141 million). Alaska has what the Lower 48 does not – intact functioning ecosystems. And intact ecosystems are what visitors come to see.”

“At stake,” the letter says, “are millions of dollars in tourism revenue the state could lose if visitors decide against a trip to Denali -- one of Alaska's most popular destinations for tourists -- because they are unlikely to see wolves.”

Marybeth Holleman noted in the *Anchorage Daily News* editorial, “Along with Yellowstone National Park, Denali had been known as one of the best places in the world to view wild wolves, but no longer. Over 400,000 visitors come to Denali each summer--many of them Alaskans--contributing over \$140 million to our state's economy. Many cite their desire to see wolves as a primary reason for visiting the park. As Denali superintendent Don Striker says, seeing wolves in the wild is an ‘amazing, oftentimes transformative experience’ for park visitors.”

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) board member Rick Steiner stated, “The game board's 2010 decision hurts tourism. The State of Alaska should understand the simple economics of this,” he said. "In places like Denali, wolves are worth far more alive than dead. Removing the buffer benefits two or three trappers, but costs thousands of park visitors the opportunity to watch wolves in the wild, and thus costs the Alaskan economy.”



same as those advocated in an emergency petition to
Map by NPCA

A Novel Solution

Following the release of the dismal wolf viewing numbers in late November, approximately a dozen public interest groups and individuals including PEER sent a letter to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Alaska Governor Sean Parnell requesting that they “negotiate an easement exchange or purchase to secure a permanent wildlife conservation buffer east of Alaska’s Denali National Park.” Additionally, the letter requested a temporary emergency closure to wolf hunting in the area.

With this exchange the State of Alaska would transfer a wildlife conservation easement east of the park (see map) to the federal government within which no take of wolves would be allowed. In return, the federal government would transfer an equal-valued federal property easement to the State, or else purchase the easement outright. The letter touts the proposal as a “win-win” for the federal and state governments and argues that there are many possible exchanges that could have mutual benefit.

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families and extended families, featuring among the most experienced. A relatively few of the oldest, experienced wolves, assume the key roles. Because these core adults contribute most of the assertive behavior, they are disproportionately being lost. Inexperienced wolves generally sustain most of the hunting, and they are vulnerable to this killing method as well. In fact, the young members who are caught and in the process risk getting caught, where wolves are more accustomed to people, as the park road makes them relatively unconcerned with traps and snare sets.”

Dr. Gordon Haber, excerpt from *Among Wolves*

DECLINE IN PARK WOLVES - A NOVEL SOLUTION

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The proposal attracted considerable media attention upon its release, and some positive reaction even from those unsympathetic to wolf conservation such as Board of Game chairman Ted Spraker. There has been some blurring of the lines in the media between a land exchange –proposed for the Wolf Townships since ANILCA but not actively pursued by anyone since the late 1990s - and this new idea, which would involve a conservation easement only.

Advocates for Denali's wolves are now looking to Interior Secretary Jewell and Governor Parnell for a response. The proposal has a long way to travel to become reality, including commitment to serious negotiations by the state and federal governments, identification of a specific exchange, gaining public support for the exchange, and possibly approval by Congress and the state legislature. At the very least, however, discussion of the proposal has the potential to change the dynamics of the debate about Denali wolves and perhaps lead the State of Alaska to acknowledge that the state has a stake in healthy wildlife viewing opportunities, an acknowledgement the Alaska Board of Game by itself has been unwilling to make. 

References used in preparation of this article

Denali National Park Service Press Release

November 27, 2013

<http://www.nps.gov/dena/parknews/wolf-viewing-down.htm>

Alaska Dispatch, November 28, 2013,

"Are hunting and trapping to blame for a drop in wolf sightings in Alaska's Denali National Park?"

By Alex DeMarban

<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20131128/wolf-views-plummet-denali-national-park-state-decision-trapping-hunting-blamed>

Anchorage Daily News, December 2, 2013

"Compass: Denali wolves need a buffer of state land"

By Marybeth Holleman

<http://www.adn.com/2013/12/02/3207873/compass-denali-wolves-need-a-buffer.html#storylink=cpy>

Alaska Dispatch, December 3, 2013

"Alaska, federal officials spar over decline in Denali wolf sightings"

By Alex DeMarban

<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20131203/alaska-federal-officials-spar-over-decline-denali-wolf-sightings>

Among Wolves: Gordon Haber's Insights into Alaska's Most Misunderstood Animal

By Gordon Haber and Marybeth Holleman

University of Alaska Press

Alaska Dispatch website, <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/sites/default/files/Parnell%20wolf%20letter%206-6.pdf>

Fairbanks Daily Newsminer, http://www.newsminer.com/denali-wolf-buffer-zone-letter/pdf_3efbd5e6-57d1-11e3-b091-0019bb30f31a.html

Editor's note: DCC will publish a complete analysis of the proposal and our own take on it in the January/February DCC News. We welcome initiatives like this that could begin a broad conversation about the value of Denali's wolves and the best way to protect them.

THE SILENCING ALASKANS ACT, DENALI COUNTRY AND WHAT YOU CAN DO

by Brian Napier

House Bill 77 (HB 77), also known as the Silencing Alaskans Act, is a legislative bill designed by Gov. Sean Parnell and proposed during last year's legislative session. The Silencing Alaskans Act gives more power to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in the making of land management decisions by eliminating various safeguards for the public interest. There are four disconcerting ways DNR's authority would be expanded at the expense of Alaskans' participation in land management decisions, as described by the Alaska Center for the Environment (ACE):

- HB 77 changes the law to authorize DNR to grant "general" permits for essentially any activity on state land.
- It limits public participation in many DNR decisions. Multiple sections of the bill limit who can appeal DNR decisions to the agency or even to a court.
- It authorizes DNR to permanently give away state land to private developers, in the hopes that the development would somehow benefit the state.
- Under HB 77, only federal, state, or local government entities could apply to DNR to reserve water. This would extinguish existing rights and investments held by non-profits and tribal entities on several streams in Alaska where fisheries are in conflict with mineral development and prohibit any similar reservations in the future.

The implications to the greater Denali area, its residents and champions, include:

- The inability to comment on many DNR permit applications, such as the permit application for the NEON Ecological Site in the Stampede Corridor. If HB 77 were to pass, a permit could allow for blanket approval of an activity or development, without considering site specifics.
- Reductions in public notification on Best Interest Findings, such as the Best Interest Finding for the Healy Basin Gas Exploration License.
- Limiting the definition of who can appeal agency decisions, such as DCC and its members, regarding any decision involving lands that we do not own or have a financial stake in.
- Extending temporary water use permits indefinitely - there are many steps in the process of natural gas development, including permittees' acquiring temporary water use permits. By indefinitely extending such permits, HB 77 foregoes additional public scrutiny and thus limits DCC from commenting on water use in the greater Denali area.
- Limits water reservations for habitat, wildlife and recreation to agencies only. DCC or its members could no longer apply for water reservations for the water bodies we value, utilize and enjoy.

Last year, the Silencing Alaskans Act passed the Alaska State House and came very close to reaching the Senate floor for final passage. By the efforts of a coalition of 18 state-wide conservation groups and the assistance of the legislative clock running out, HB 77 was put on hold until the 2014 Legislative session. Some fear an almost certain passage this coming January. However, recent hearings, sponsored by Senator Micciche in Soldotna, Homer and Anchorage, garnered widespread public opposition to the bill. The 2014 Legislative Session is set to begin January 21st.

What can we do?

- Call or write our Representative/Senator and tell them you oppose the Silencing Alaskans Act (HB77):

Senator Lyman Hoffman (District S) State Capitol Room 11 Juneau AK, 99801 Phone: 907-465-4453 Senator.Lyman.Hoffman@akleg.gov	Representative David Guttenberg (District 38) 1292 Sadler Way Suite 304 Fairbanks AK, 99701 Phone: 907-456-8172 Juneau phone: 907-465-4457 Representative.David.Guttenberg@akleg.gov
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- Tell a friend, neighbor or loved one by email, phone, Facebook or in person. Additionally, urge them to call or write our legislators.
- If you have a Facebook account, follow Alaska Center for the Environment (ACE) as they lead the charge in opposition; share their HB77 posts with friends. <https://www.facebook.com/AlaskaCenterfortheEnvironment>
- Sign ACE's petition to oppose HB 77 at <http://akcenter.org/>.
- Stay tuned for more calls-to-action in opposition to the Silencing Alaskans Act.

SOUTH DENALI VISITOR CENTER COMPLEX: CONSTRUCTION BUT NOT PROTECTION

by Brian Okonek

After 40 years of proposals to develop a visitor center somewhere within Denali State Park, work began in 2013 on the South Denali Visitor Center Complex (SDVCC). A ground-breaking ceremony this past fall included the major agency partners in the project, which are the State of Alaska's Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the National Park Service (Denali National Park and Preserve). Initial work on Phase 1 included construction of a road approximately one-and-a-half miles in length that leaves the George Parks Highway at Milepost 135.4 and the extension of electrical power up the Parks Highway to the site. The road will lead to other Phase 1 facilities to be completed in 2014, including a 35-site RV campground, 22-site day-use parking lot, maintenance/ranger office, and interpretive trail.

When additional funding is secured, Phase 2 will extend the road another three miles to a tree-line site where a proposed destination-oriented visitor center and trails will be constructed. This 17,000 square foot visitor center is planned for the south end of Curry Ridge near lake 1787' at an elevation of 1,840'. This is in the southeastern section of Denali State Park east of the George Parks Highway. Additional facilities including a 30-bus parking lot, 100 additional car parking sites, a 15-site walk-in campground and a visitor contact area will also be added in this phase.

The State of Alaska legislature provided funds for Phase 1, but the original funding plan included a federal appropriation for some of the Phase 2 components, particularly the destination visitor center. The National Park Service originally got involved in part because agency staff hoped such a development would reduce the growth in demand for trips along the Denali park road, though it is possible that a south side visitor center will not draw people away from the north side, but rather just add another venue for people to partake in while in the Denali region. At present, neither Congress nor the Alaska legislature has appropriated funds for Phase 2.

Completion of the entire SDVCC is estimated to cost \$40 million. SDVCC is intended to be a major attraction for tourism, attracting 2,000 visitors per day and with proponents typically describing it as a "world class" experience. Unfortunately, the responsible agencies have not yet taken the necessary steps to maintain the region as a "world class" experience. During the scoping and planning process there was public support for the SDVCC only if other critical measures to assure quality development and resource protection for Denali State park were completed. The measures included:

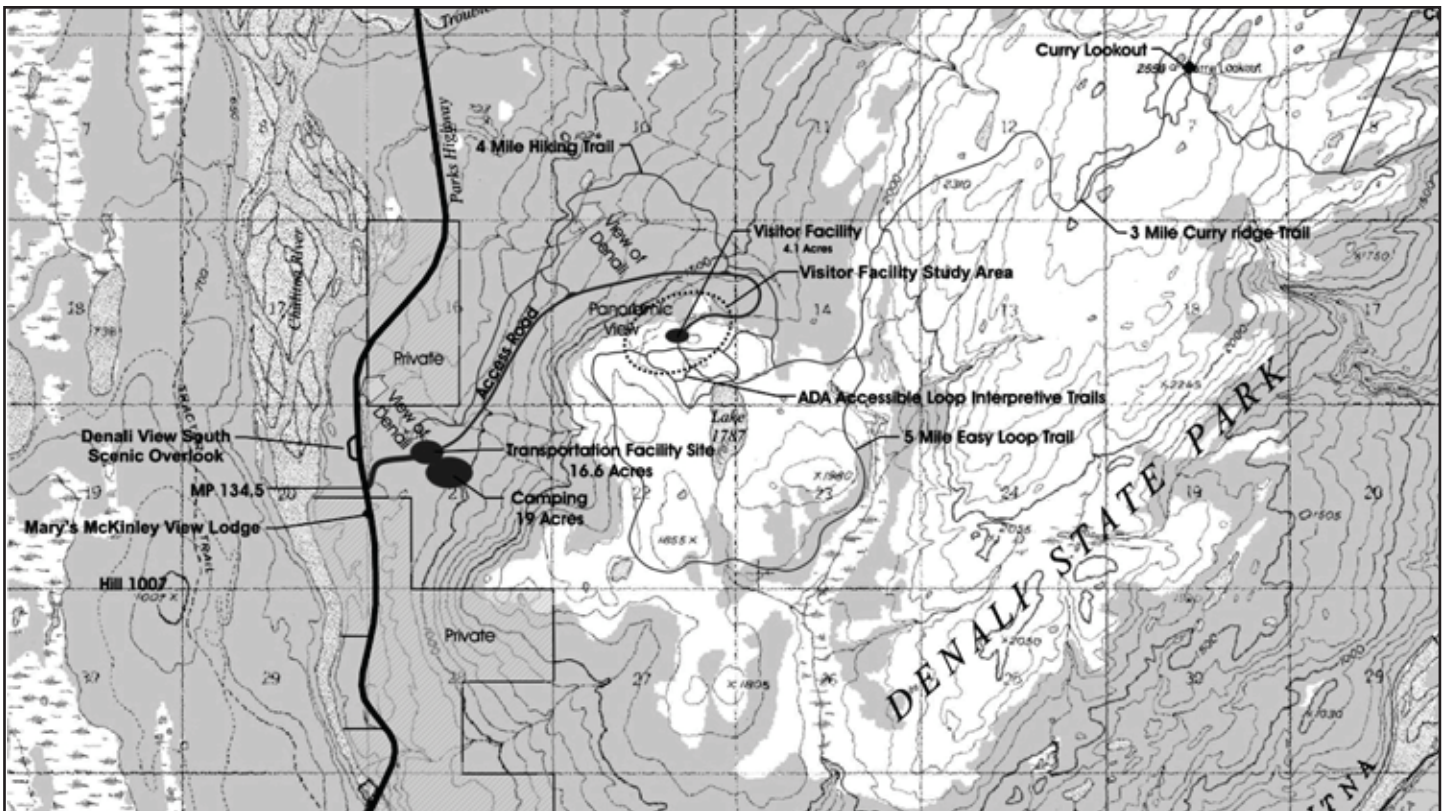
- completion of comprehensive biological surveys so that planners would know what wildlife habitat should be protected and how to mitigate for loss of habitat due to construction of facilities in the park
- the buyout of several private inholdings in the park to protect the scenic vistas along the George Parks Highway and from the visitor center, and to prevent strip development within the park
- update of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) Denali State Park Special Land Use District (SPUD) regulations to shape development on private inholdings within the park and prevent chaotic and unsightly development
- the closure of areas within Denali State Park to snowmachine use to allow for a fair balance of recreation and to protect wintering wildlife.

continued on next page



Looking toward the Alaska Range and the Chulitna River from Curry Ridge, near the site of the South Denali Visitor Center complex.
photo by Bill Kiger


SOUTH DENALI VISITOR CENTER - IMPLEMENTATION IS INCOMPLETE *continued from previous page*



Map of road, campground and transportation facilities, and location of South Denali Visitor Facility. The road takes off east from the George Parks Highway not far from Mary's McKinley View Lodge. Cars will park and visitor center guests will take a shuttle to the actual site. Extensive trails are planned, including an ADA-accessible trail around a lake near the site. Planning to avoid conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users, especially in the vicinity of Curry Ridge, is not yet complete. *Map by DNR*

To date, only part of one of these measures has been implemented. The Hooper Bay Native Corporation and the State of Alaska negotiated a deal where the state received a portion of the corporation's land to construct the first three-quarters of a mile of the access road.

The local, state, and federal agencies involved are very excited about completing the construction project, but have shown considerably less interest in implementing the measures that everyone agreed were necessary to address the consequences of construction. It is troubling that despite years of planning the necessary guidelines are still not in place to control development, protect park resources and assure an aesthetically pleasing visitor experience in Denali State Park. Adequate steps have not been taken to protect the park itself, nor the region, from the impacts of hundreds of thousands of projected visitors and the new commercial enterprises that will set up shop to serve them. Visitors, businesses, and the park will all benefit if the agreed-upon measures are completed first, before Phase 2 begins.

Throughout the country and even at the existing entrance to Denali, poorly planned and managed gateway community development mars the landscape that visitors come to enjoy, and local communities spend vast amounts of money and time to repair the damage. We have a chance to do it right the first time for South Denali. We even have a plan that describes exactly what needs to be done. The partner agencies should keep their commitments and coordinate their efforts and resources to insure protection – rather than construction – comes first as they look ahead to Phase 2. 

Brian Okonek lives in Talkeetna with his wife Diane. For many years, they worked as backcountry and mountaineering guides and have extensive biking experience in the lands to be affected by the South Denali Visitor Center. Brian is currently the president of the Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition.

BRIEF NEWS AND VIEWS

PARKS HIGHWAY WORK PLANNED THROUGHOUT DENALI BOROUGH FOR 2014

Two overlapping Department of Transportation (DOT) projects will bring loads of construction activity to the Parks Highway in the summer of 2014, including work stretching between the southern and northern boundaries of the Denali Borough. The Parks Highway Milepost (MP) 163-305 Passing Lanes project will continue, with passing lane construction starting this summer at several locations (MP 197.7 to 200.1, MP 213.1 to 215.1, MP 232.6 to 234.5, MP 265.2 to 267.5, MP 272.6 to 274.7, MP 289.5 to 291.6, and MP 294.1 to 296.2). DCC members may recall the efforts of local residents to limit passing lanes through the McKinley Village area to promote safety in turning on and off the highway from residential areas. During the planning process for this project, DOT visited the Denali Borough a number of times to bring updates on the project and solicit feedback from residents. Local comments led DOT to scrap several passing lanes proposed for the McKinley Village area, and revise other problematic proposals.

A second project, the Parks Highway MP 239-263 Rehabilitation project, involves resurfacing throughout the project area, construction of nine passing lanes at five different locations (starting with MP 245.3 to 246.8 and MP 250-251), repairing culverts (including two stream crossing culverts at Rock Creek and Little Panguingue Creek), and performing maintenance on ten bridges. Passing lanes in both the north and southbound lanes immediately north of Healy may pose increased risk to drivers turning onto Stampede and Lignite Roads from accelerated speeds in the passing zones. Hannah Blankenship, with the Department of Transportation, encourages local residents to keep up to date on construction information through DOT's Alaska Navigator website (<http://www.alaskanavigator.org/>). DOT's Northern and Central Region staff will be working jointly to ensure that project information gets to the public via the website, although information is not posted online until the work is set to begin. If you have questions or concerns about these projects please contact Hannah Blankenship at (Hannah.Blankenship@alaska.gov, (907) 451-5307). ☞

WINTER ROUTE TO THE SUSITNA-WATANA DAM SITE TO START ON DENALI HIGHWAY

Cruz Construction applied for a state land use permit to put in a winter trail from the Denali Highway to a private parcel near the proposed Susitna-Watana dam site this winter, including brushing a 20' wide path as needed. The company intends to use the route to move several pieces of heavy equipment to the private parcel for use in work related to the dam project. The take-off from the Denali Highway will be 37 miles east of Cantwell, well past the end of winter maintenance, so the company intends to groom a trail along the highway with snowcats. According to a report on KTNA Talkeetna, the company presently has no plans to plow the highway itself.

The dam project itself is still under study and requires environmental review and permitting by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Governor Sean Parnell's recently-released capital budget proposal includes only \$10 million for the dam, while over \$100 million is needed to complete the work necessary for licensing. While the legislature may make amendments and increase funding, this budget proposal represents a substantial de-prioritizing of the Susitna-Watana dam. ☞

GVEA ACQUIRES HEALY 2

On December 4, 2013, Golden Valley Electric Association (GVEA) completed the purchase of the 50-megawatt Healy 2 power plant from the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority. The GVEA acquisition of Healy 2 (formerly known as the Healy Clean Coal Project) was part of the original plan for the heavily-subsidized project from the beginning, but GVEA's refusal to take the plant after testing in 1999 left it dormant until now. GVEA is paying AIDEA \$44 million for the plant, but is expecting to spend over \$100 million in retrofits before Healy 2 begins producing electricity. Approximately \$88 million of that sum is for installation of pollution controls required by GVEA's consent decree with EPA, an estimated price tag which has doubled in the past year. ☞

BRIEF NEWS AND VIEWS

LOCALS EXPRESS CONCERN OVER PRINCESS' EXPANSION OF FORMER HEALY HOTEL

News gradually seeped out into the Healy community this fall that many more employees from the Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge (DPWL) would be moving into Healy next summer. Some DPWL employees have been housed in Healy for a number of years in what was previously the North Star Inn and historic Healy Hotel (now referred to as the "Princess Homestead" and "Stampede Inn"). Many employees had previously been housed near the Lodge itself in the Nenana Canyon, near the entrance to Denali National Park. Employee housing units were moved this fall from the Canyon to Healy, sprawling around the existing Princess housing compound in central Healy.

Resident numbers forecasted for summer 2014 include upwards of 700 additional people in Healy, a community that boasts a population of just over 1,000 year-round residents. Concerns were voiced at the October Denali Borough Assembly meeting regarding issues from previous summer seasons (garbage, trespass, fires on private property, and more), and the potential for increased impacts with substantially more seasonal employees residing in town. There is little land use planning in the Denali Borough involving legal restrictions or requirements, except for the land-fill, which is the only zoned property in the Borough. At the October meeting, one Assembly member speculated that, as an organized borough, the Denali Borough Assembly is choosing not to accept the responsibilities of a government. DCC is open to feedback from members about what needs to be done to maintain order and protect the safety of both Princess employees and Healy residents. ☞

HARD ROCKS ON PANORAMA GO TO ANCHORAGE STREETS

In late October Alaska's Division of Mining, Land and Water announced a permit application to purchase 20,000 cubic yards of material at an existing material site near Milepost 217 on the Parks Highway on Panorama Mountain outside of Cantwell. James Caswell, of the Alaska Lime Company, had originally applied to establish the material site in 2005. Ahtna, Inc. appealed the state's decision to authorize the mine, but the appeal was denied by the state and the material site was approved in September 2008 for a period of five years. This permit would extend the material site's use by the Alaska Lime Company for another five years. Access to the site is being negotiated separately with Ahtna, Inc. and also includes a 1,000 foot road across state land. All surface materials are included with this permit, although the Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) announced in an *Alaska Dispatch* article ("Hard rock from near Denali won't wither under Alaskans' studded tires," 10/28/13) that they've got their eyes on the basalt rocks found there. DOT engineers touted the benefits of Panorama Mountain's basalt, suggesting that the rock's remarkable hardness was the solution to Anchorage's rutted roads. A new Alaska DOT policy requires that harder rock be used in asphalt mixes for any road that sees an average of 5,000 or more vehicles per day. The policy sent DOT employees on a hunt for locally-sourced hard rock, rather than barging in rock from Washington or elsewhere. The hardness of rock depends on the mineral composition, and can also vary slightly depending on the geologic conditions a rock was formed under. The Panorama basalts are apparently harder than rocks DOT can find in sites closer to Anchorage. To be clear, the proposed use of Panorama basalts is not because it is a miraculously hard stone, but because it is a relatively accessible rock that meets DOT standards for hardness to use on busy Alaskan city roads. DCC will continue to monitor this and future material site developments. ☞

DCC NEWS

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