



Denali Wilderness and Backcountry

"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." The Wilderness Act, 1964

I wish to point out that the wilderness standards in McKinley must be maintained on a higher level than anything we have attempted in the States. Because McKinley is a wilderness within a vast northern wilderness, the ill effect of any intrusion will here be proportionately greater; and any "dressing up" will be more incongruous, will clash more with the wilderness spirit, than would be true in any of our areas in the States. And since wilderness is recognized as one of the foremost values in the Park, it must be given special consideration in order to maintain its purity." Adolph Murie, 1956

"Denali will retain its unique status as a park that offers an undeveloped Alaskan wilderness park experience distinct from the wilderness and park experience in other states, while being more accessible than most national parks in Alaska...." Denali Backcountry Management Plan, 2006

Since Charles Sheldon, the founder of Mount McKinley National Park, entitled his Alaska memoir *The Wilderness of Denali*, the area now enclosed within Denali National Park and Preserve has been tightly associated with the idea of wilderness. That association was reinforced by the close relationship between the park and members of the Murie family, who were instrumental in the creation of the Wilderness Society, and by Denali's status as the best known national park in Alaska, the entire state being an emblem of untracked wilderness to the rest of the nation. When the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) passed into law in 1980, it designated almost the entire area of the former Mount McKinley National Park as Wilderness under the *Wilderness Act*, and stated that an important purpose of the 4 million acres added to the original park is *"to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities."*

The National Park Service has done an admirable job of planning for the protection of wilderness at Denali, often against some daunting constraints. The Denali Citizens Council supports the vision for the future of the park described in the 2006 *Denali Backcountry Management Plan*, but believes more action is needed to achieve the ideals expressed in that plan. Here are some of our concerns.



Establish Clear Limits on Backcountry Use

Adaptive management has failed. The 2006 *Backcountry Management Plan* (BCMP) established a set of indicators with standards for how much noise should be heard in the park, how many people and signs of people a hiker should encounter, and others. However, NPS's implementation of the basic requirement – monitoring indicators – has been very inconsistent, and the agency has yet to take a single meaningful action to address the violation of standards. NPS should recognize this system for managing visitor impacts is not working, and instead define clear numerical limits on use throughout the backcountry to protect wilderness character.

Fully Implement Comprehensive Wilderness Monitoring Plan

Although adaptive management has been unsuccessful, the identification and monitoring of indicators of wilderness quality is still important, and the BCMP indicators are a useful start. NPS should fully fund and implement a comprehensive wilderness monitoring plan to detect changes in wilderness quality, and make changes in backcountry regulation if deterioration in quality is detected or anticipated.

Protect Natural Sound from Aircraft Overflights

The opportunities for solitude and silence are among the most important of wilderness values. At Denali, the noise generated by aircraft is undoubtedly the most immediate threat to those values. Much of the aircraft traffic is scenic flight tours, although there is plenty of noise added by NPS administrative use, military jets and helicopters, private planes, and commercial jets. The *Backcountry Management Plan* set limits for the amount of motorized noise that should be heard throughout the park, and established an Aircraft Overflights Advisory Council (AOAC) to develop voluntary strategies for reducing aircraft noise in the backcountry, although the Council has since disbanded. We recognize that aircraft are important for backcountry access and for scenic appreciation of the park, but ultimately aircraft traffic needs to be managed by the NPS, partner agencies, and the aircraft community to preserve the natural soundscape of the park backcountry. DCC encourages resumption of the AOAC as an important ongoing mechanism for minimizing aircraft noise in the backcountry. NPS should limit its administrative use of aircraft to the minimum required, as the Wilderness Act specifies.

Regulate Snowmachine Use, Define Traditional Activities

Since the passage of ANILCA, there has been confusion over the ability of NPS to regulate the use of snowmachines in the Alaskan national parks because of language in the law that allows snowmachine access “for traditional activities.” The Denali Citizens Council believes that regulation should clarify that “traditional activities” are activities that are part of a traditional Alaskan lifestyle, but do not include purely recreational or sightseeing activities. Because of the associated noise, trails, and landscape damage, recreational snowmachines do not have a place in most parts of Denali. NPS has been negligent in failing to monitor the impacts of existing snowmachine access in the park additions since the completion of the BCMP – or to even account for the scale and type of use – and in its failure to take any actions to manage that access.

Support Dispersed Use in the Backcountry

In the 1970s, park managers stated plainly what many backcountry users in Mount McKinley National Park already knew: because of the park's largely open terrain, there was no need for constructed trails. Going a step further, managers also concluded that trails would actually be detrimental to the sense of wilderness in the backcountry. In Denali, backcountry travelers could have the experience of discovering their own route in an untracked wilderness, a distinctive experience in the spectrum of possible national park backcountry

experiences. The 2006 *Backcountry Management Plan* reaffirmed a “dispersed use” philosophy for the Denali backcountry including a landscape free of constructed trails except for a handful specified in the entrance area and around development nodes along the road corridor. DCC supports this unique vision for Denali and believes NPS should utilize the “toolkit” in the BCMP to emphasize mitigations to protect resources other than trail construction.

Commercial Use Authorizations

The NPS commercial services law is clear that commercial use authorizations (CUAs) should be awarded only to very small-scale endeavors (\$25,000 or less annual revenue) or to businesses whose use of the park is incidental, for example an air taxi service that drops off users in the backcountry. However, NPS has been proposing and awarding CUAs to businesses whose main purpose is guiding in the park, and at least one at Backside Lake near the Ruth Glacier which has a full-time occupied seasonal camp on park land. Simultaneously, NPS has decreased Discovery Hikes, forcing visitors who wish to have some guidance in Denali’s backcountry to pay for the experience. DCC believes NPS should only issue CUAs for those purposes specified in law, and that NPS should increase the Discovery Hike program to provide equitable, affordable access to the backcountry for those uncomfortable in traveling the “trail-less” wilderness on their own.

Winter Road Maintenance Should Favor Wilderness Recreation

In winter, DCC believes the park road past Headquarters should be managed to support outdoor recreation activities. The snow-covered road surface is particularly important early in winter when the park road is often the only place suitable for mushing or skiing. DCC supports the current practice of plowing the road to Mountain Vista beginning in February if the primary purpose is to provide access to skiers, snowshoers, mushers, and others seeking to enjoy the outdoor recreational experience (as opposed to providing for tour buses).

Complete Wilderness Designations in the Park Additions

In the late 1980s, the National Park Service proposed that much of the Denali additions be designated as Wilderness under the *Wilderness Act*. These proposals were never acted upon, although they were consistent with the purpose of the park and the character of the land. Such a designation would ensure that most of the park would never be subject to new development. DCC supports managing the lands determined eligible for Wilderness designation as if they are so designated until Congress considers the proposal. DCC supports Congressional action to make such designations.

Park Engagement with Community

Over the past 30 years, many factors have conspired to discourage local residents and seasonal employees from visiting the park backcountry. Entrance fees and the logistics and expense of using the park bus system have pushed these former categories of visitors onto adjacent public lands. Some locals never visited the park’s backcountry because of the higher level of regulation compared to neighboring areas. However, NPS needs devoted, frequent, engaged visitors to understand the unique wilderness experience available in the Denali backcountry so that there is a reservoir of public support for preserving this incredible park resource and experience. NPS should actively engage and encourage local and seasonal residents to visit the backcountry, particularly to those many areas that are not heavily used by the national and international tourist population.