



## The Denali Park Road

*“This drastic rebuilding of the old road shows an obsessive regard for superhighway standards and a lack of appreciation for the spirit of this northern wilderness “ Adolph Murie, 1965*

*“The character of the park road and its relationship with the landscape through which it passes are an integral part of the visitor experience at Denali...The character of the road is in keeping with the character of the land: a primitive, low-speed road located in a wild and pristine land.” NPS, 1997 Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP (Frontcountry Plan)*



Traveling the park road is presently the primary experience for most visitors coming to Denali. For that reason, the park road trip needs to provide visitors the opportunity to appreciate all of the values of the park, particularly the wildlife and wilderness for which the original park was founded. Major park policies including the restriction of most access to park-authorized buses, vehicle capacity limits, and road character design guidelines have been important in protecting the road experience for visitors. However, they have not been sufficient, and the quality of the experience has eroded over time.

### Protect Park Road Character

DCC supports the vision of Adolph and Olaus Murie for the character of the Denali park road, that it should be a primitive, low-speed road with a rustic character that matches the surrounding wild and pristine landscape. NPS planning documents, including the 2007 *Road Design Standards* and 2005 *Maintenance Standards*, support this goal. However, NPS actions do not always follow. Road construction activities have become so constant that it is impossible for visitors in any year to have an experience that feels wild and remote. “Temporary” structures such as the Weatherport bookstore at Toklat River remain in place indefinitely, contrary to the expressed vision for the park road. DCC believes that facilities along the park road, such as administrative sites, bridges, large culverts and their associated structures, should be as minimal as possible, and those that are necessary should be sited and designed so as to minimize their impacts.

### Keep the Lid on Park Road Capacity

DCC strongly supports limits for vehicle traffic on the Denali park road to protect park resources and visitor experiences, including wildlife viewing opportunities, while providing travelers the opportunity to be immersed in the surrounding wilderness landscape. DCC supports the philosophy of the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP* that concluded visitation growth should be addressed by providing additional opportunities in the park entrance area for visitors who are not necessarily interested in the park road experience.

DCC believes that the adaptive management framework implemented in accordance with the 2012 *Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan (VMP)* is not sufficiently cautious in its protection of the visitor experience and wildlife along the park road compared with the firm limits on vehicle traffic that existed previously. In particular, the *VMP* lacks good metrics for tracking the impact of increased vehicle traffic on wildlife along the park road. Additionally, DCC is concerned that the indicators determined through social science defer capacity determinations to a shifting baseline of contemporary visitor expectations which cannot provide a true limit that will protect the historic, rustic, and wilderness character of the park road. At the very least, NPS should act proactively in managing traffic to prevent violation of the *VMP* standards, rather than waiting for exceedances before implementing new restrictions.

### **Restore a True Public Transit System**

While concession bus tours have existed since there was a road to drive on and merit continuation, it is the transit bus system which is fundamental to modern management of the park road. When the National Park Service started limiting private vehicle traffic on the road in 1972, it took on responsibility for providing basic transportation. The transit buses – provided free of charge for the first 23 years of operation – are necessary for visitor access to the park as well as for achieving the ANILCA-mandated goal of providing “reasonable access” for “wilderness recreational activities.” As such, these buses should be provided at the lowest possible cost and these buses should have the highest priority among passenger vehicles competing for space on the park road. Unfortunately, since NPS turned the buses over to the park concessioner in 1995 the cost of bus tickets has risen to a level determined by commercial criteria. DCC believes NPS should manage these buses as a true public transit system, rather than as a commercial transportation service or a budget tour.

Despite NPS insistence that the transit buses would have priority among vehicles on the park road, the 2012 *VMP* contains no effective mechanism for ensuring that this will occur in the face of strong commercial pressures to sell pricey tours. We are concerned that commercial pressure to access the park will encroach on the transit system. Additionally, any proposals to expand tour bus traffic in the winter and shoulder seasons should be accompanied by affordable transit options and monitoring and enforcement of traffic standards to limit impacts to wildlife and other park resources.

### **Purchase Inholdings, Limit Commercial Development in Kantishna**

The growth of tourism-related enterprises on private inholdings in the Kantishna area poses one of the greatest long-term threats to the management of the Denali park road. Some inholders are challenging the National Park Service’s ability to regulate their vehicle use under the special access provisions of ANILCA. The NPS decision that Kantishna lodge day tours should be treated as concessions rather than inholder access was a logical and legal step, but the absence of a firm limit on the number of day tours means the new solution may be worse than the original problem. Undeveloped inholdings in Kantishna are a latent threat that could destabilize the road management system, as well as further harm the remote, small-scale, nature-centric character of Kantishna tourism enterprises. DCC believes the acquisition of these undeveloped inholdings should be a high priority for the National Park Service. DCC is concerned that a proliferation of commercial use authorizations will impact the character of Kantishna and adjacent Wonder Lake area, and increase the demand for additional vehicle use on the Denali park road.

### **Choose the Minimum Intervention for Park Road Maintenance**

Thanks to a previously unidentified rock glacier and a warming climate, a known slump at “Pretty Rocks” (mile 45 of the park road) in 2021 turned into a steadily moving landslide that removed a portion of the park road. In August of 2021 NPS found that they could no longer safely maintain the road, and closed it to traffic at the East Fork bridge. NPS has since proposed and begun construction of a bridge over the slide area with a timeline for completion now at July, 2026.

Pretty Rocks is unlikely to be the last park road failure in an era of climate warming, and additional work is already slated for the section of road between East Fork bridge and Pretty Rocks. DCC intends to scrutinize proposed projects carefully to make sure the minimum needed intervention is chosen to avoid disruption to the park road’s historic character and to the wildlife that lives nearby. The rock scaling at Toklat Bluffs in the summer of 2021 was an example of engineering overreach that we hope to avoid in the future.