

A black and white photograph of a rugged mountain landscape. In the foreground, a steep, rocky slope descends from the left, partially covered in snow. In the background, several jagged mountain peaks rise, their upper sections and crevices filled with snow. The sky is dark and cloudy. A small figure of a person is visible in the lower right foreground, providing a sense of scale to the massive mountain range.

Denali National Park and Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan General Management Plan Amendment Environmental Impact Statement April 2005

Denali National Park and Preserve

Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan,

General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement

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Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan
General Management Plan Amendment
Environmental Impact Statement

Lead Agency: **National Park Service**

Abstract: This *Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan, General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement* provides specific direction for backcountry management and guides backcountry management decisions for Denali National Park and Preserve for the next 20 years. This plan will update and expand the 1976 *Backcountry Management Plan* and will amend the 1986 *General Management Plan* for Denali National Park and Preserve. The plan addresses management of all park and preserve areas not included in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor* and the 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plans*, including the designated wilderness in the former Mount McKinley National Park, the national park additions, the northwest and southwest national preserve areas, and the park road corridor west of park headquarters during the winter season. Four action alternatives are presented, each of which provides for growth in the level of backcountry use, with additional facilities and services proposed in three of the alternatives. The intent is to manage growth so that in the long term a greater number of users can experience the park with reduced resource impacts.

This document is a Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement, which replaces the *Draft Backcountry Management Plan, General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement* (DEIS) released in February 2003. The comment period on the revised draft plan and environmental impact statement will extend through **June 30, 2005**. Additional information can be obtained and comments submitted through the National Park Service's *Planning, Environment and Public Comment* web site at:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/>

Information may also be obtained and written comments submitted at the following address:

Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755
DENA_BC_Plan_Comment@nps.gov

Executive Summary

This document is a *Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan, General Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement*, which replaces the *Draft Backcountry Management Plan, General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement* (DEIS) for Denali National Park and Preserve released in February 2003. This RDEIS substantially changed the actions in the plan alternatives in response to public comment on the original draft. This revised draft broadens the range of actions considered, provides quantitative descriptions of management areas, reallocates management areas, defines access management strategies, distinguishes between commercial guided and educational activities, and clarifies the appropriate locations, types, and scale of commercial services in the backcountry.

Purpose and Need

The goal of the backcountry management plan is to describe how the National Park Service will act to provide future generations with a variety of opportunities to experience the Denali backcountry while protecting park wildlife and other natural resources, wilderness resource values, and subsistence resources. This plan will update and expand the 1976 *Backcountry Management Plan* and, once approved by a Record of Decision, will amend the 1986 *General Management Plan* for Denali National Park and Preserve. This plan will also serve as a *Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management Plan* as required by NPS Director's Order 47, as a *Wilderness Management Plan* as required by NPS Director's Order 41, and as a *Commercial Services Plan* for the backcountry.

This new plan addresses management of all park and preserve lands, except the park road corridor and adjacent development zones and backcountry day use areas, which were addressed in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP*. The study area also includes the park road corridor west of park headquarters during the winter season. Some actions do affect the development and backcountry day use areas delineated in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP*; the new actions proposed in this plan, however, are consistent with the *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP* and the 1997 *South Side Denali DCP*. The plan is intended to guide decision-making for the backcountry areas of Denali for 20 years.

There are four reasons why a new backcountry management plan is needed at this time, identified as planning issues during project scoping.

- The 1976 backcountry planning document predated ANILCA, and the 1986 GMP did not provide detailed guidance about managing backcountry uses in the park additions.
- Visitation has grown dramatically for some backcountry activities, requiring new methods of management.

- Anticipated increases in additional activities are expected in the next 20 years.
- Changes in backcountry use require National Park Service action to protect park resources and wilderness character.

Specifically, actions described by this plan should

- protect and preserve the park’s natural and cultural resources, including natural soundscapes and subsistence opportunities;
- protect and preserve the park’s wilderness resource values, including its wilderness character and outstanding opportunities for solitude;
- provide for the public’s maximum freedom of use and enjoyment of the park’s backcountry and wilderness in a manner that is consistent with park purposes and the protection of park resources and values;
- define the recreational opportunities provided in Denali’s backcountry within the context of a spectrum of recreational opportunities available on public lands in the Denali region (primarily state parks, other state lands, and federal Bureau of Land Management lands);
- ensure all National Park Service management practices and research activities in the backcountry are consistent with park purposes; and
- provide for the means to achieve public understanding and support of backcountry and wilderness values.

The purpose and need for the plan are explained fully in Chapter 1.

Alternatives

The RDEIS includes a no-action alternative and four action alternatives. The action alternatives address seven essential components of backcountry management.

- 1) Management Areas: This topic includes descriptions of visitor experience and resource protection goals for various parts of the backcountry. These goals are presented through the articulation and allocation of “management areas” that are defined by indicators and quantitative standards. The management areas are defined in tables 2-1 through 2-9 and applied in maps 2-1 through 2-5.
- 2) Access Management: Each alternative has a distinct strategy for managing motorized and non-motorized access to the park and preserve, including general tools that would be applied under any alternative.
- 3) Wilderness Management: This topic addresses a guiding philosophy for wilderness management at Denali consistent with law, policy, and the park’s specific history. It includes several specific measures to protect wilderness resources and wilderness recreational opportunities, including policies on group size, human waste disposal, and climbing tools.
- 4) Commercial Services Planning: This topic includes descriptions of the appropriate type, locations, and scale of commercial services in the backcountry including both transportation and guide services. Guided hiking, air taxi, scenic

- air tour, and guided sport hunting services are specifically addressed.
- 5) Backcountry Facilities: This topic identifies appropriate types of and locations for backcountry facilities – including trails, designated campsites, sanitation facilities, cabins and shelters, and information facilities – as well as proposing specific new facilities. This topic also includes winter management of the park road corridor west of Park Headquarters.
 - 6) Administrative and Scientific Activities: This topic addresses the management of administrative and scientific activities to protect resource values of the backcountry. It covers administrative camps, information and education, aviation, research, and resource management.
 - 7) Easements and Boundary Changes: This topic includes proposed land exchanges and a strategy for addressing a stranded public access easement in the Cantwell/Windy Creek area that is intended to provide access to the park boundary.

Each alternative represents a distinct vision for the Denali backcountry and proposes a set of actions under the seven topic categories which would result in achievement of the vision. The action alternatives fall roughly along a spectrum. Experiential values related to wilderness character – typically defined by opportunities for solitude, to hear natural sounds, to explore with minimal guidance, and to encounter wildlife undisturbed in its native habitat – are at one end of the spectrum. Values related to recreational opportunity in a wilderness context including diversity of opportunities, more options for access, and more supportive services and infrastructure are at the other end. All alternatives propose measures to protect wilderness resource values and provide opportunities for wilderness recreational activities. The alternatives are fully developed in chapter 2 and summarized in Table 2-10, which appears at the end of the chapter. The general vision for each alternative is as follows.

Alternative 1 (No Action)

The National Park Service would continue the present management direction, guided by the 1986 *General Management Plan*, the 1997 *Entrance Area Road Corridor Development Concept Plan*, the 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan*, and the 1976 backcountry management plans with amendments. Recreational use and access patterns would continue to develop and the agency would respond as necessary on a case-by-case basis. No new services or facilities would be developed to meet increased levels of use in the backcountry, except for those identified in previous plans.

Alternative 2

This alternative would distinguish a unique Denali experience based on dispersed use in a wilderness landscape with few sights or sounds of people or mechanized civilization. There would be few services, facilities, or signs of management presence. This alternative would most clearly distinguish the backcountry experience in Denali from the surrounding public lands, providing a place primarily for visitors who are very self-reliant, and would include many opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations. Backcountry users seeking other experiences would find those opportunities on neighboring lands.

Alternative 3

This alternative would provide opportunities for a variety of wilderness recreational activities by establishing areas to serve those visitors who want to experience the wilderness resource values of the Denali backcountry but require services, assistance, or short time-commitments. The areas would be the minimum necessary to provide these experiences based on present demand and would be focused along the park road in the Old Park and Kantishna and at the existing high activity areas at the Ruth Glacier and the Kahiltna Base Camp. The majority of the backcountry would be managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel, and would include opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations.

Alternative 4 (Preferred Alternative)

This alternative would also provide opportunities for a variety of wilderness recreational activities and experiences by establishing areas to serve those visitors who want to experience the wilderness resource values of the Denali backcountry but require services, assistance, or short time-commitments. However, the areas would be of sufficient size to accommodate anticipated growth in the next 20 years and would be focused along the park road in the Old Park and Kantishna; at the Ruth, Tokositna, and Kahiltna Glaciers; and in the Dunkle Hills/Broad Pass area. The remainder of the backcountry would be managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel, and would include opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations.

Alternative 5

This alternative would create two distinct geographic areas that provide different kinds of visitor experiences in the Denali backcountry. The Old Park and the Denali additions north of the Alaska Range would be managed primarily for dispersed, self-reliant travel, although no areas would be managed specifically to preserve opportunities for extended expeditions in remote locations. Areas along the park road and in Kantishna that presently receive a relatively high volume of use and large parts of the additions south of the Alaska Range would be managed for a greater intensity and variety of appropriate recreational activities and would have more visible management presence and opportunities for more services and facilities.

Environmental Consequences

Following the alternatives is an analysis of the environmental consequences of the actions in each alternative. This analysis evaluates the magnitude of impacts and how these impacts compare to current conditions. The cumulative impact assessment outlines overall impacts resulting from past, current, proposed, and reasonably foreseeable management and other actions. The analysis is intended to guide the decision-maker in choosing a management action based on an objective understanding of environmental consequences.

The National Park Service considered in detail 10 resource categories for analysis. These were:

- Soils (particularly ice-rich permafrost soils)
- Vegetation
- Fish and wildlife
- Natural soundscapes
- Wilderness
- Subsistence
- Cultural resources
- Socioeconomics
- Recreational opportunity and visitor safety
- Park management and operations

The environmental consequences are analyzed in chapter 4 and summarized in Table 2-11, which appears at the end of chapter 2. Conclusions for each alternative may be stated as follows.

Alternative 1 (No Action)

Ongoing increases in visitor use and motorized access without new management initiatives would result in moderate to major adverse impacts to many park resources, including ice-rich permafrost soils, vegetation, wildlife, and subsistence resources and opportunities. Wilderness-dependent recreational opportunities would decline. Most affected would be natural soundscape and wilderness resources, for which major cumulative adverse impacts could lead to impairment of these park resources.

Alternative 2

The actions in this alternative would constrain recreation opportunities to those that are most wilderness-dependent, and primarily those dependent on non-motorized forms of access. As a result, there would be moderate adverse impacts to recreational opportunities because of a decline in availability of some types of appropriate activities, although moderate to major benefits would occur for wilderness and natural soundscape resources. The actions would result in negligible impacts to ice-rich permafrost soils, vegetation, wildlife, and subsistence resources and opportunities.

Alternative 3

This alternative would provide for a diversity of wilderness recreational activities and limited motorized access, creating moderate benefits to the diversity of recreational opportunities that would be accompanied by moderate benefits to both wilderness and natural soundscape resources. Only minor adverse impacts would occur to wildlife, subsistence, and vegetation resources and there would be negligible impacts to ice-rich permafrost soils. The actions in this alternative would mitigate the affects of some past actions, reducing the level of adverse impact to wilderness and natural soundscape resources.

Alternative 4 (Preferred Alternative)

Providing for growth in recreational activities that require services, assistance, or short time-commitments would constrain some opportunities for wilderness-dependent activities in accessible areas and produce minor benefits to recreational opportunities overall. There would be a negligible change in impacts to wilderness and natural soundscape resources, although locations of impacts in the park would shift. Minor adverse impacts would occur to ice-rich permafrost soils, minor to moderate adverse impacts to wildlife, and moderate adverse impacts to vegetation and subsistence resources and opportunities. This alternative would provide little overall mitigation for past actions, so there would still be cumulative major adverse impacts to such resources as wilderness and natural soundscapes.

Alternative 5

The actions proposed under this alternative would allow substantial increases in use levels and motorized access parkwide, with particular concentrations on the south side of the Alaska Range. As a result, there would be moderate adverse impacts on recreational opportunities because some kinds of wilderness-dependent activities would become difficult to find over the life of the plan. This alternative would also cause moderate adverse impacts to wildlife, wilderness, and natural soundscape resources as well as major adverse impacts to vegetation and subsistence resources and opportunities. This alternative would not provide mitigation for past actions, so there would still be major adverse impacts to many park resources including wilderness and natural soundscapes, but these resources would not become impaired.

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