

Glacier Bay Vessel Use Planning *UPDATE*

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Glacier Bay National Park
And Preserve



Congestion at the Bartlett Cove dock.

NPS Photo

What's the Issue?

Over the past 3 years charter vessel use days in May and September (the “shoulder season”) have increased over 600%. During the same period the number of Commercial Use Authorization (CUA) holders increased from two to six and the number of CUA vessels has also increased from 5 to 14. Charter vessel passengers have increased almost 475%. The park is concerned about the continuing growth of this commercial activity leading to increased impacts on park resources.

Background

Several events may have led up to the increase in shoulder season vessel uses in park waters.

2003: The Vessel Quotas and Operating Requirements (VQOR) Record of Decision determined cruise ship and tour vessel use limits for Glacier Bay year round. However, vessel entry quotas for private, concession, and CUA vessels were only defined for June-July-August.

2005: The Superintendent revised park charter vessel provisions to permit CUAs to operate in Glacier Bay proper from September through May in accordance with the VQOR record of decision. Before it was discontinued in 1998, Glacier Bay Lodge operated the only guided charter fishing service for Glacier Bay proper.

Ongoing park research shows the number of humpback whales present in the Bay in May and September is increasing.

A Related Issue

The 2005 Final Rule establishing current vessel regulations for Glacier Bay included a “transit” permit for private vessels entering and leaving Bartlett Cove. This permit provision was to remain in effect for five years. The provision is due to sunset in November 2011.

What the NPS Heard

The NPS initiated a public involvement process to clarify specific issues and explore appropriate courses of action. Between March and June 2009 the park received 17 individual comment letters from local businesses, private individuals, and other interested organizations. A public meeting was held in May 2009, attended by 55 people. The park heard a range of ideas, including:

- * Why is vessel use only limited in June, July and August? The Bay and its resources are the same all year round.
- * Glacier Bay offers protected waters for sport fishing and other recreational activities in May and September and the income is needed by Gustavus. Charter services and support is the lifeblood for many residents.
- * The park should impose some type of limit on fish harvest or vessel activity to protect fish populations within park waters, or create a “no take” zone regardless of other existing harvest regulations.
- * The park should analyze the condition and health of Glacier Bay fish populations to base future charter fishing activity on.
- * Park facility crowding and wildlife habituation (such as Steller sea lions scavenging fish carcasses in Bartlett Cove) can be addressed with changes in dock use guidelines and CUA permit conditions.

What's Next?

The Superintendent is considering various options to address the changes in shoulder season vessel use. Potential actions within NPS jurisdiction include:

- * Extending private and charter vessel quotas for Glacier Bay from June through August to May through September.
- * Extending private and charter vessel quotas for Glacier Bay from June-August to all year.
- * Managing charter vessels year-round through the concessions program.
- * Leaving current regulations and seasonal quotas unchanged.

Proposed Planning Timeline

An Environmental Assessment analyzing the potential effects of various alternatives will be prepared this winter. A 60 day public review of the environmental assessment could take place by March 2010. Following this the NPS would consider comments and analyze any additional potential impacts raised by these comments. Barring major process delays, an alternative and accompanying regulations could be determined by June 2010. Regulatory changes would take effect in 2011.