
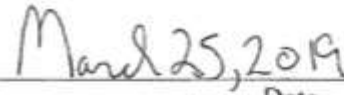




National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Katmai National Park and Preserve
Alaska

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform

Recommended:

Mark Sturm Date
Superintendent, Katmai National Park and Preserve

Approved:

Herbert C. Frost Date
Regional Director, Alaska National Park Service

1. Introduction

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Park Service (NPS) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to examine alternative actions and environmental impacts associated with the proposed project to construct the Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform within Katmai National Park and Preserve. The project is needed to provide barrier-free access and reduce safety concerns at the Research Bay overlook area. The site currently lacks clear signage and a formally developed trail to the Research Bay overlook. As a result, visitors typically follow a social trail network that terminates at a potentially hazardous drop-off overlooking the Iliuk Arm of Naknek Lake and Research Bay. The existing social trail network is not suitable for people with mobility limitations.

The statements and conclusions reached in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) are based on documentation and analysis provided in the EA and associated decision file. To the extent necessary, relevant sections of the EA are incorporated by reference below.

2. Selected Alternative and Rationale for the Decision

Based on the analysis presented in the EA, the NPS has selected Alternative 2: Build Trail and Viewing Platform (Proposed Action and Preferred Alternative). This alternative includes construction of a 150 foot long trail from mile 8 of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes (VTTS) Road to the Research Bay Overlook western viewpoint and the development of a 12 foot by 20 foot viewing platform at the Research Bay Overlook. The overlook platform includes installation of interpretative signage mounted to the deck railings of the platform providing visitors with educational information about park resources and the viewing area.

Rationale

Alternative 2 best meets the purpose and need identified in the EA: to provide barrier-free access and reduce safety concerns at the Research Bay overlook area. The newly aligned trail will improve safety conditions at the Research Bay Overlook by eliminating the risk of injury associated with the steep drop-offs, improving the trail surface thereby increasing the level of access to the overlook in compliance with accessibility standards contained in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA).

In addition to addressing access and safety concerns, the project provides an opportunity to use a trail crew from the Student Conservation Association (SCA), giving young people an increased sense of pride and ownership in the management and stewardship of their national parks.

3. Mitigation Measures

To the extent possible, the trail and viewing platform will be situated to avoid tree removal. The developed trail will generally follow the existing western social trail.

The social trail from the VTTS Road to the eastern viewpoint will be closed and revegetated with native plants. The park will install a temporary barricade that allows for vegetation growth along the corridor of the existing eastern social trail at the Research Bay Overlook. Once the vegetation has recovered in this area, the barricade will be removed.

The trail and viewing platform will use neutral colors and other design features to minimize visual impact and blend developments into the surrounding landscape. The design of the deck will closely match the existing deck and viewing platform located at the Three Forks Visitor Center located at mile 23 of the VTTS Road.

The developed trail surface will be stabilized to reduce erosion potential using geo-cell or similar materials. The base material will be covered and compacted with gravel sourced from borrow pits located along the VTTS Road.

In order to avoid impacts to mating and nesting bird species along the new Research Bay Overlook Trail and at the overlook platform, vegetative clearing necessary for construction will not be conducted during late spring (April through July).

The park will regularly monitor this location for invasive species over a period of five (5) years, removing (if necessary) non-native plant species.

The park's cultural resource team will dig test pits at the proposed viewing platform site in advance of construction to prevent inadvertent disturbance to, or discovery of, previously unidentified cultural resources. In the event of an inadvertent discovery, all construction work will cease, and the Cultural Resources Management Specialist will be notified.

The improvements to the Research Bay Overlook area will result in adverse effects to the VTTS Road Historic District. These adverse effects include the construction of the new access trail to the Research Bay Overlook, the construction of the viewing platform, and the visual impacts of the viewing platform as seen from the VTTS Road. These adverse effects are being mitigated through a Memorandum of Agreement with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) as required by the National Historic Preservation Act §106.

4. Public Involvement/Agency Consultation

The EA was placed on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment website on December 18, 2018, where it was available for public review and comment through February 18, 2019.

Consultation letters regarding this project were sent to the following Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act regional and village corporations, and Alaska Native Descendant organizations culturally-affiliated with Katmai National Park and Preserve: Alaska Peninsula Corporation, Ugashik Village, Alutiiq Village of Old Harbor, Village of Clark's Point, Bristol Bay Native Corporation, Village of Iliamna, Chignik Bay Tribal Council, Chignik Lake Village, Cook Inlet Region Incorporated, Council of Katmai Descendants, Curyung Tribal Council, Egegik Village, Fortier & Mikko, P.C., Heirs of Palakia Melgenak, Igiugig Village, Ivanof Bay Tribe, Kaguyak Village, King

Salmon Tribe, Kokhanok Village, Koniag Incorporated, Levelock Village, Manokotak Village, Naknek Village Council, Native Village of Afognak, Native Village of Akhiok, Native Village of Aleknagik, Native Village of Chignik Lagoon, Native Village of Ekuk, Native Village of Ekwok, Native Village of Karluk, Native Village of Larson Bay, Native Village of Ouzinkie, Native Village of Perryville, Native Village of Pilot Point, Native Village of Port Lions, New Koliganek Village Council, New Stuyahok Village, Newhalen Tribal Council, Nondalton Village, Paug-Vik, Inc. Ltd., Pedro Bay Village, Port Heiden Village Council, Portage Creek Village, South Naknek Village, Sun'aq Tribe of Kodiak, Tangirnaq Native Village, The Native Tribe of Kanatak, Traditional Village of Togiak, and Twin Hills Village.

The State of Alaska SHPO was notified of the project by letter in 2017 and again in 2018. Formal in person consultation occurred between the NPS and the SHPO on this project and lead to the development of a Memorandum of Agreement to mitigate the adverse effects to cultural resources.

Notice of the availability of the EA for public comment was sent to local and statewide newspapers, radio networks, television channels, and other publications including magazines and journals. The information was also published on the Katmai National Park Website and sent out through Katmai social media channels. The project received five (5) comments during the public comment period. The comments did not change the conclusions in the EA regarding the environmental effects of the action. Responses to substantive comments are found in Appendix A.

5. Finding of No Significant Impact

As described in the EA, the selected alternative has the potential for adverse impacts to scenic views, soils, vegetation, visitor experience, subsistence, and historic districts; however, no potential for significant adverse impacts was identified.

- **Scenic Views:** Development of an accessible trail and viewing platform will alter the appearance of the area. Portions of the trail and viewing platform will be visible from the VTTS Road.
- **Soils:** The proposed access trail and viewing platform will result in approximately 300 cubic feet of soil disturbance. The top 5 inches of soils along the trail corridor will be removed to allow for the installation of the geo-cell materials. The viewing platform will require 18 deck support pilings to be installed in holes approximately 1 foot wide and 3 feet deep. The soils will be removed from the project area and stored at the 5 Mile Pit located along the VTTS Road for use as fill in future projects.
- **Vegetation:** Limited ground vegetation removal, brush removal, and tree limb removal will occur to accommodate construction. The existing social trail at the eastern viewpoint of the Research Bay Overlook will be closed and revegetated.
- **Visitor Experience:** The visitor experience will be disrupted during construction activities for the new trail and viewing platform. Once completed, the visitor experience in this area will

improve as there will be increased access for visitors with mobility impairments, enhanced visitor safety associated with the improved trail surface and elimination of steep drop-offs, and enhanced experience due to the addition of interpretative signage on the overlook platform.

- Historic District: The VTTS Road Historic District will be adversely affected by the construction of the access trail and viewing platform at the Research Bay Overlook. These adverse effects are being mitigated through a Memorandum of Agreement with the SHPO.

Alternative 2 will not result in significant adverse impacts to scenic views, soils, vegetation, and visitor use and experience. The impacts to these park resources will primarily occur during the construction period and will gradually fade over time as the new trail and overlook platform are completed. Adverse impacts to the VTTS Road Historic District are not significant and will be reduced through mitigation.

There will be no effects to subsistence resources in the area because the project occurs within an area of Katmai National Park that is closed to subsistence use. There will be no significant impacts on public health, public safety, or unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the NPS selected alternative will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law. The NPS has prepared a Non-Impairment Finding that is included as Appendix B.

6. Conclusion

As described above, the selected alternative does not constitute an action meeting the criteria that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and, thus, will not be prepared.

This action complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and Executive Orders 12898 and 13175. There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the ANILCA Title VIII, Section 810 summary evaluation and findings.

Appendices Include:

- Appendix A: NPS Responses to Public Comments on the Environmental Assessment for Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform
- Appendix B: Non-Impairment Finding on the Environmental Assessment for Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform

Appendix A:

NPS Responses to Public Comments

On the Environmental Assessment for Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform

Katmai National Park and Preserve

In response to the environmental assessment, the NPS received 5 comments through the Planning, Environment & Public Comment system, no comments were sent in through postal mail or delivered by hand to the King Salmon Visitor Center. The NPS has read and considered all comments received. The NPS has determined one (1) comment to be substantive and has responded to that comment below.

1. Comment #1 Individual: I see no reason to build a platform out in a wild area of Katmai on the Valley Road. The bus may stop there once a day for a few minutes and only to break up the monotony of that stretch of road. The idea of erecting a platform to solely satisfy a 10 minute bus stop on the way to the Valley is ridiculous. I understand the desire to create more ADA friendly areas and to create more areas that will funnel attention away from the viewing platforms to other areas, but this is not the way to do it. For starters, the bus is by no means ADA accessible as a large 4wd vehicle. Thinking that adding a viewing platform or two to the Valley Road will divert more people from the crowded Brooks area is a departure from the reality. People want to see bears catching salmon at the falls. 99.9% don't care about anything else. The valley tours are made up of people staying for multiple days at Brooks and they are looking to see the Valley of 10,000 Smokes and not going to book the tour because there is a platform present at a brief stop along the way. You are taking an area with no visible human built structure and dropping a platform onto it. This is not the vision of wild Alaska that I think of. The National Parks see themselves as a place to get away from the busy world and out to wilderness. Yet, for some reason the Brooks Camp and surrounding area is proposing and embracing more development than any park in this modern era should. This is not an isolated proposal and is just one of many upcoming developments slated for Brooks Camp and surrounding area. The solution to Brooks Camp congestion is not to build more. It simply will not work.

NPS Response #1: The NPS feels that the construction of this trail and viewing platform will positively affect the safety of park visitors who are experiencing the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes bus tour. The bus tour runs once per day during the operating season taking approximately 25 to 35 visitors from the developed area of Brooks Camp to the Three Forks Visitor Center located at the end of the Valley Road. This tour operates from June to September, 7 days per week, and has the potential of taking approximately 2,500 to 3,500 visitors annually to view the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. The bus routinely stops at the Research Bay Overlook on the outbound trip from Brooks Camp to the Three Forks Visitor Center. The safety of these visitors, NPS rangers delivering the interpretative program on the Valley bus tour, and concession staff operating the bus will be improved by construction of the access trail and viewing platform.

It is accurate that the bus currently used in the VTTS tour was not designed to be ADA accessible but this should not be a disqualifying factor for making accessibility improvements to the new trail at the Research Bay Overlook. Katmai National Park and Preserve has identified accessibility improvements to park infrastructure to be a high management priority in order to improve visitor experience. All park improvement projects are being examined for their compliance with accessibility standards in order to move towards this objective.

The Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform is not intended to be an attraction that will draw visitors away from Brooks Camp, as the capacity for the VTTS bus tour is already limited by current infrastructure. The NPS understands that the primary reason for visiting Katmai National Park and Preserve remains bear viewing, and Brooks Camp is arguably the best place in the world to view wild Brown Bears. However, the improvements to the Research Bay Overlook have long been overdue to address the safety concerns and environmental degradation of the current viewing area.

Thank you for taking the time to comment and voice your concerns over this project.

Appendix B:

Non-Impairment Finding

On the Environmental Assessment for

Research Bay Trail and Viewing Platform

Katmai National Park and Preserve

A determination of non-impairment is made for each of the resource impact topics carried forward and analyzed in the environmental assessment for the preferred alternative. The following criteria was used as a basis for determining the significance of the resource and whether or not impairment would occur:

- Necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the enabling legislation or proclamation of the park;
- Key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for enjoyment of the Park;
- Identified in the park's general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents as being of significance.

Scenic Views

Scenic views are included in the General Management Plan for Katmai National Park and Preserve, the Foundation Statement for the park, and the park's enabling legislation as a resource of significant value.

"Katmai National Monument ... shall be managed for the following purposes, among others: To protect habitats for, and populations of, fish and wildlife including, but not limited to, high concentrations of brown/grizzly bears and their denning areas; to maintain the water habitat for significant salmon populations; and to protect scenic, geological, cultural and recreational features."

- ANILCA Section 202 (2)

Alternative 2 will impact scenic views along the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes Road as portions of the access trail and viewing platform may be visible from the roadway. The ability of visitors to experience the scenic views of Naknek Lake and Research Bay from the safety of the viewing platform will be improved. These impacts will not result in impairment to park resources or values.

Soils

Management for soils is not specifically identified as a purpose in the establishing legislation of the park and is not specifically identified in the park's general management plan as being of significance. Alternative 2 will impact approximately 300 cubic feet of soils and will not result in impairment.

Vegetation

Management for vegetation is not specifically identified as a purpose in the establishing legislation of the park and is not specifically identified in the park's general management plan as being of significance. Alternative 2 will impact approximately 1,000 square feet of vegetation and will not result in impairment.

Visitor Use and Experience

Visitor use and experience is intertwined with many of the resources that are deemed to be significant throughout the park and is specifically mentioned in the park's GMP related to the use of the Brooks Camp area, including the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes bus tour. Alternative 2 will disrupt the visitor experience during the construction period for the access trail and viewing platform, and enhance the experience during operation of the new facilities. These impacts will not result in impairment.

Historic District

Protection of historic districts is not specifically identified as one of the park's purposes in the establishing legislation of the park. Cultural Resources are included in the General Management Plan for Katmai National Park and Preserve, the Foundation Statement for the park, and the park's enabling legislation as a resource of significant value. The park's general management plan identifies cultural resources as a significant resource and the protection of cultural resources is key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park.

"Katmai National Monument ... shall be managed for the following purposes, among others: To protect habitats for, and populations of, fish and wildlife including, but not limited to, high concentrations of brown/grizzly bears and their denning areas; to maintain the water habitat for significant salmon populations; and to protect scenic, geological, cultural and recreational features."

- ANILCA Section 202 (2)

Alternative 2 will result in adverse impacts to the VTTS Road Historic District by the construction of the new trail and viewing platform. The impacts to the historic district will be mitigated to the maximum extent practical and will not result in impairment to the VTTS Road Historic District.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as guided by this analysis, good science and scholarship, advice from subject matter experts and others who have relevant knowledge and experience, and the results of public involvement activities, it is the Superintendent's professional judgment that there will be no impairment of park resources and values from implementation of Alternative 2.