



Denali Park Road

Draft Vehicle Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

ABSTRACT
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR – NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE
VEHICLE MANAGEMENT PLAN / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

The National Park Service has prepared this *Denali National Park and Preserve Vehicle Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement* to evaluate alternatives for managing vehicle use along the Park Road at Denali National Park and Preserve. Since the 1920s, visitors have traveled the Park Road in buses provided by a park concessioner. Although visitation was relatively low before 1972, it rose quickly in the years that followed in direct response to the opening of the George Parks Highway, which linked the park to Anchorage and Fairbanks. Park managers instituted a mandatory visitor transportation system at the time to minimize disturbances to wildlife and scenery anticipated by the upsurge in visitor numbers. The present approach for managing vehicles on the Park Road is based on the park's 1986 general management plan, which established an allowable seasonal limit of 10,512 vehicles on the Park Road past Mile 15 from approximately Memorial Day to a week after Labor Day. This seasonal limit has served well for many years as a means to manage vehicle use and provide quality visitor opportunities. However, the consistent growth in tourism that Alaska has experienced over the last decade has resulted in increasing visitation to Denali National Park and Preserve. As a result, the *Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan* is intended to assist park managers with decision making and management of vehicles on the Park Road for the next 15 to 20 years.

In this vehicle management plan / environmental impact statement, the National Park Service analyzes three management alternatives and the environmental impacts associated with implementing them. Alternative A is the no-action alternative that would continue current management. Alternative B, "Optimized Access," would promote maximized seating on all transit and tour vehicles to offer the largest number of visitors the opportunity to travel the Park Road. Alternative C, "Maximizing Visitor Opportunities," would promote a variety of opportunities that range from brief experiences in the park's entrance area, to short and long visits along segments of the Park Road, to multiday experiences in the park's backcountry. From this range of alternatives, National Park Service managers will ultimately identify and select a preferred alternative that would meet the vision, goals, and objectives, and identify the strategies (including user capacity), for managing vehicles on the road in a fashion that optimizes visitor experience and preserves park resources and values.

This environmental impact statement has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act to provide the decision-making framework that (1) analyzes a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives; (2) evaluates potential issues and impacts to the park's resources and values; and (3) identifies mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. Impact topics that have been fully analyzed in this document include visitor use and experience, the transportation system and traffic, wildlife and wildlife habitat, wilderness, park management and operations, and socioeconomics. All other impact topics have not been fully analyzed because the resource does not exist within the park or project area, or implementation of any of the alternatives would result in no effects or negligible to minor effects on them.

HOW TO COMMENT ON THIS PLAN

If you wish to comment on this vehicle management plan / environmental impact statement, you may do so online at the NPS planning website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/dena> or you may mail comments to the address below. This document will be available for public review for 60 days, ending on September 30, 2011.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you may ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

Please address written comments to
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF ACTION

The purpose of the proposed National Park Service action is to improve the management of vehicles along the 92-mile-long Denali Park Road. The goal of the plan is to provide a high quality experience for visitors; protect wilderness resources and values, scenic values, wildlife, and other park resources; and maintain the unique character of the Park Road. The alternatives consider the Park Road's user capacity (the maximum number of vehicles that can be accommodated on the road during the peak visitation period of May through September). The plan provides a means to assess the effectiveness of the transportation system in protecting park resources and providing for visitor access and enjoyment.

NEED FOR ACTION

The current approach for managing vehicles on the Park Road is based on the park's 1986 general management plan, as amended, which established an allowable seasonal limit of 10,512 vehicles on the Park Road past Mile 15 from approximately Memorial Day to a week after Labor Day. While the overarching goal of the limit was to protect opportunities for viewing scenic landscapes and wildlife health and habitat, the limit was not connected to more refined desired conditions in a logical framework that could be measured and monitored over time.

Although the vehicle limit is clearly measurable, it is less clear that a numerical limit alone is enough to adequately protect park resources and provide visitors with freedom of movement along the Park Road. Other factors come into play as indicated by a multidisciplinary road study that began in 2006 to expand understanding of the impacts of traffic volume and traffic patterns on the park's physical, biological, and social environment. These factors include visitor perceptions of crowding at wildlife stops

and rest stops; interactions between buses and wildlife; and the patterns of wildlife movements along the Park Road corridor. In addition, there is a growing demand for the Park Road experience and trends indicate that visitation to Alaska and the Denali area will continue to increase.

As a result, this plan is needed to set measurable indicators and standards that will ensure key park resources and values along the Park Road are adequately protected in accordance with desired conditions, especially in light of the potential for increased visitation. These resources and values include (1) wildlife populations, habitat, and the processes and components of the park's natural ecosystem, (2) wilderness character and values, and wilderness recreational opportunities, (3) the scenic and geologic values of Mount McKinley and the surrounding mountain landscape, (4) visitor enjoyment, and (5) the inspiration visitors derive from the park's natural features and opportunities to observe wildlife in their natural habitat. Additionally, an adaptive management approach which employs more sophisticated science, modeling, and monitoring techniques to effectively protect resources and provide high quality visitor experiences is needed to allow park managers the flexibility to adjust operations in response to observed resource protection or visitor use issues.

PLANNING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goals provide descriptions of what will be achieved, while the objectives list more specific outcomes of the goals.

Goal 1: Protect the exceptional condition of the park's resources and values through informed, proactive, and transparent management.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objectives:

- Manage the transportation system to ensure protection of wildlife populations, wildlife habitat, and the processes and components of the park's natural ecosystem.
- Manage the transportation system to ensure protection of wilderness character, wilderness resource values, and wilderness recreational opportunities.
- Continue to protect and promote the historic character of the Park Road and related elements of the cultural landscape.
- Share monitoring findings with the public and inform them of management actions regarding the transportation system.

Goal 2: Provide high-quality and appropriate visitor opportunities on the bus.

Objectives:

- Ensure a transportation system that provides the park's interpretive themes and messages to all visitors as a means to encourage public understanding and support of park resources and values.
- Ensure a transportation system that provides a high-quality opportunity for viewing scenic landscapes and wildlife.
- Provide a bus environment that enables visitors to engage with the park resources and values in a meaningful way.

Goal 3: Provide access to recreational and educational opportunities along the Park Road.

Objectives:

- Provide freedom of movement.
- Provide a system that is universally accessible and able to accommodate visitor needs and equipment.

Goal 4: Make the park transit/access system understandable and user friendly.

Objectives:

- Clearly communicate information about the system through a variety of means.
- Enable visitors to easily choose the experience that meets their needs within the limits of the system.
- Ensure the transportation system enables visitors to spend time at an NPS visitor center.

Goal 5: Provide a transportation system that meets visitor access needs.

Objectives:

- Optimize seating capacity within the system design.
- Maximize system flexibility to meet future visitor demand, while sustaining desired resource conditions and visitor experiences.
- Provide stability and predictability in the system.
- Develop a system that is affordable and offers opportunities for the full range of park visitors.

Goal 6: Provide access for subsistence use and inholders.

Objectives:

- Provide legally required access to Kantishna inholdings.
- Provide legally required access to subsistence users

ALTERNATIVES

The alternatives under consideration include a required "no-action" alternative (alternative A, which is a continuation of current management) and two action alternatives (alternatives B and C), which were developed by an interdisciplinary planning team with feedback from the public

and other experts during the planning process. The alternatives are briefly described below, and include a number of actions that would be common to all alternatives, as well as those common to just alternatives B and C.

An important element common to both alternatives B and C is that vehicle use on the Park Road would be adaptively managed to achieve specific desired conditions. Through the use of indicators and standards, the current visitor experience and resource condition would be maintained or improved. For the restricted section of the Park Road (Savage River to Wonder Lake), the following indicators would be monitored annually:

- sheep gap spacing
- night time traffic levels
- large vehicles
- vehicles at a wildlife stop
- vehicles in a viewscape
- wait time for hiker
- vehicles at rest areas and Eielson visitor center

Additionally, comprehensive monitoring and data collection would take place every 1-5 years for the following to detect any impacts attributable to changes made to the transportation system.

- natural resource condition
- visitor satisfaction

The maximum annual and daily vehicle capacity for the Park Road will be published each year as part of the Superintendent's Compendium, subject to public notice and comment. This will allow the Superintendent to set the next year's capacity based on monitoring, research, and lessons learned in the prior years' implementation. The National Park Service would initiate the necessary steps to promulgate a modification of CFR 13.932 - 13.934 that would give the Superintendent discretion to set the maximum capacity of the road to maintain the vehicle

management system indicators and standards.

Alternative A: No Action (Continuation of Current Management)

Alternative A represents the existing condition. Vehicle use on the restricted section of the Park Road would continue to be managed through a seasonal limit of 10,512 vehicles; this limit was set in the 1986 general management plan and then formalized in regulations in 2000. The regulated season begins on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend and continues through the second Thursday following Labor Day, or September 15, whichever comes first. Allocation for segments of the transportation system and other vehicle use were modified in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan* and the *Park Superintendent's Compendium*.

A check station where staff count visitors and vehicles was established on the road at the Savage River in the 1970s.

Resource monitoring and visitor surveys would continue to be conducted to address areas of concern but are not part of a formal adaptive management approach to maintain or improve resource condition and visitor experience along the Park Road.

Management zones along the Park Road would remain as described in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan*. The current management zoning could allow for an increase from the current condition in vehicle use west of Eielson to Wonder Lake.

Alternative B (Optimizing Access)

This alternative would promote maximized seating on all transit and tour vehicles to offer the largest number of visitors the opportunity to travel the Park Road. Visitors would have access to a highly structured transportation system that offers

predictability, efficiency, and greater opportunity to have a park experience of choice, while meeting set standards for natural resource protection and visitor experience.

To fully optimize the transportation system, a majority of seats on both transit and tour buses would be filled by pre-booking visitors (independent and organized groups). This would allow managers to predict daily vehicle needs and maximize the flexibility of the system to accommodate visitor demand.

Management zones along the Park Road would remain as described in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan*. This may allow for future growth in vehicle use west of Eielson to Wonder Lake.

Alternative C (Maximizing Visitor Opportunities)

This alternative would promote a variety of visitor opportunities that range from brief experiences in the park's entrance area, to short and long visits along segments of the Park Road, to multiday experiences in the park's backcountry. Visitors would have opportunities for spontaneity and freedom during their park visit, while set standards for resource condition and visitor experience are met.

The transportation system in this alternative would separate tour and transit functions by developing a self-guided economy tour. Distinguishing the economy tour experience from transit offers benefits to both user groups. Dedicated transit services would provide more seating for eastbound hikers, increasing visitors' freedom of movement. A

dedicated economy tour service would provide visitors with a modest tour experience.

To further preserve wilderness resource values and contemplative visitor experiences, a new management subzone on the Park Road would be created west of Eielson Visitor Center to Wonder Lake (Wildlife Viewing Subzone 3). This section would be managed for the lowest traffic volume on the Park Road and not allow significant growth beyond the current condition.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The environmental consequences of the actions in each alternative were analyzed. This analysis evaluated 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 six impact topics for detailed analysis, including

- visitor use and experience,
- the transportation system and traffic,
- wildlife and wildlife habitat,
- wilderness,
- park management and operations, and
- socioeconomics.

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