
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve
Alaska

Finding of No Significant Impact

Whale Skeleton Shelter in the Bartlett Cove Area August, 2011

Recommended: *Susan Rouds* *August 26, 2011*
Superintendent, Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve Date

Approved: *Steve Mason* *9/14/2011*
Regional Director, Alaska Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Whale Skeleton Shelter in Bartlett Cove Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve, Alaska September 2011

The National Park Service (NPS) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate a proposal to construct an open-air structure to showcase a 46-foot humpback whale skeleton in Glacier Bay National Park.

The NPS has selected Alternative B (Construct a Whale Skeleton Shelter) with mitigation measures under which the NPS would build the shelter, re-articulate the entire skeleton and mount it above the ground, and install educational panels that tell the story of the whale.

Two comments in favor of the proposal were received during the 30-day public review period. The selected alternative was not modified.

ALTERNATIVES

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA.

Alternative A - No Action

Under the No Action alternative, no structure would be built in Bartlett Cove to house the skeleton. Selected bones would be incorporated into existing interpretive and educational programs or housed in the Glacier Bay Lodge Visitor Center.

Alternative A would be the environmentally preferable alternative.

Alternative B –Construct a Whale Skeleton Shelter (NPS Preferred Alternative)

Under this alternative, the entire whale skeleton would be articulated and mounted under a 22'x30'x50' (height x width x length) open-air, roofed shelter along the coastal trail in Bartlett Cove at the southwest corner of the Glacier Bay Lodge Complex Historic District. The proposed structure would provide a place to display the skeleton and informational panels, protect it from the weather and offer rain protection for visitors viewing the exhibit. The shelter would be designed with respect to orientation, form, scale, scope, materials and roof shape which characterize the Lodge historic district. To improve viewing light conditions, skylights may be included in the structure design.

The whale skeleton would be mounted from the ground supported by steel bars. The shelter would be built from heavy timber framing and have a dirt/gravel floor. Native vegetation would be cleared from the construction area (about 1,500 sq. ft.). Roof supports would be mounted on concrete pilings embedded 5 to 6 feet into the ground. The concrete pilings would prevent rotting of the wooden support structure. Shelter construction would occur outside the May through August summer visitor season while skeleton rearticulation and mounting could occur

throughout the summer months. The site would require periodic vegetation pruning or removal to prevent vegetation encroachment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The project proposal was initially released for public scoping and comment from January 1, 2008 to February 20, 2008. Consultation with the Hoonah Indian Association began in 2008 and remained open through the public comment period. The consultation did not result in any changes to the proposal. The EA was sent by mail or email to 5 state and federal agencies, the Hoonah Indian Association, interest groups and individuals, and was posted on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment System (PEPC) and the park's webpage.

The EA was released for public review and comment from June 22, 2011 until July 22, 2011. Comments were received from the National Parks Conservation Association and the Glacier Bay Lodge concessioner Aramark. The comments received supported the proposed action. No specific responses to comments by the NPS are required. The public comments received did not change the conclusions in the EA about the environmental effects of the action.

DECISION

The NPS decision is to select Alternative B, Construct a Whale Skeleton Shelter, along with the mitigating measures described in the EA. No modifications of Alternative B were made during or after the public comment period.

Mitigating Measures

The following mitigation measures apply to the selected alternative B, Whale Skeleton Shelter Construction:

- *Migratory and nesting bird protection:* Vegetation clearing, grubbing, and other site preparations will not occur from April 15 to July 15. If an active nest is encountered, at *any time*, including before or after the local timing window, leave it in place and protect the site until young hatch and depart. "Active" is indicated by intact eggs, live chicks, or presence of an adult on the nest.
- *Cultural Resources:* If archaeological features are encountered during construction, work would cease immediately and the Superintendent and park Cultural Resources Program Manager would be notified. Procedures as per Director's Order 28 and guiding regulations in 36 CFR 800.13 would be followed. No further action would take place until the NPS provides clearance.
- *Water Quality:* Project design and construction would incorporate best design standards to reduce surface runoff into Bartlett Cove.

Rationale for the Decision

Alternative B (NPS Preferred Alternative) with mitigating measures will satisfy the purpose and need of the project better than the no-action alternative (environmentally preferred alternative).

Viewing and learning about humpback whales is an important aspect of many visitors' trips to Glacier Bay. The bay provides important feeding grounds for humpbacks and the NPS directs a significant amount of management, funding, and staffing to protection and research. While park interpretive and educational staff incorporates individual whale bones, specimens and images into visitor programs and provide commentaries about whales during Glacier Bay boat tours, visitors do not have any opportunities to see a full size whale up close. So much of what makes a humpback whale real is the size. There are few places in the US where visitors can see re-articulated whale skeletons at close range or even touch them. Alternative B would permit a more lasting impression of an adult whale. The story of this particular whale is a potent reminder of the threats they face and how important the carefully managed waters of the park are to the species.

Alternative B would require construction of a fairly large building, however the site chosen has been disturbed previously, there are no species of concern present, it is within the established development footprint of Bartlett Cove, does not require re-routing or modification of other visitor support facilities, and would not adversely impact the integrity of the Glacier Bay Lodge Complex Historic District. Funding to re-articulate the skeleton and construct the shelter is available.

Alternative A would continue to use individual bones in visitor programs but would not have the impact of an entire skeleton. This alternative would not require new structures or additional expenses to retain the skeleton other than monitoring the condition of stored bones, even though convenient storage of the materials will create some additional work and maintenance over time.

Significance Criteria

The preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. This conclusion is based on the following examination of the significance criteria defined in 40 CFR Section 1508.27.

1. Impacts that may be beneficial or adverse.

The EA evaluated the effects of Alternative B on vegetation, wildlife, visitor experience, and cultural resources. As documented in the EA the effects of the proposed action on each resource would be minor.

2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.

There would be neither a positive nor a negative effect on public health or safety by implementing the preferred alternative.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to cultural or historic resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The skeleton shelter would be located in Glacier Bay National Park within a developed “frontcountry” visitor use area.

The project site is within the Glacier Bay Lodge Complex Historic District. Preliminary consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer resulted in a finding of no adverse effect through use of design, materials, site location, and partial vegetative screening.

The project lies within the traditional cultural property (TCP) of *L'eiw Shaa Shakee.aan*, Town on Top of the Sand Hill. The TCP encompasses the waterways of Bartlett Cove, the Bartlett River, Bartlett Lake and the Beardslee Islands, as well as portions of certain surrounding lands. Consultation with the Hoonah Indian Association revealed no effects to the TCP from taking this action.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Scoping with Federal, State, local agencies, and the public did not identify any highly controversial issues or effects associated with the site.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

This proposal does not present any highly uncertain or involve any unique or unknown risks.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about future considerations.

Any other proposals to construct, operate and maintain similar facilities in the park will require an appropriate level of NEPA documentation at the time of the proposal. No other projects of this type or for this purpose are being considered.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually but cumulatively significant impacts.

No related actions are proposed.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss of destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

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9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The selected alternative would not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat. No endangered or threatened species are located within the project area.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or Local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The selected alternative will not violate any Federal, State, or local law or environmental prohibitions.

FINDINGS

The levels of adverse impacts to park resources anticipated from the selected alternative will not result in an impairment of park resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park.

The selected alternative complies with Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990. There will be no restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

The National Park Service has determined that the selected alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement is not needed and will not be prepared for this project.