

**Finding of No Significant Impact
Brooks River Bear-Viewing Facility
Katmai National Park and Preserve**

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates constructing a new bear-viewing facility near the Brooks River in Katmai National Park and Preserve. This facility will have the following components: (1) a bear-viewing platform on the south shore of the river about 300 feet downstream of the existing Brooks River falls' platform; (2) an elevated boardwalk providing access to the falls platform and the new platform (the boardwalk will replace a portion of the existing Brooks Falls trail); and (3) an elevated gathering and interpretive area on the boardwalk where it divides to go to either the falls platform or the new platform. This facility is needed to improve bear-viewing opportunities in the Brooks River area, reduce delays in accessing the existing Brooks River Falls bear-viewing platform, increase visitor safety, and better protect bears and archeological resources in the Brooks River area.

Mitigation

Mitigation that will be taken in conjunction with implementing the proposed action includes:

- ***Archeological Resources.*** Every effort will be made to avoid archeological resources during project design and construction. Most of the project area has not been inventoried for archeological resources; therefore, archeological investigations will be conducted before ground disturbance anywhere within the facility footprints, construction staging and work areas, and along the remaining trail section that extends from the road to the start of the boardwalk. (Ground disturbance is defined as any disturbance that involves cutting through the Katmai ash layer into deeper layers, including removing stumps, roots, and rocks.) To facilitate this effort, the specific locations of the boardwalk and platform footings in the floodplain will be located and flagged ahead of time. If archeological resources were discovered in an area slated for disturbance, professional archeologists will evaluate the significance of the site. Appropriate actions for protecting the resource will be recommended after consultation with the Alaska SHPO, the Advisory Council and other interested parties according to 36 CFR 800.11 and, as appropriate, provisions of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. If there were any alterations to the planned footing locations after the clearance was conducted, these new areas will be investigated and appropriate actions taken (as listed above) if any archeological resources were discovered.

The first 200 feet of the boardwalk will cross an archaeological site included in the Brooks River Archeological District National Historic Landmark. If the boardwalk could not be designed to avoid an effect on this site, a data recovery program will be conducted to mitigate the effects of boardwalk construction. Consultation will take place with appropriate Alaska Native organizations in accordance with the provisions of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990.

The section of the Brooks Falls trail that crosses the depressions related to semi-subterranean houses will be closed and rehabilitated so that areas denuded of vegetation or with rutting into or through the Katmai ash layer will be stabilized as needed to protect subsurface archeological deposits. If fill was used in this process, it will be locally obtained sod that retains Katmai ash around the grass roots; this will keep the soil strata in its natural position. Sod-borrow areas will be cleared by an archeologist prior to sod removal.

If human remains are discovered during construction, work will stop and the remains will be protected until consultation takes place with Native groups as consistent with NAGPRA.

- **Soils and Vegetation.** Construction limits will be identified in construction documents and specifications, and fenced or signed in the field to protect vegetation from unwarranted disturbance. A construction supervisor will monitor ground and vegetation disturbance to ensure that it is restricted to the minimum area necessary.

After construction was complete, compacted areas will be scarified to promote natural revegetation of the disturbed area. Organic materials removed during construction will be reincorporated in some form into the disturbed area.

- **Bears.** The construction coordinator will consult closely with the park's Chief of Resource Management and NPS bear biologists to assure construction occurred during a period of minimal bear activity. To the extent practicable, all construction activities in the first phase will be scheduled in late Summer 1999 to coincide with the time when the river does not provide a major source of fish for the bears, and in advance of freeze-up. This generally occurs in August; however, due to variations in the salmon run, actual dates vary from year to year. If a second phase was needed, it will be scheduled to occur in Spring 2000 (i.e., from May through June), allowing construction to be completed prior to the period in July when the bears use the river for catching sockeye salmon.

The NPS will actively manage for no more than 25 people at one time at the platform and will conduct monitoring for at least one season before deciding whether to increase this number to the design capacity of 40 people. This same strategy will apply to the gathering/interpretive area on the boardwalk. Both the new platform and the falls platform, as well as the Brooks Falls trail/boardwalk, will be closed to the general public during late evening and early morning hours to allow use of the area by bears without human disturbance.

An NPS bear biologist and other park staff will continue to conduct monitoring in the Brooks River area to determine how human use and facilities affect bears. In particular, monitoring will focus on better understanding the effect of the boardwalk and platforms on bear travel, behavior, numbers of bears in specific classes, and other factors that might assist in determining impacts.

Public Involvement

A 30-day public comment period was provided for the EA. Eight comment letters were received, including one from the State of Alaska's Division of Governmental Coordination (DGC) and seven from individuals, businesses, or interest groups. Commenters expressed concerns about the consistency of the bear-viewing facility with the 1996 *Brooks River Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*; the need for and funding of the facility; and the impacts of the facility on bears, wildlife, the riparian environment, human remains and funerary objects, subsistence rights, and sport angling. All comments were thoroughly analyzed and they, as well as the NPS responses, are on-file at Katmai National Park and Preserve. After careful consideration, the NPS determined that the comments did not warrant changes in either the proposal or the EA's conclusions about impacts.

Alternatives Considered

The following alternatives were considered: no action and the construction of the Brooks River bear-viewing facility.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

The NPS has determined the proposed action can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to soil and vegetation, water resources, brown bears and other wildlife, archeological and ethnographic resources, visitor experience, local economy, or park management as documented by the environmental assessment. The primary environmental effects of the proposed action are summarized below (for a complete analysis, refer to the *Brooks River Bear-Viewing Facility Environmental Assessment*).

- An estimated 920 square feet of soil will be permanently displaced due to placement of structural footings; however, short term and long term positive and adverse impacts on soil and vegetation will be minor.
- If water is withdrawn from the Brooks River for use in building facility foundations, mitigative measures will ensure that neither salmon nor salmon spawning will be significantly impacted. Water removal will not significantly impact water flow or other hydrologic characteristics of the river.
- About 1/2 acre of bear habitat will be temporarily cleared of vegetation, and about 1/5 acre of high use bear habitat will be naturally revegetated; however, neither of these impacts will significantly affect individual bears or the Brooks River bear subpopulations. Use of the river corridor by bears will not be significantly affected by the new facilities. The elevated boardwalk will better separate visitors from bears, moderately benefiting bears.
- There will be both a short term and long term net loss of less than a 1/2 acre of other wildlife habitat, and a long term gain of about 1/5 acre of wildlife habitat. These losses and gains will be unlikely to significantly affect individual animals or wildlife populations.
- The proposed action complies with the Endangered Species Act, and Executive Orders 11988 (Floodplain Management) and 11990 (Protection of Wetlands). No threatened or endangered species are found in the project area, nor is there potential habitat for these species. There are no wetlands within the project area.
- The proposed action complies with the National Historic Preservation Act and consultation under section 106 of this Act has been completed. Archeological resources will not be adversely impacted by the proposal.
- The proposed action alternative is not expected to significantly impact ethnographic resources in the Brooks River area. The NPS will continue to consult with appropriate Native groups with regard to ethnographic resources and potential impacts from park projects.
- Over the long run, there will be both positive and negative impacts on the visitor experience, depending on individual visitors and the type of experience they seek at Brooks River. The boardwalk will provide major benefits to visitors by better separating visitors and bears and improving visitor safety.
- The proposed facility could attract more visitors to Brooks River, benefiting concession, commercial, or other local businesses by increasing the demand for their services and increasing revenues over the long run. Such economic benefits could range from minor to major.

- Overall park management under this alternative will be moderately improved.
- There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810 (a) Summary Evaluation and Findings. Implementation of the proposed action will not impact redfishing at the mouth of the Brooks River.

I find that the proposed action 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 will not be prepared for the project.

Recommended: _____

Deborah O. Liggett, Superintendent, Katmai National Park and Preserve

6/18/99
Date

Approved: _____

Robert D. Barbee, Regional Director, Alaska Region

6/21/99
Date