

Denali National Park and Preserve Final Backcountry Management Plan

General Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement January 2006

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Abstract: This *Final Backcountry Management Plan, General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS)* provides specific direction for backcountry management for Denali National Park and Preserve for the next 20 years. This plan will update and expand the 1976 *Backcountry Management Plan* and will amend the 1986 *General Management Plan* for Denali National Park and Preserve. The plan addresses management of all park and preserve areas not included in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor* and the 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plans*, including the designated wilderness in the former Mount McKinley National Park, the national park additions, the northwest and southwest national preserve areas, and the park road corridor west of park headquarters during the winter season. The *Final EIS* follows a *Draft EIS* published in February 2003, and a *Revised Draft EIS* published in April 2005. It presents a modified version of the preferred alternative from the *Revised Draft EIS* and an analysis of its environmental consequences. It also provides a summary of the other alternatives considered and their environmental consequences. The complete text of those alternatives can be found in the *Revised Draft EIS*.

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Executive Summary

This document is a *Final Backcountry Management Plan, General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS)*. It follows an original *Draft Backcountry Management Plan and EIS (Draft EIS)* published in February 2003 and a *Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan and EIS (Revised Draft EIS)* published in April 2005. The *Final EIS* makes several adjustments to the preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS*, but retains that alternative's essential elements and strategies.

This document does not reprint all of the information from the *Revised Draft EIS*. It contains the entirety of the Purpose and Need (chapter 1), the modified preferred alternative (chapter 2), and an analysis of impacts of that alternative (chapter 4). It also contains a summary comparison of the modified preferred alternative with the alternatives previously presented. Factual corrections to the Affected Environment (chapter 3) and the Appendices are presented as Errata sheets following the Final Action. The entirety of the chapter on Consultation and Coordination (chapter 5) and the Section 810 evaluation and findings of potential restrictions to subsistence activities (appendix C) are also reprinted with modifications. Unmodified portions of the *Revised Draft EIS* are incorporated into the *Final EIS* by reference.

Purpose and Need

The goal of the backcountry management plan is to describe how the National Park Service will act to provide future generations with a variety of opportunities to experience the Denali backcountry while protecting park wildlife and other natural resources, wilderness resource values, and subsistence resources. This plan will update and expand the 1976 *Backcountry Management Plan* and, once approved by a Record of Decision, will amend the 1986 *General Management Plan* for Denali National Park and Preserve. This plan will also serve as a *Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management Plan* as required by NPS Director's Order 47, a *Wilderness Management Plan* as required by NPS Director's Order 41, and a *Commercial Services Plan* for the backcountry.

This new plan addresses management of all park and preserve lands, except the park road corridor and adjacent development zones and backcountry day use areas, which were addressed in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plans (DCP)*. The study area also includes the park road corridor west of park headquarters during the winter season. Some actions do affect the development and backcountry day use areas delineated in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plans*; the new actions proposed in this plan, however, are consistent with the *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP* and the 1997 *South Side Denali DCP*. The plan is intended to guide decision-making for the backcountry areas of Denali for 20 years.

There are four reasons why a new backcountry management plan is needed at this time, identified as planning issues during project scoping.

- The 1976 backcountry planning document predated the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and the park's 1986 General Management Plan did not provide detailed guidance about managing backcountry uses in the park additions.
- Visitation has grown dramatically for some backcountry activities, requiring new methods of management.
- Anticipated increases in additional activities are expected in the next 20 years.
- Changes in backcountry use require National Park Service action to protect park resources and wilderness character.

Specifically, actions described by this plan should

- protect and preserve the park's natural and cultural resources, including natural soundscapes and subsistence opportunities;
- protect and preserve the park's wilderness resource values, including its wilderness character and outstanding opportunities for solitude;
- provide for the public's freedom of use and enjoyment of the park's backcountry and wilderness in a manner that is consistent with park purposes and the protection of park resources and values;
- protect and provide opportunities for wilderness recreational activities in the backcountry, including reasonable access; these recreational opportunities should be defined within the context of a spectrum of recreational opportunities available on lands managed by public agencies in the Denali region (primarily state parks, other state lands, and federal Bureau of Land Management lands);
- ensure all National Park Service management practices and research activities in the backcountry are consistent with park purposes; and
- provide for the means to achieve public understanding and support of backcountry and wilderness values.

The purpose and need for the plan are explained fully in chapter 1.

Alternatives

The *Revised Draft EIS* included a no-action alternative and four action alternatives. This document describes the modified preferred alternative and summarizes the other four alternatives. A summary of all the alternatives appears in Table 2-14. The following topics are addressed.

- 1) Management Areas: This topic includes descriptions of visitor experience and resource protection goals for various parts of the backcountry. These goals are presented through the articulation and allocation of "management areas" that are defined by indicators and quantitative standards.
- 2) Access Management: This topic addresses strategy, tools, and specific prescriptions for managing motorized and non-motorized recreational access to the park and preserve.
- 3) Wilderness Management: This topic addresses a guiding philosophy for wilderness management at Denali consistent with law, policy, and the park's specific history. It includes several specific measures to protect wilderness

- resources and wilderness recreational opportunities, including guidance on group size, human waste disposal, and climbing tools.
- 4) Commercial Services Planning: This topic includes descriptions of the appropriate type, locations, and scale of commercial services in the backcountry including both transportation and guide services. Guided hiking, air taxi, scenic air tour, and guided sport hunting services are specifically addressed.
 - 5) Backcountry Facilities: This topic identifies appropriate types of and locations for backcountry facilities – including trails, designated campsites, sanitation facilities, cabins and shelters, and information facilities – as well as proposing specific new facilities. This topic also includes winter management of the park road corridor west of Park Headquarters.
 - 6) Administrative and Scientific Activities: This topic addresses the management of administrative and scientific activities to protect resource values of the backcountry. It covers administrative camps, information and education, aviation, research, and resource management.
 - 7) Easements and Boundary Changes: This topic includes a proposed land exchange in the Tokositna and Coffee Rivers area and a strategy for addressing a stranded public access easement in the Cantwell/Windy Creek area that is intended to provide access to the park boundary.

Each alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* represented a distinct vision for the Denali backcountry and proposed a set of actions under the seven topic categories which would result in achievement of the vision. Based on public comment, the *Final EIS* presents the following vision as the preferred alternative:

This backcountry management plan would guide the National Park Service in providing opportunities for a variety of wilderness recreational activities and experiences while recognizing and protecting the premier wilderness resource values of the entire backcountry. Areas in the Dunkle Hills and around the Ruth and Tokositna Glaciers on the south side of the Alaska Range would be managed for those visitors who want to experience the wilderness resource values or other resource values of the Denali backcountry but require services or assistance, or who are unable to make a lengthy time commitment. Areas along the park road in the Old Park and the Kantishna Hills would provide accessible opportunities for short- or long-duration wilderness recreational activities with only limited options for guidance or assistance the farther one gets from the park road. The remainder of the backcountry would be managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel, and would include opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations.

Environmental Consequences

Following the modified preferred alternative is an analysis of environmental consequences of that action. This analysis evaluates 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. Table 2-15 compares the conclusions of the analysis for the Final Action to the conclusions of the action alternatives presented in the *Revised Draft EIS*.

The National Park Service considered in detail 10 categories for analysis, including park resources, recreational opportunities, and park operations. These were:

- Soils (particularly ice-rich permafrost soils)
- Vegetation
- Fish and wildlife
- Natural soundscapes
- Wilderness
- Subsistence
- Cultural resources
- Socioeconomics
- Recreational opportunity and visitor safety
- Park management and operations

By providing for growth in recreational activities that require services or assistance, the preferred alternative would constrain some opportunities for wilderness-dependent activities in accessible areas and produce minor benefits to recreational opportunities overall. There would be a negligible change in impacts to wilderness and natural soundscape resources, although locations of impacts in the park would shift. Minor adverse impacts would occur to ice-rich permafrost soils, minor to moderate adverse impacts to wildlife and subsistence resources and opportunities, and moderate adverse impacts to vegetation. This alternative would provide little overall mitigation for past actions, so there would still be cumulative major adverse impacts to such resources as wilderness and natural soundscapes.

The impacts of the modified preferred alternative are compared to the impacts of the other four alternatives of the *Revised Draft EIS* in Table 2-15.

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