

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Kenai Fjords National Park
Alaska



Finding of No Significant Impact

Improvements to Trails and Overlooks in the Exit Glacier Area

May, 2006

Recommended: _____

Superintendent, Kenai Fjords National Park

5/30/06
Date

Approved: _____

Regional Director, Alaska

6/1/06

Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Improvements to Trails and Overlooks in the Exit Glacier Area Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska May, 2006

The National Park Service (NPS) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate a proposal to implement selected actions from the Exit Glacier Area Plan (NPS 2004) in order to improve the visitor experience, create wheelchair accessible glacier viewing opportunities, prevent adverse impacts to natural resources, and provide for safer access to Exit Glacier. Proposed improvements include rerouting a portion of the Nature Trail that is threatened by bank erosion along Exit Creek, making the Nature Trail accessible to people in wheelchairs, rerouting a degraded section of the Harding Icefield Trail, extending the Overlook Loop Trail so visitors can approach the margin of Exit Glacier, and constructing overlooks to provide vistas of the outwash plain and glacier. The overall purpose of these proposed actions is to enhance the visitor experience at Exit Glacier while minimizing impacts to park natural resources. These projects are all located in the Exit Glacier Area within Kenai Fjords National Park (KEFJ), Seward, Alaska.

The NPS has selected the proposed action alternative to reroute and improve the Nature Trail, construct an extension to the Overlook Loop Trail, and reroute a portion of the Harding Icefield Trail with the mitigation measures as described in the EA.

Only one minor change was made to clarify what constitutes “power equipment” that is limited to use between 9 am and 6 pm as a mitigation measure for impacts to visitor experience in the proposed action. No other changes have been made to the alternatives or analysis in the EA and no substantive public comments were received. Therefore, no errata sheet was prepared.

ALTERNATIVES

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA.

The No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, no improvements would be made to the existing trails and overlooks in the Exit Glacier area. Routine maintenance of existing trails and facilities would continue.

Currently, the nature trail experience is a loop walk consisting of the main paved and gravel trails, a portion of the outwash plain trail and the designated nature trail. The only portion of the Exit Glacier trail network that meets accessibility requirements is the main paved trail. The main paved trail is approximately 1/3 mile in length and does not provide a view of the glacier during the summer visitor season. Under the No Action Alternative, the Nature Trail would not be rerouted and made accessible to persons with disabilities. The overlook and spotting scope would not be installed along the Nature Trail to provide an opportunity for physically challenged visitors to view the glacier.

The Overlook Loop Trail currently consists of a loop trail providing views of Exit Glacier from a distance of approximately 100 yards or more. Despite management efforts to delineate the trail and discourage off-trail travel, visitors desiring a closer view of the glacier often travel off-trail creating social trails which may pose safety issues for some users and which cause unacceptable impacts to visual and natural resources, as well as to the visitor experience. Under the No Action Alternative, the Overlook Loop Trail would not be extended to provide closer access to the face of Exit Glacier.

The Harding Icefield Trail currently provides a somewhat rugged hiking experience for those desiring a more strenuous and challenging trail experience. An 850 foot section approximately 0.4 miles up the trail is steep, following directly up the fall line, and has become degraded as a result. This degraded section creates difficulties for most hikers and leads hikers near the edge of an overhanging drop off, where signs inform them to stay back from the edge. Under the No Action Alternative, this degraded segment of the Harding Icefield Trail would not be rerouted.

The Proposed Action Alternative (the NPS Preferred Alternative and the Environmentally Preferred Alternative)

The proposed trail improvements would occur in independent phases and over the course of three summer seasons. Work on the Nature Trail reroute and Overlook Loop Trail spur (Phase I) would be completed in 2006. Accessibility improvements to the Nature Trail would occur in 2007 (Phase II), and the Harding Icefield Trail reroute (Phase III) would take place over the course of two summers, 2007 and 2008. All trail and overlook construction activities would occur from May through September and would be accomplished by the park maintenance staff and volunteers using hand tools as well as a motorized wheelbarrow, chainsaws, mechanical compactors, and gasoline powered rock drills. An electric rock drill run off a gasoline powered generator may also be used. Dump trucks would be used to deliver tread material to the Exit Glacier area, and a smaller Bobcat bucket loader would be used to transport tread material from the staging area to points along the Nature Trail. A small portion of the parking lot would be used as a temporary staging area for construction materials. Construction of the Harding Icefield Trail reroute could require the use of rock drills and explosives to traverse around unavoidable bedrock outcrops, talus slopes and other obstacles.

This alternative would reroute approximately 1,000 linear feet of the Nature Trail away from an eroding creek bank, and provide wheelchair accessibility along the entire length of the Nature Trail following U.S. Access Board Outdoor Recreation Guidelines (1999).

Approximately 490 linear feet of new trail would be added to the Overlook Loop Trail. This proposed spur trail would depart from the western edge of the Overlook Loop Trail and traverse across moraines and bedrock to an overlook on a bedrock knoll near the present margin of the glacier.

This alternative would reroute a degraded portion of the Harding Icefield Trail that climbs a steep cliff band near the lower end of the trail. Approximately 850 linear feet of the existing trail would be removed and between 1,300 and 2,500 linear feet of new trail would be constructed in

its place. The new trail segment would conform to the existing terrain constraints to the extent possible, with modifications (filling depressions, removing bedrock outcrops) where necessary to ensure trail stability, visitor safety and a reasonable grade. The exact placement and design of the proposed reroute has not been determined, but its general location would be to the north of the existing trail. Instead of climbing straight up the fall line of the slope as the existing trail does, the new trail would ascend more gradually with an average grade of 12 to 20% to meet standards defined in the 1991 Park Trail Plan.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The EA was issued for public review and comment from March 22, 2006 to April 21, 2006. The EA was sent by mail to 43 government agencies, tribal entities, interest groups and individuals. The EA was posted on the Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website and on the park's webpage. Comments were accepted through the PEPC site or by mail.

The park issued a press release about the availability of the EA and the open comment period on March 22, 2006. Notice of the EA comment period was published in the Seward Phoenix Log on March 30, 2006.

Kenai Fjords National Park Superintendent Jeff Mow presented the alternatives at a Seward City Council meeting on March 28, 2006; no questions or comments were raised by the council.

Five comments were received. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) determined that no Essential Fish Habitat Assessment is required, so they have no objection to the project and no further consultation with NMFS is needed. The Independent Living Center in Homer, AK, sent a letter of strong support for the projects. Two individuals also expressed strong support for the projects. The State of Alaska is supportive of the National Park Service's efforts to enhance visitor experience at Exit Glacier. The State resource agencies agree with the NPS negative determination, and therefore an Alaska Coastal Management Program review is not required for this activity.

DECISION

The NPS decision is to select the proposed action alternative for Improvements to Trails and Overlooks in the Exit Glacier Area as described above, along with the mitigating measures. No modifications were made, except to clarify what constitutes "power equipment" that is limited to use between 9 am and 6 pm as a mitigation measure for impacts to visitor experience.

Mitigating Measures

The following mitigation measures apply to the selected alternative:

Soils: Trail construction will be planned and designed to minimize erosion and sedimentation and the removal of soil-stabilizing vegetation. Alignment of trails will avoid disturbing fragile wetland soils or intercepting and diverting seeps and stream channels. Trails will be constructed in a manner to avoid or minimize steep treadways, reducing the potential for soil erosion due to

formation of water rills, gullies, and outboard trail tread failure. The wheelchair accessible trail will be wide enough to allow two wheelchairs to pass each other safely without leaving the path tread, which would minimize localized impacts to soils along the margins of the path. Hiking trails will also be designed to prevent development of social trails or other off trail uses.

Impacts to soils including compaction from visitor use will be mitigated by installing barriers to minimize off trail use. Where appropriate, natural rock or log trail borders will be installed to delineate trails and encourage users to remain on the trail tread, thus reducing soil impacts to adjacent off path areas. At the proposed Overlook Loop Trail glacier overlook, signs as well as posts with rope barriers will be used to define the trail.

Soundscape: For trail construction, hand tools will be used in lieu of power tools as much as possible in order to lessen noise. Small diameter trees and shrubs will be cut or removed with handsaws or loppers.

Vegetation: Work on trails and overlooks will be planned so as to reduce impacts on vegetation. Proposed locations for infrastructure such as signs, trails and overlooks, will be surveyed for possible special status plant species. Trails will be designed and maintained to discourage social trail development. To mitigate the impacts of blasting, careful placement of charges will be used to minimize flying debris and damage to vegetation.

Efforts will be utilized to control exotic species. The park's exotic plants inventory and monitoring program currently surveys all trails and developed areas in the park for the purpose of early detection and rapid removal of non-native invasive plant species; this survey effort will continue under the selected alternative.

In addition, the following mitigation measures will be implemented to minimize or avoid infestation of exotics resulting from the projects:

- Vehicles and equipment (including hand tools and wheelbarrows) brought in from off-site will be cleaned at a commercial car wash in Seward and transported to the Exit Glacier area on a trailer prior to taking them off of the paved trail. If equipment leaves the pavement in the Exit Glacier developed area during the project, it will be recleaned prior to returning to the unpaved trail system.
- During the brush clearing portion of the Nature Trail Reroute, a pickup truck will be driven up the paved trail and parked at the end of the paved trail (still on pavement) while clean smaller equipment, such as a bobcat, transports brush cut from the trail corridor back to the pick-up for transport to an off-site disposal area. A chipper may be used to reduce the volume of brush to be handled. Park Resource Management staff will inspect the brush disposal location for presence of exotics to minimize the probability of transporting seeds into the park trail system.
- Some rock material used for these trail projects will come from on-site to avoid importing exotic plants to the area. Any purchased materials that could transport exotic vegetation will be purchased from sources as close to the Resurrection Valley as possible. If appropriate, park resource management personnel will inspect the material source prior to use.

- Area of disturbed soil will be minimized to the extent practicable, consistent with project objectives.
- Any stockpiled material will be stored for as short a time period as practical to maintain it in as weed-free condition as possible.
- At the start of the field season, and again whenever new trail crews arrive, trail workers will receive an orientation to exotic plants and standard or specific mitigation measures to reduce infestations. The park's resource management staff will be responsible for conducting the briefing. The park's maintenance staff is responsible for notifying appropriate resource management personnel when new crews are arriving to schedule the briefing.
- Park exotic plant personnel will pay particular attention to the project areas during routine survey efforts for at least three years following completion of the projects to ensure that any weeds inadvertently transported to the site are promptly detected and treated. Since trucks will be driven up the paved trail and to/from the off-site brush disposal site, intensive survey attention will be paid to areas along the paved trail.

Geologic Resources: To mitigate the impacts of blasting to geologic resources:

- Bedrock outcrops, talus slopes and other barriers will be avoided whenever possible by adjusting and lengthening the alignment of the trail; and
- Charges will be carefully placed in order to reduce the size of the impacted area.
- Blasting will be planned and conducted out by a trained, certified blaster.

Wildlife: New trails and overlooks will be sited to avoid sensitive wildlife habitats, including wildlife travel corridors, foraging areas, denning sites, and nesting or brood-rearing areas.

To mitigate the impacts of blasting on wildlife, the following mitigation measures will be employed:

- Blasting will be performed late in the summer season to minimize impacts on breeding wildlife;
- Blasting will occur between the hours of 9am to 6pm to avoid peak wildlife foraging times (early morning and evening).

Visitor Experience: To mitigate the impacts of blasting on park visitors, blasting will occur late in the summer season when visitation is lower. Power equipment (including all motorized equipment except pickup trucks) and blasting will be restricted to the hours between 9am and 6pm to avoid disturbing overnight campers in the Exit Glacier area. Signs will be posted at trailheads to notify visitors of blasting on days when it will occur.

Maintenance staff will coordinate weekly with Interpretive staff regarding trail construction activities to mitigate impacts on park visitors and interpretive programs.

Rationale for the Decision

The selected alternative (the Environmentally Preferred Alternative) will satisfy the purpose and need for the project better than the other alternative because it will improve the visitor experience, create wheelchair accessible glacier viewing opportunities, prevent adverse impacts to natural resources, and provide for safer access to Exit Glacier.

The No Action Alternative was rejected because it would not meet the purpose and need as well as the selected alternative. Under the No Action Alternative, the visitor experience would not be improved and wheelchair accessible viewing of the glacier would remain limited. Off trail use by visitors wishing a closer view of the retreating Exit Glacier from the Overlook Loop Trail would continue to impact natural resources and the visitor experience, including safety. The degraded section on the lower Harding Icefield Trail would continue to compromise resource protection and visitor safety.

Significance Criteria

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

(1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

This EA examined alternatives for implementation of selected actions from the Exit Glacier Area Plan. The overarching FONSI for that plan was signed in October 2004.

This EA evaluated the effects of the preferred alternative on soils, water quality, floodplains, soundscape, vegetation, geologic resources, wildlife, visitor experience and safety. Effects will be as follows: negligible adverse long-term effects on soils and geologic resources; minor adverse long-term effects on water quality, soundscape, wildlife and vegetation; moderate short-term effects on soundscape, wildlife and visitor experience; moderate long-term effects are expected to continue regarding floodplains, while moderate beneficial long-term effects may be expected on the visitor experience.

As part of the larger Exit Glacier Area Plan, long-term cumulative effects are estimated as follows: negligible for geologic resources; minor for water quality and soundscape; moderate for soils and floodplains; major for vegetation, wildlife and visitor experience.

(2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

Implementation of the selected alternative will have minor beneficial long-term effects on public safety by providing improved access to glacier views for all visitors and improving alignment of the lower Harding Icefield Trail. This EA considers implementation of a portion of the larger Exit Glacier Area Plan and, as such, would contribute to continued minor adverse long-term cumulative increased safety risks described in the 2004 EA and FONSI.

These projects will have minor beneficial long-term effects on safety, however in combination with past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions within the study area, minor adverse long-term cumulative increased safety risks would continue as described in the 2004 EA for the Exit Glacier Area Plan.

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

The geographic area covered by this alternative is within Kenai Fjords National Park. No historic or cultural resources, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas will be affected, either positively or negatively, by these three trail projects.

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

The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial as evidenced by the lack of comments received during the public comment period.

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

These are standard trail improvement projects conducted routinely throughout most national park areas. The effects on the human environment are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

(6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent of future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The 2004 Exit Glacier Area Plan and General Management Plan Amendment identified management zones and desired future conditions through an appropriate NEPA process. This EA describes more detailed impacts associated with more detailed project descriptions for implementation of projects broadly covered in the previous larger planning process. Therefore, these actions do not establish a precedent, but rather are a small part of a planning context previously analyzed.

(7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

The 2004 Exit Glacier Area Plan and General Management Plan Amendment identified management zones and desired future conditions through an appropriate NEPA process. This EA describes more detailed impacts associated with more detailed project descriptions for implementation of projects broadly covered in the previous larger planning process. Cumulative effects of all management anticipated in this area of the park were considered as part of the previous process which resulted in a FONSI signed in October of 2004.

(8) 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 or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Cultural resources were dismissed from detailed analysis because this area has been surveyed and no such properties occur there.

(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. No listed threatened or endangered species, or their designated critical habitat, occur in 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.

These actions will not cause a violation of any Federal, State, or local law or requirements for environmental protection.

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 all laws and Executive Orders. 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.