

**KATMAI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE AND
ALAGNAK WILD RIVER
WILDERNESS AND BACKCOUNTRY MANAGEMENT PLAN**

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY REPORT

NOVEMBER 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From March 21, 2022, through May 3, 2022, the National Park Service (NPS) invited the public to provide input as part of a civic engagement process for the development of a wilderness and backcountry management plan (“the plan”) for Katmai National Park and Preserve and Alagnak Wild River (“the park”).

To introduce the planning effort, the National Park Service held three virtual public meetings to discuss the development of the wilderness and backcountry management plan and to answer questions about the project. These virtual public meetings were held on Wednesday, March 23, at 10:00 a.m. (AKST); Wednesday, March 30, at 5:00 p.m. (AKST); and Thursday, April 7, at 1:00 p.m. (AKST). During the virtual meetings, NPS staff explained the planning process, showcased methods for public comment, and answered participants’ questions.

The public was invited to submit written comments by mail, email, and on the project website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/katmai-wbmp>. The National Park Service informed the public about the opportunity to provide feedback using printed and digital flyers and newsletters. The public was also directed to the project “StoryMap” (<https://bit.ly/katmaistorymap>), which provided additional context on the plan, including proposed management zones and desired conditions for those areas.

By the close of this comment period, the National Park Service had received 24 correspondences on the project website. In addition, the project StoryMap logged more than 300 views. Of the correspondences submitted on the project website, the majority (75%) were from Alaska residents. Two comments were submitted by Colorado and California residents, and one comment was submitted each by Washington and Florida residents.

This report provides an overview of the planning process and a summary of public comments, grouped by topic questions posed to the public during the review period.

PLANNING PROCESS

The initial planning process was paused in 2018 and reinitiated in 2022. Prior work has been updated to reflect the parks’ current conditions and challenges in managing the wilderness and backcountry areas of Katmai National Park and Preserve and Alagnak Wild River.

In March 2022, the planning team released a flyer, newsletter, and online StoryMap (<https://bit.ly/katmaistorymap>) to inform the public about the planning process and how to share feedback on the ideas presented. The public input received in this round of civic engagement via the project website will inform the development of this plan and its related management actions.

After incorporating public feedback into the draft management strategies and actions, the planning team will request feedback from the public on proposed plan actions and preliminary management options in spring of 2023. That feedback will also be incorporated into the draft wilderness and backcountry management plan, which will go out for public review in spring of 2024. The plan will be finalized in the fall of 2024.

Throughout the planning process, the National Park Service will continue to engage with the public and park partners to gather input on the project. The NPS planning team is grateful to those who engaged in the public comment process and appreciate the robust and thoughtful input. This input is key to developing a plan that best serves the park resources and its managers, stakeholders, and community members.

COMMENTS BY TOPIC QUESTIONS

Question #1: What experiences in the wilderness and backcountry do you find most important?

Multiple commenters value opportunities to experience solitude, see wildlife (e.g., bears, fish); access these areas easily; identify native plant and tree species; and enjoy wilderness, beauty, and quiet. Multiple commenters value that the backcountry and wilderness areas are largely undegraded by humans and have few to no signs of human activity and development. Commenters value being able to camp overnight in these quiet and undisturbed areas. Multiple commenters noted the importance of historical and ongoing uses of these lands, including native allotments by local residents from the villages of Igiugig, Kokhanok, and Levelock. Commenters noted the importance of commercial services supporting visitor use in this remote area and, in turn, supporting the local economy.

Question #2: What issues or impacts most interfere with your desired park experience in the wilderness and backcountry areas of the park?

Multiple commenters noted the growing numbers of visitors that has resulted in crowding, noise (e.g., music, loud groups, planes, helicopters, motorboats); uneducated visitors recreating in areas inappropriately (not adhering to NPS rules); and associated signs of human use, such as litter and repeated trampling of native plants. One commenter noted that high noise levels and overcrowded backcountry campsites can scare off native wildlife and make the area more disturbed overall. One commenter noted the issue of competition among fishermen and a general lack of respect among different user groups. One commenter noted the issue of drop-off rafters camping on private lands in the preserve and along the Alagnak River. One commenter noted that closures with limited notice to commercial operators and lack of experienced NPS personnel most interfere with their desired experience. Multiple commenters expressed experiencing minimal to no issues that negatively impact their experience in wilderness and backcountry areas of the park.

Question #3: What strategies or specific changes would you like the planning team to consider when brainstorming solutions to resolve the key planning issues in the wilderness and backcountry?

Some commenters would like to see strict quotas or limitations on the number of people (and aircraft) allowed to visit these areas at one time, including a limitation on commercialized use. One commenter suggested restricting visitors to trips that are longer than one day. No other specific numbers or parameters for determining limits were suggested by commenters. Commenters explained how these limits would help spread out user groups, reduce ground vegetation trampling, and reduce crowding. If limits were placed, these commenters would like to see clear criteria used to determine such limits, including visitor use data, historical use by commercial use authorizations (CUAs), and seasonal use patterns. Commenters who want to see limitations placed would like these limitations to provide equitable access to visitors.

Some commenters would not like to see restrictions placed on local residents or on commercial providers. One commenter noted that any rules strictly limiting locations or number of aircraft visiting certain areas could negatively affect the safety of guests and employees due to these areas' remoteness and unpredictable weather. One commenter suggested that any limits placed on the park would increase costs of service, making the area less equitably accessed by the public. A few commenters noted that the commercial operator program is working as intended and that there is no need for a wilderness and backcountry management plan at this time.

Commenters advised the park to be sensitive to the effects of information technology, online content, and general marketing that attracts visitors to the wilderness and backcountry.

Multiple commenters would like more proactive educational materials to be provided to all visitors, including best practices, online videos focused on backcountry visitor activities (similar to the Brooks Camp orientation materials), online access to best bear viewing practices, awareness of animal behavior, and Leave No Trace practices.

Multiple commenters urged the National Park Service to reference accurate visitor use data, noting that the data presented in the newsletter (40,000 annual visitors) includes data from the frontcountry Brooks River developed area and the Lake Camp boat launch. Commenters also suggested that the backcountry trends presented do not match what is shown at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/visitor-use.htm>. Relatedly, commenters suggested that the visitor data for Moraine Creek drainage are stable and do not result in crowding in the vast area nor does visitation detract from the safe and enjoyable experience of visitors. One commenter recommended that the park collect visitor use data to proactively avoid duplication of visitors—that is, not double counting one visitor who uses air and boat services on the same day. One commenter noted that the number of commercial use authorizations has been consistent over the past decade and has been working well over this period. One commenter suggested that the park is likely nearing its highest potential per-day visitation now due to its geography and suggested that no changes are necessary.

Multiple commenters would like to review data supporting the statement that bear physiology and behavior are being negatively impacted by human interactions in the

backcountry and wilderness. These commenters said that, contrary to the newsletter, the bear populations and habitat are healthy. These commenters would like to see more visitor use studies, such as the park's three-year study at Geographic Harbor and Hallo Bay (1998–2001). One commenter suggested that NPS bear management and protection is overly reactive to minor instances of bear habituation, while the overall bear population remains healthy. One commenter suggested that the NPS perception and preservation of the park's "natural" environment must account for human existence historically, including Alaska Native peoples. This commenter suggested that human existence is part of nature and recommended maintaining opportunities for bears to experience nonaggressive tolerance of humans.

One commenter would like reasonable access to be maintained, especially for visitors who may not be able to undertake an unsupported trip into the backcountry or wilderness.

One commenter would like clarification of whether the NPS Visitor Experience and Resource Protection process will be used in this plan. One commenter mentioned the importance of monitoring indicators to ensure actions are taken before acceptable standards are exceeded.

Multiple commenters noted the success of the site-specific protocols implemented at Geographic Harbor and suggested implementing a site-specific protocol at specifically busy areas to provide more predictable and consistent human behavior, which benefits the bears. One commenter suggested considering site-specific protocols for areas that are regular daily destinations for commercial operators, have concentrated visitor use, and have frequent interactions with bears closer than 50 yards.

One commenter questioned why the navigability of rivers in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) addition, such as Battle River, is included in this plan, adding that crowding is not an issue here. This commenter suggested that the wilderness and backcountry management plan is too broad and far reaching to resolve issues that are experienced only at specific locations.

Some commenters want to ensure that the plan adheres to all experiences and activities allowed under the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act, which amends the application of the Wilderness Act. ANILCA provisions brought up by commenters include those allowing motorized transportation, cabins, weather monitoring stations, and other uses in designated wilderness.

One commenter would like the Alagnak Wild River portion of the plan to be referred to as the "Alagnak Wild and Scenic River Plan" because the wild and scenic river is a separate conservation system unit under ANILCA. One commenter also noted that the Alagnak River is a state-owned, navigable waterbody with mixed upland ownership and recommended that the river be managed in cooperation with the state as per ANILCA.

One commenter would like the statutory purpose of Katmai, mandated as per ANILCA section 202(2), to be included in this plan. One commenter would like the plan to differentiate between administratively defined wilderness and congressionally designated wilderness under ANILCA. One commenter suggested reviewing the 2006 Alaska Supplement

to the Minimum Requirements Decision Guide (Alaska Supplement) to ensure the plan adheres to both the national policy direction of designated wilderness and wild and scenic rivers and ANILCA. One commenter advocated for the project to adhere to the ANILCA recommendation for state participation in the collaborative development, preparation, and revision of the plan. One commenter requested that the plan clearly depict the land status of the state-owned lands within the planning boundary. One commenter requested that the plan and planning process more fully recognize the state's authorities that overlay the park's land management responsibilities in the actions common to all alternatives.

One commenter requested the following in coordination with the State of Alaska: the opportunity to review data on fish and wildlife and related uses and access that will be used to develop management proposals; involvement in planning efforts regarding human-wildlife interactions and potential conflicts; consultation with Alaska Department of Fish and Game regarding management efforts of the Alagnak River and other sportfishing and commercial fishing areas; retaining existing access to and opportunities for general and subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering activities within the preserve; the opportunity to review information on resources and the range of visitor experience opportunities, including any maps and surveys the National Park Service uses; and any management prescriptions that address and/or propose commercial use limits for guided hunting and fishing (e.g., selection/renewal criteria, specific locations, times of year, types and levels of use) that have the potential to affect visitor and local use, as well as local and state economic development.

Question #4: Given that most visitors access the wilderness and backcountry at Katmai and Alagnak through commercial services, what strategies or specific changes would you like the planning team to consider regarding commercial services?

Multiple commenters would like to see more stewardship promoted (e.g., Leave No Trace, use of latrines) for commercial services and more guide accountability. One commenter suggested expanding the Brooks River guide program to a parkwide guide program. The parkwide guide program would provide a comprehensive, clear image of rules and expectations; enable guides to conduct personal bear orientation training and backcountry best practices to visitors; allow the park to require guides to retake guide training if proving insufficient; and provide closer scrutinization of operators who opt out of the program.

Commenters would like to see more proactive measures taken with commercial operators, such as preseason operator meetings (as Katmai Service Providers holds) to encourage consistent field practices, including using consistent routes, slowing down and sitting down, merging groups to avoid stress when near bears, having agreed-upon time-of-day limits on some parts of the meadows, and spreading out commercial use to other locations. Commenters also recommended that the park implement online programs and associated tests developed by Katmai Service Providers to help with safety, interactions with different user groups, and interactions with bears, including promoting “stand your ground” and “slow down and sit down.” One commenter suggested working with the State of Alaska and commercial operators to develop bear country guide training standards and eventually a bear viewing guide licensing program. One commenter suggested standardizing best camp

practices among commercial use authorizations, including camping away from bear traffic areas (grazing meadows), installing electric fencing, and removing latrine waste from the field.

Multiple commenters want limits on the number of guided visitors who can visit at one time in specific areas of the backcountry and wilderness. One commenter would like limits on the number of flights allowed in these areas (to reduce noise).

One commenter would like the park to partner with experienced commercial service operators and leverage their expertise and knowledge to support park staff's limited ability to effectively manage the vast remote areas. One commenter recommended capping the number of commercial service providers at the number of currently operating CUA holders to encourage operators to work cooperatively rather than as competitors. Specific recommendations include guaranteed renewal to holders in good standing; the opportunity for the park to revoke permits for those in poor standing; the opportunity to transfer, sell, gift, or opt out of a permit; and the forfeit of permits for those who opt out or do not reapply, allowing others to apply for the permit.

One commenter suggested setting a cap on the number of landings a transportation provider is allowed to make in a specified area per day to lessen concentrated visitation. Specific recommendations include two landings per holder per day in any one specific location; caps applying only to passenger drop-offs (would not apply to dropping guides or employees, nor would it apply to passenger pick-ups); and caps not restricting holders to landing at their lodges or semipermanent camps.

One commenter would like the park to retain opportunities for visitors to access these areas without commercial services. One commenter suggested that the three local villages (Igiugig, Kokhanok, and Levelock) should be included for commercial services businesses and receive a percentage of the sport or visitor permits each day. Several commenters would like the park to partner with commercial services providers in the off-season, with more review time, so that providers may contribute comments during a less busy time.

One commenter would like to discourage the park from closing areas without warning and explained how this action is disruptive to business and clients. One commenter would like to see the overall economic impact of the proposed plan on the commercial service providers, including hunting and fishing guides operating within park boundaries.

Multiple commenters discouraged the park from changing the commercial use management to a concessions system, suggesting that there is no evidence of degraded habitat from human access in the backcountry and expressing worry that a concessions program would limit access and impose additional regulations on providers. One commenter explained that if the park were to move to a concessions program, commercial use authorizations would lose their current opportunity of providing new services to customers based on visitor preferences.

One commenter disapproved of backcountry access via commercial services, remarking that more heavily trafficked areas are better suited for commercial services and the less-experienced visitor they support. One commenter noted that commercial services in this area

would violate the ethics of Leave No Trace and detract from the undisturbed quiet experience of the backcountry and wilderness.

One commenter would like to see concentrated visitor use areas in the backcountry and wilderness, where visitors would be encouraged to view bears from high vantage points. One commenter acknowledged that Katmai Service Providers encourages its members to group bear viewers into established viewing spots to offer bears consistency and reduce impacts. This commenter argued that by using this technique, 10 to 50 visitors wouldn't impact bears any differently.

Question #5: What is the park doing well to manage these issues that you would like to see continue?

Multiple commenters expressed appreciation that the park addresses these issues, informs the villages about this project, works collaboratively with the commercial use authorizations, and manages bears with respect. One commenter expressed a preference for interacting with interpretive staff instead of enforcement staff, particularly at Hallo Bay. One commenter expressed appreciation for senior park staffs' expertise and attributed the successful work with bears and other wildlife to the staffs' long-standing experience at Katmai.

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