

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Katmai National Park and Preserve
Alaska



Finding of No Significant Impact

Swikshak Patrol Cabin Replacement

April 2010

Recommended:

Ralph Moore

Superintendent, Katmai National Park and Preserve

4/1/10

Date

Approved:

Ann G. Mason

Regional Director, Alaska

4/14/2010

Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Swikshak Patrol Cabin Replacement Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska March 2010

The National Park Service (NPS) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate a proposal to replace the Swikshak Patrol Cabin on the northern coast of Katmai National Park (KATM), Alaska. This area is within congressionally designated Wilderness.

The NPS has selected Alternative 2, the preferred alternative, Replace Cabin, to construct a new cabin and outhouse, with mitigating measures.

Attached to this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) are responses to substantive public comments and errata that details changes made to the EA.

ALTERNATIVES

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA.

Alternative 1, No Action

Under the No Action alternative the Swikshak patrol cabin would not be rebuilt. The NPS would take no action to stabilize the structure. The cabin would continue to naturally deteriorate and collapse. Ranger patrols and other NPS administrative use would continue either by camping at the site in tents with a temporary electric fence or by using the site only during the day.

Alternative 2, Replace Cabin, the NPS Preferred Alternative

The existing Swikshak patrol cabin would be demolished and a new cabin would be built at the same site. A new outhouse would also be constructed. The cabin would serve as an NPS administrative facility and would not be used for subsistence, commercial or public use purposes. If needed, the cabin could be used by visitors as an emergency shelter.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The EA was issued for public review and comment for 20 days from February 11, 2010 to March 3, 2010. The abbreviated public comment period is provided for under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) fast track guidance. The EA or notices of the EA were sent by mail or email to 109 government agencies, tribal entities, interest groups, and individuals. The EA was posted on the NPS national website, *Planning, Environment, and Public Comment* (PEPC) at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/> and on the park's webpage. The NPS issued a press release about the availability of the EA and the open comment period. Thirty-eight written comments were received.

The public comments received did not change the conclusions in the EA about the environmental effects of the proposed action. The NPS responses to substantive public comments are found in the attached errata sheet.

DECISION

The NPS decision is to select Alternative 2, Replace Cabin, along with mitigating measures.

Transportation and Staging

Approximately four laborers will be brought to the site by float plane (Swikshak Lagoon), fixed winged aircraft on wheels (sandy coastal beach on south side of the peninsula), or boat (coast or lagoon). A cabin kit and other building materials will be brought to the site from Kodiak, Alaska on a landing craft vessel. It will take two trips to bring the cabin kit over to Swikshak. Staging of materials and staff camp tents will be near the cabin site. Camping will be done using *Leave No Trace* principles. Once ashore, all transportation of materials and people to the cabin site will be on foot. No motor vehicles will be used within the Katmai Wilderness.

Demolition and Removal of Existing Structures

The existing 10' x 12' cabin (120 sq ft) will be demolished with hand tools. Cabin materials and the remnants of the former 12' x 7.5' sauna (90 sq ft) and 3' x 3' outhouse (9 sq ft) will be consolidated and sorted. Non-treated and non-painted clean wood and other combustible materials will be burned below the mean high tide line. Materials that are not combustible or that are hazardous to burn will be transported to Kodiak on the landing craft vessel's return trip for proper disposal.

Cabin Construction

A new 20' x 12' kit-built log cabin (240 sq ft) will be constructed on the same location as the existing cabin during the summer of 2010. Although the footprint of the new cabin (240 sq ft) will be twice the size as the existing cabin (120 sq ft), with the removal of the sauna ruins (90 sq ft), the overall increase of the development footprint will be 30 sq ft or 15%. The new cabin will be of identical design and size as the Amalik Bay patrol cabin (EA Figure 4).

A 5 horsepower gasoline-powered generator will provide temporary electricity to power saws and other similar tools during cabin construction. Use of the generator will be limited to the minimum amount of time needed to complete cabin and outhouse construction. It will be removed after construction. Use of power tools will be minimized and restricted to work that cannot be accomplished safely with hand tools.

The interior of the cabin will be designed and constructed to accommodate two people for extended occupation. The cabin will be elevated above the ground between approximately 18" and 24" on pilings, allowing for the temporary storage of boats, kayaks, and other large items.

Anti-reflective photo-voltaic solar panels will be installed on the cabin roof to power a small low-wattage battery system. The power will be used for light bulbs and to charge NPS radios and other portable equipment. A radio antenna will be installed and extend between 6' and 8'

above the roof. A ladder and small platform will be installed on the rear of the cabin to enable park staff to set up and remove the solar panel(s) and radio antenna, when needed.

Since the nearest freshwater source is located approximately 1/2 mile north of the cabin on the north shore of Swikshak Lagoon, a 50 gallon rainwater cistern will be installed under or immediately adjacent to the cabin. Rainwater will be collected from the roof (approximately 400 sq ft of surface area) and channeled to the cistern through a system of gutters and pipes. A hand operated pump will provide water to a kitchen sink.

A propane stove and oven will be installed in the cabin for cooking. A propane tank shelter box will be constructed outside the cabin to protect gas lines and prevent wildlife damage. The cabin will be equipped with a battery powered smoke detector and fire extinguisher. A steel storage box will be installed immediately adjacent to the cabin for fuel and boat motor storage.

Outhouse Construction

A new 4' x 4' outhouse will be constructed over a hand-dug hole in native soil (identical size as existing outhouse). The new outhouse will be made of wood and appropriately styled (design, finish, roofing, and color) to blend in with the Katmai Wilderness setting. Motorized equipment will not be used to excavate the hole. To comply with State water quality regulations, the bottom of the hole will be at least 4 feet above the water table, and the outhouse will be at least 100 yards from the nearest open water. The existing outhouse hole will be hand-filled with native soil from the adjacent new privy pit excavation.

Vegetation Removal

Some trees and brush may need to be removed to provide for a buffer around the new cabin, outhouse, water cistern tank, fuel storage box, and propane tank shelter. This fire safety buffer will be a maximum of 30 feet from all structures. Any trees and brush removed will be cut flush with the ground surface and the slash scattered through the local area. Tree or brush cutting will not occur between April 10 and July 15 in order to protect nesting migratory birds and to comply with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 USC 703).

Cabin Use

The cabin will be used for ranger patrols from 3-6 weeks per summer during the early summer through the salmon run, and for visits of 1-2 week duration throughout the summer by scientists or other NPS staff. Cabin occupancy may also include resource management, visitor service, and research staff. The cabin will not be a subsistence use cabin or a public use cabin.

Rationale for the Decision

The selected actions will satisfy the purpose and need of the project better than the No Action alternative because the existing Swikshak cabin is uninhabitable, and the new replacement cabin will function as a base of operations for regular long-term resource protection patrols. The cabin will enable the NPS to protect and manage the extensive Katmai coast during the summer months when visitation is at its highest levels, and provide the NPS a safe and durable hard-sided shelter for protection against inclement weather and occasional undesirable wildlife encounters while conducting official government business for extended periods of time.

The impacts to park resources, as analyzed in the EA, are not significant. These impacts are outweighed by the benefits to park resources and park operations of having a functioning patrol cabin at Swikshak.

The administrative headquarters for the park is in King Salmon, approximately 100 miles west of Swikshak. Often, patrol staff may not have dependable transportation to and from King Salmon due to flight weather conditions over the Katmai Range. Due to this, patrol rangers may need to stay on the coast for extended periods, increasing the likelihood of encountering extreme weather conditions not normally experienced by the majority of visitors to the Katmai Wilderness.

The Swikshak location is the most utilitarian site between Cape Douglas and Big River. It provides for foot and water based patrols of the Swikshak and Big River areas which are two of the primary destinations along the Katmai coast for commercially guided bear viewing and sport fishing. The numbers of visitors to these areas have increased substantially from 268 in 1991 to 1,365 in 2007. Big River and Swikshak account for approximately 40% of the visitation along the Katmai coast. As visitation increases, the likelihood of emergency response from the NPS will also increase.

The No Action alternative did not meet the purpose and need of the project. Under the No Action alternative, NPS patrol rangers would camp in tents surrounded by a temporary electric fence for bear protection, or would patrol the area during shorter visits. Portable heavy-duty tents and tent frames would not provide the necessary protection from wildlife when longer periods of occupancy or lengthy unoccupied periods occur. Electric fences are less secure deterrents than a cabin for extended periods of absence from stored food, garbage, fuel, and fresh water.

The No Action alternative was the environmentally preferred alternative in the EA because it would have a lesser footprint of development on the park and Wilderness, but it would not serve the logistical needs of backcountry rangers patrolling the Katmai coast.

Significance Criteria

The selected 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.

The EA determined that impacts will range from moderately beneficial to moderately negative. No impacts will be major.

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

The selected action will be beneficial to public health and safety. The NPS will improve its ability to patrol and respond to emergencies. Per the Alaska National Interest Lands

Conservation Act (ANILCA), the cabin may be used by the general public during emergencies involving the safety of human life.

(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 cabin site is in a national park and designated Wilderness and near (about ½ mile) historic commercial clam operations ruins.

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

Based on public comment, the effects presented in the EA are not highly controversial.

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

The effects of the proposed actions do not appear to have significant elements of uncertainty or to 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 proposed cabin replacement was evaluated in the EA on its own merits, and in relation to its location, need, and affected resources. Each such proposal is evaluated independently, and decisions regarding this project do not set precedence of policy, practice, or operations for any future proposal.

(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 replacement and maintenance of a structure within the Katmai Wilderness contributes to a cumulative impact on national park and Wilderness values. Within the 3,473,000-acre Katmai Wilderness, there are currently two other cabins for administrative use. One is near the Nonvianuk River, on the west side of the park; the other is on the Katmai coast at Amalik Bay. The park's 1986 GMP provides guidance for structures in Wilderness.

(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.

The cabin is not eligible for the National Register, and there are no historic properties affected.

(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 area of potential effect contains no proposed or listed endangered or threatened species or critical habitat.

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

The proposed action is consistent with Federal, State, and local laws.

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 the Wilderness Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), the Endangered Species Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act. 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.

ATTACHMENT A

NPS RESPONSES TO PUBLIC COMMENTS AND ERRATA
for the
Katmai National Park and Preserve EA for
Swikshak Patrol Cabin Replacement

This attachment amends the subject environmental assessment (EA) and provides NPS responses to public comments.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

The NPS received 38 public comments: 34 from private individuals (PI), 2 from the State of Alaska (Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas (CACFA) and the ANILCA Implementation Program (AIP)), and 2 from preservation/conservation organizations (Alaska Chapter of Wilderness Watch (WW) and Alaska Chapter of Sierra Club (SC)).

The NPS has read and considered all comments received. Responses to substantive comments are provided below. A substantive comment is defined as one which leads the NPS to: (1) modify an alternative, including the proposed action; (2) develop and evaluate an alternative not previously given serious consideration; (3) supplement, improve, or modify the environmental analysis; or (4) make factual corrections (CEQ NEPA Regulations 1503.4).

Comment 1, PI: I believe the public would rather have a public use cabin than a ranger patrol cabin. A good compromise may be a mixed use cabin.

Response 1, NPS: Currently, the NPS has one public use cabin within the park and Wilderness (Fure's cabin adjacent to the Bay of Islands area of Naknek Lake). The park's General Management Plan (GMP 1986, page 39) directs that there will be no new public use cabins within the park and Wilderness.

Comment 2 PI: The construction of a ranger patrol cabin is apparently not addressed in any existing wilderness plan or planning document for Katmai.

Response 2 NPS: The park's 1986 GMP (page 23 figure) provides for a seasonal ranger camp in the Big River area of the Katmai coast, about 5 miles west of Swikshak. After conducting extensive patrols of this area from the 1980s to the present, the NPS has determined that replacing the existing Swikshak cabin will be more beneficial in protecting park and Wilderness resources than maintaining a seasonal ranger camp or constructing a new administrative cabin in the Big Creek area.

Comment 3 PI: Develop and follow an appropriate wilderness stewardship plan for the Katmai Wilderness.

Response 3 NPS: The NPS is continuing to implement the park's 1986 GMP which serves as the park's Wilderness Management Plan (GMP page 91).

Comment 4 PI: The EA says that the new structures would become a focal point of NPS management activities and future activities, such as co-located research facilities, communication facilities and repeater stations "would be drawn to this existing development." This is stated as a positive, as if the Park Service doesn't have control over whether or not, or where, these other activities take place. I don't believe an administratively created development zone within a Wilderness area is permitted under the Wilderness Act. And although the expectation of the development zone is stated, there is no assessment of this additional development.

Response 4 NPS: The co-located research facilities, communication facilities, or repeater stations will require additional environmental analysis if such structures and facilities are proposed. The NPS is not proposing to construct such structures as part of the Swikshak cabin replacement project. The NPS does not consider the Swikshak patrol cabin and surrounding area to be an administrative development zone.

Comment 5 WW: The Wilderness Act in section 4(c) prohibits structures or installations in Wilderness.

Response 5 NPS: The Wilderness Act provides exceptions to the prohibition of structures or installations in Wilderness in special cases. Specifically, Section 4(c) provides exceptions for structures and installations if necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of the Wilderness Act.

The NPS completed a wilderness minimum requirements analysis as part of the EA justifying the continued need of the patrol cabin for administrative purposes. This is consistent with the Wilderness Act, ANILCA, and NPS Management Policies.

Comment 6 WW: We would like to know how many other such ranger patrol or other administrative cabins currently exist in the Katmai Wilderness? Are there plans for other administrative cabins? The EA mentions a patrol cabin at Amalik Bay; we would like to know when this cabin was established and how it was justified.

Response 6 NPS: The NPS has two other ranger patrol cabins within the Katmai Wilderness: the Amalik Bay cabin and the Nonvianuk cabin. The Amalik Bay cabin was constructed in 1999 to replace a similar structure built by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in 1962. The justification for the Amalik Bay cabin was identical to the Swikshak cabin. See the "Rationale for the Decision" section above. The NPS does not have plans to construct additional administrative cabins within the Katmai Wilderness.

Comment 7 AIP: As noted in the EA, the cabin site was originally developed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) for administrative purposes to support monitoring of fish and wildlife resources within the area. We request the decision document recognize that ADF&G may also use the cabin for future administrative activities, on a scheduled or emergency basis.

Response 7 NPS: The NPS will work closely with ADF&G regarding the Department's interest in using the cabin for administrative and emergency purposes.

Comment 8 SC: We recommend adoption of a third alternative, which is a variation on the no-action alternative. Under this third alternative, the existing Swikshak shack would be removed as described in the section on Demolition and Removal of Existing Structures, not left to decay and

collapse. Instead of a permanent cabin, weather port-type facilities inside an electric fence would be used during the summer patrol season and removed at the end of the season. Scientists would not be permitted to use the facilities.

Response 8 NPS: Under the No Action alternative, the proposed cabin replacement would not take place, and normal park management would continue. Under those circumstances, the existing structures could be removed as wilderness restoration actions, or tent camping in various forms could continue, but those are not addressed or proposed in this project. Even the use of heavier duty tent structures and electric fences would not provide the same level of protection of food, fuel, garbage and fresh water from wildlife as does a hard sided cabin during longer absences for patrols. The park superintendent has the discretionary authority to issue permits for conducting scientific research, and could allow use of administrative facilities as part of such a permit. Wilderness areas offer unique research possibilities where valuable baseline information can be gathered and generally undisturbed natural systems can be studied.

Comment 9 PI: The justification for the project in the minimum requirements analysis seems weak.

Response 9 NPS: See the “Rationale for the Decision” section above for clarification.

ERRATA

This errata section provides clarifications, modifications or additional information to the EA and to the selected alternative, Alternative 2, Replace Cabin. These amendments do not significantly change the analysis of the EA and, therefore a new or revised EA is not needed and will not be produced.

1. The location of the Swikshak patrol cabin in the Purpose and Need section of the EA (page 4) was incorrectly stated as 220 miles east southeast of Anchorage. The cabin is located 220 miles southwest of Anchorage.

2. Appendix B: Wilderness Minimum Requirements Analysis, Step 1(E) Wilderness Character
Is the action necessary to preserve the following quality of Wilderness?

Untrammeled: Yes: No: X Not Applicable:

Explain: “Untrammeled” wilderness is that which is unhindered and free from modern human control or manipulation. Although the replacement of the Swikshak cabin would not specifically preserve the untrammeled quality of the wilderness, ranger patrols and other wilderness resource management actions based out of the cabin would help ensure this quality is not adversely affected.

Natural: Yes: X No: Not Applicable:

Explain: The Swikshak patrol cabin is necessary to preserve the natural quality of the Katmai Wilderness. The cabin would provide an important base of operations to ensure natural systems are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization. This would be accomplished through the use of routine ranger patrols, scientific monitoring, and

management. These benefits would enable the park to preserve these natural Wilderness values, outweighing the impacts of the cabin's presence on the landscape.

Other unique components that reflect the character of this wilderness:

Yes: X No: Not Applicable:

Explain: One of the purposes of Katmai National Park and the Katmai Wilderness is to protect scenic, geological, cultural, and recreational features. The unique components that make up the Katmai Wilderness include the scenic coast, the coastal brown bear population, and salmon abundant rivers and streams. The Swikshak patrol cabin is necessary to preserve these unique components of the Katmai Wilderness. The cabin would enable the NPS to effectively contact visitors and commercial operators; interpret and educate wilderness values; monitor bear viewing, sport fishing, and other recreational activities; and assess physical, natural, and cultural resources within the Wilderness.