
Chapter 6

REGIONAL RECREATION & VISITOR USE

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Management and development policies for Denali State Park should be formulated in the context of the overall Denali region, recognizing the particular role the park plays in serving regional demands for natural resource use, public recreation, and tourism. Analysis of trends in outdoor recreation and tourism, preferred activities, existing recreation and tourism facilities, and resource attractions and constraints enable realistic and appropriate management plan recommendations.

This chapter provides a general summary of trends for the region. The Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), published by the National Park Service, should be consulted for more in depth environmental analysis of the area. The FEIS provides detailed trend and resource information particularly as it relates to development proposals discussed in Chapter 8 of this plan.

Recreation and Tourism Trends

Visitor Demand. Over the long run, the population of Alaska is expected to grow resulting in increased recreation demand by residents. Population growth in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough has been particularly high in recent years. Growth averages 4% per year. Between 1990 and 2000 the population of the borough increased 50% and another 25% between 2000 and 2005. The borough now contains approximately 11% of the state's population. The number of tourists visiting Alaska will also continue to increase at a rate of up to 10% per year. In recent years the proportion of visitors coming to Alaska on package commercial tours has been increasing, especially from the cruise ship industry. In the past, the vast majority of Matanuska-Susitna Borough visitors were independent travelers. However, that started changing when the Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge opened in 1997 and the Talkeetna Lodge opened in 1999. One example of the growth in destination tourism activity is illustrated by the more than doubling in the borough's bed tax revenues between 1999 and 2004.

Seasonality of Demand. While most growth in recreation and tourism has occurred in the summer months, the "shoulder season" and winter season have grown as well, particularly with the growth in the number of private cabins and lodging adjacent to the park. Development of facilities and services in the region could help expand off-season recreation and provide more varied opportunities.

Regional Demand. Denali is an international attraction set in a region that has other attractions including Alaska’s two largest cities, glaciers, and wildlife. The region forms an important leg of a “tour triangle” promoted by the tourism industry. The region as a whole is an attraction and should be considered as a whole.

Access. The Denali region is special because it can be accessed in a variety of ways including by highway and rail. In recent years, the Alaska Railroad has shown increased interest in providing whistlestops and developing facilities in these locations that provide access to visitors. New visitor facilities in the region will likely take advantage of the improvements to the highway and railway to maximize the accessibility and to ensure their success through dynamic shifts in travel modes in the future.

Proposed Facilities. Denali State Park is the only other major park in the region, and its current facilities are inadequate to meet current and future demand. The private sector has responded to the increasing number of visitors and the unmet demand with new facilities, primarily lodges, and new activities, such as guided trips.

Preferred Activities

Resident Preferences. Residents enjoy the region because of the natural attractions. Compared to tourists, residents are much younger and are more interested in camping, fishing, and hiking. For residents, the future value of the region depends on protection of the resource base.

Tourist Preferences. Tourists, on average, are much older than Alaska residents and much more interested in sightseeing activities, such as viewing Denali, wildlife, and glaciers. There is, however, still strong interest among tourists for camping, fishing and hiking. During the relatively short period of their time in the Denali region, tourists desire a variety of recreation activities.

Services. Both residents and tourists require a variety of basic services to make use of recreation opportunities. Such services include a general store, coffee shop, lodging, modern campsites, cabins and fuel.

Recreation Facilities and Services

Regional Network. A high percentage of the land in the Matanuska-Susitna and Denali boroughs is in public ownership but not designated as either a national or state park. These lands complement Denali State Park and may be suitable for development. Developing a network of recreation facilities on both private and public lands that takes advantage of dispersed recreation attractions throughout the region rather than focusing all development in the state park may be beneficial.

Travel Time and Distance. Denali State Park is about equal distances from Anchorage and Fairbanks and is well within the driving range of residents for weekend trips. Any development in the state park will be well used by residents of Anchorage and Fairbanks. Given the location of the park, about midway between the two cities, both cities will be served about equally. Travel distances for residents of the Matanuska-Susitna and Denali boroughs are much shorter. As the population growth in the Susitna Valley increases disproportionately to Anchorage and Fairbanks, the percentage of visitation from valley residents in comparison to other Alaskan residents is likely to increase.

Recreation Demand. Existing public recreation facilities, primarily in Denali National Park, are at or exceeding capacity. There is a substantial demand for a variety of facilities and services. In particular, there is a demand for opportunities to view Denali and a need for additional campgrounds, trails, waysides, public use cabins and information centers.

Private Sector. The private sector is diverse and capable of providing a wide range of facilities and services. The private sector has demonstrated an ability to respond to recreation and tourism demand, particularly lodging and guided tours. There is some land in the park, immediately outside the park, and in the region on which private facilities might be developed.

Resource Attractions

Denali. Denali State Park and other sites from Talkeetna to Broad Pass, have excellent views of the mountain. Better views of the mountain are found at the north and south boundaries of the state park along the Parks Highway.

Weather. The weather on the south of the mountain is varied. The National Weather Service reports that it is likely to be cloudy three days more per month in Broad Pass than it is on the north side of the mountain. This additional cloudiness is not considered significant in terms of locating facilities.

Glaciers. The terminal moraines of three major glaciers are within the park: Tokositna, Ruth and Eldridge. The Ruth Glacier has carved a spectacular canyon, and the Eldridge Glacier is closest to the highway. From certain locations along the highway, the glaciers are significant attractions even when cloud cover obscures Denali.

Wildlife. In general, sightings of large mammals are not as numerous in the state park as along the Denali National Park road and backcountry on the north side of the Alaska range. Although densities of large mammals are high, particularly for bears and moose, dense vegetation limits viewing opportunities. In addition, caribou and Dall sheep are not found in the park and sightings of wolves by visitors are rare. Some sites, such as where bear catch salmon at the Chulitna River tributary confluences and along Byers Creek, have more frequent sightings and may offer opportunities for viewing. Unfortunately, population densities are not high enough to warrant developing viewing facilities at these sites.

Other Natural Attractions. The park and the region have an array of other natural attractions, including rivers, streams, lakes, waterfalls, peaks and alpine meadows. Existing trails provide access to a sampling of these features, and others are accessible by boat, plane, snowmachine and dog sled. The possibilities for developing trail and other types of access to these attractions, some in remote parts of the park or public land around the park, are many.

Cultural Attractions. The park and region have a rich cultural history that is of high interest to visitors. Archaeological and historical material from the area could easily fill a visitor center. Of particular interest to visitors may be the history of expeditions on Denali, the construction of the railroad, and the early explorations and Native cultures of the area.

Resource Constraints

Natural Resources. Some of the land in the region, and in the park, appears to be suitable for development based on slope, aspects, soils, permafrost, and surface- and ground- water. Much of this land lies along the Parks Highway and is suitable for construction. The majority of the land in the region, however, has one or more natural resource constraints that would make development either costly or impossible. Sensitive vegetation and wildlife areas may exclude large parts of the park from development and heavy uses, including both alpine and wetland areas.

Cultural, Social Factors. Patterns of land ownership and land use in and around the park make some land unsuitable or marginal for some types of development. For example, residential developments, mining claims and traditional-use areas are located near the Tokosha community, near Peters Hills, along the Susitna River, and, to a lesser extent, near Hurricane. To avoid conflicts with local residents, as well as to protect recreational experiences of park users, design and location of development should be sensitive to potential conflicts with these existing uses.