
Chapter 1

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Plan Purpose

This plan provides guidance for management of park lands and development of recreational facilities, consistent with the park’s Mission Statement. In addition, the plan discusses trends in recreation and tourism, and provides natural resource information that will simplify the task of maintaining a current resource database as new information becomes available.

Establishment of the Park

The Alaska State Legislature created Denali State Park (AS 41.21.150-152) in 1970, and in 1976 amended the boundary to add the upper reaches of the Tokositna basin, west of the old park boundary (see Figure 1). In both actions, the legislature had a strong interest in tourism related development, as well as providing recreational opportunities for Alaskans and preserving the area's natural resources. In 1994 the Blair Lake and Tokositna State Recreation Areas were established. The Indian River State Recreation area was added in 2002. All three were created through management agreements within DNR.

Overview of the Park

Denali State Park is approximately 324,240 acres in size. The State Recreation Areas include an additional 1,470 acres. Although much smaller than Denali National Park and Preserve to the north (6,028,203 acres), Denali State Park and its associated State Recreation Areas are very diverse area. They afford tremendous views of Denali; contains three major rivers, the Susitna, Chulitna, and Tokositna; and have three glaciers adjacent to or within its boundaries, the Ruth, Eldridge and Tokositna. Vegetation ranges from lowland spruce and hardwood forests to alpine tundra. The George Parks Highway transects the park and opens its scenery, wildlife and other natural resources to the public.

Primary uses of the park are camping, hiking, fishing, viewing Denali, canoeing, rafting, river boating, hunting and trapping.

Historical Background

The Mount McKinley National Park was created in 1917, when the federal government “reserved” a 2 million acre tract around Mt. McKinley as a national park. The national park quickly became one of Alaska’s primary tourist attractions.

In 1968 the U.S. and Alaska Departments of Commerce proposed a facility at Chulitna Pass. That was followed by a 1969 proposal by the National Park Service and the Alaska Division of Tourism for a facility on South Curry Ridge (NPS 1969). The location at Chulitna, which is only 70 miles from the main entrance of Denali National Park, and lack of existing infrastructure at both sites made these projects unappealing to many people. Although the designation of Denali State Park in 1970 was intended to provide the land base and protections needed for a major public tourism facility, neither proposal materialized. The later report led the National Park Service to recommend this area for inclusion in the national park, due primarily to the tremendous views of Denali.

The State of Alaska selected these lands and the state legislature created Denali State Park in 1970. With the 1972 opening of the George Parks Highway, the number of visitors to the park increased dramatically. New access to the area also spurred proposals for development, including a Teflon-domed recreational city in the Tokositna area. In 1974, the state completed improvements including a 61-unit campground at Byers Lake and a trail along the Curry-Kesugi ridge system.

State Parks wrote the Denali State Park Master Plan in 1975 with proposals for a variety of developments within the park and intensive development concentrated around Byers Lake. Development was to include a major visitors' complex and downhill ski area. This project was let out for competitive proposals and a contract was awarded; however, the successful bidder never seriously pursued the project.

In 1976, one year after the Denali State Park Master Plan was adopted, 42,240 acres in the Tokositna region were added to the park. This addition was significant because it incorporated into Denali State Park the highest-rated location in the state park for viewing Denali.

Since 1978, there have been several proposals for a major visitor complex in the park. Ambitious plans for a resort city in the Tokositna area and a controversial proposal for a mountain viewing facility on the flank of Curry Ridge were never implemented.

Recognizing that the 1975 master plan was outdated, the Department of Natural Resources, in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development and the National Park Service, contracted with DOWL Engineers to provide recommendations for the update of the plan. That effort resulted in the 1989 Denali State Master Plan.

There were also other various planning processes that addressed the region in the 1980s and 1990s notably the 1997 South Side Development Concept Plan / Environmental Impact Statement that addressed increasing recreation and tourism opportunities on the south side of Denali. Portions of the 1997 plan remained controversial even after substantial revisions were made to address public concerns, particularly about development in the Peters Hills. In 1999 the South Denali Citizens Consultation Committee Final report recommended modifying the developments in the 1997 plan. Some of these developments were built, primarily pullouts and waysides along the George Parks Highway.

In 2004, Denali National Park and Preserve received funding to begin the *South Denali Implementation Plan*. A cooperative agreement was finalized between the State of Alaska, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the National Park Service to cooperatively plan for development at specific locations to provide new access and increased recreational opportunities in the South Denali region.

The agencies worked together on development of the Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) which presents proposals for enhanced park and recreational facilities in the area. As part of this process, State Parks amended the 1989 Denali State Master Plan to parallel action alternatives in the FEIS that may occur within the park boundary.

The amendment also reflects changes that have occurred since 1989 including: revised statutes and regulations; facilities that have been built or improved; new information from site planning; and developments under consideration along the Alaska Railroad. The amendment focused on revising Chapters 7-9 of the 1989 plan and two appendices that addressed facility recommendations and plan implementation information. Minor updates were made to the remainder of the 1989 plan including Chapters 1-6, which include background information and planning process. These were updated to be consistent with the information in the FEIS. Some appendices were eliminated because they are no longer relevant or are better addressed in the FEIS.

Management and Facility Recommendations

The final segment of the planning process was the formulation of management and facility recommendations. Management recommendations focus on issues related to the management and public use of the park. Facility recommendations relate to physical improvements necessary to protect the natural resources and provide for recreational use of the park. Facility improvements range from new and rerouted trails to a visitor center. The facilities outlined in the recommendations are those that should be provided over the planning period of 20 years.

Implementation

After adoption of this plan, State Parks and other state, federal and municipal agencies will begin implementing its provisions.

Figure 1
LOCATION MAPS