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## **Chapter 3**

# **ISSUES**

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Tourism  
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Park Operations and Staffing Requirements

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## Chapter 3

### ISSUES

This chapter lists and briefly discusses issues that have been raised during the planning process. Recommendations in Chapters 7 and 8 address many of these issues.

#### **Land Use and Development**

Land Use Designations on State Park Land. State park management plans classify state-owned park lands according to an established system: Wilderness, Natural Area, Cultural, and Recreation Development. Designations suggest how specific areas are to be managed, and the type and scale of development that is appropriate. An issue in Denali State Park is the proper mix of classifications, from wilderness to intensely used recreation development areas.

Private Inholdings. There are a number of private inholdings in Denali State Park. The use and development of private lands inside the park boundary has the potential for creating a range of problems including environmental impacts, recreational conflicts, degradation of the view shed and wildlife displacement. Private owners are concerned about the effects on their property from park facility development and recreational uses.

Native Allotments. There are a number of native allotments in the park, in various stages of application, approval, and title conveyance. Most allotments are along the Parks Highway corridor in the southern end of the park. As lands held in trust for Natives by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, allotments are not subject to traditional forms of land use regulation (including zoning) until they are sold. The use and development of allotments, therefore, is of considerable concern.

Management of Adjacent Public Lands. Much of the land adjacent to Denali State Park is owned and managed by other public entities, including the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Alaska Railroad, National Park Service, ADOT/PF and DNR's Division of Mining, Land and Water. Management of adjacent lands will affect use patterns within the park, and could pose environmental threats. If intensively developed for tourism, for example, there will be extra demands placed on park lands for natural areas and recreational facilities. New residents settling in the area following state land disposals would likely establish local recreational and subsistence patterns that could conflict with other park users. Development of facilities on the park's south boundary, including expansion of the existing hotel and development of a Boy Scout Camp, could result in a significant increase in use of the park's facilities, rivers and trails.

Spillover Development. A question associated with proposals for major recreation and tourism development in the park is whether inappropriate spillover development would be spawned. At present, private holdings inside and adjacent to the park are generally undeveloped. Many people argue that, without new land use controls, private holdings would quickly be developed in response to new recreation/tourism facility development in the park.

## **Environmental Protection**

Wildlife Habitat. Denali State Park supports a variety of wildlife, including large mammals like grizzly bear, black bear and moose. There is concern that proposals for recreation and tourism facilities will damage wildlife habitat and displace sensitive wildlife.

Swan Nesting Areas. The Tokositna River lowlands host a significant number of nesting and fledging Trumpeter Swans. Conflicts between human uses and swans, particularly during the swan nesting and fledging season, is a concern.

Unique and Special Areas. The park contains a number of special areas and resources that warrant special attention, including the Curry-Kesugi Ridge system, river lowlands, and the Peters Hills. Plan issues center on balancing development and use in these areas with the special values that are found in these areas.

## **Recreational Activities and Facilities**

Conflicts Between User Groups. Certain recreational uses have inherent conflicts that can be mitigated, but sometimes with limited success. These include different modes of travel on trails, noise, crowding and aesthetic concerns. Although such situations are rare in the park, as use increases, conflicts too are likely to increase.

Recreational Facilities. Denali State Park is largely undeveloped, which makes it particularly attractive to wilderness advocates and others who enjoy self-sufficient recreation. Others have argued for a greater level of facility development, suggesting that new users would be attracted to the park if new facilities were built. At issue is the appropriate level of facility development that will continue to support existing uses while providing new opportunities.

Motorized Activities. Off-road vehicles, snow machines, motorboats, and aircraft are controversial recreational activities and modes of access. Existing park regulations address these forms of motorized access. Through the planning process, members of the public argued for changing current restrictions.

Flight Operations. Aircraft operations, including take-offs and landings as well as overflights, is an issue. Aircraft are used for recreational and hunting access in several areas in the park. Flightseeing is an increasingly popular activity, currently directed primarily towards the national park. Although aircraft provide access to remote areas, they also have serious noise impacts on other park users and local residents. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation has the authority to regulate and prohibit take-offs and landings, but overflights are the sole jurisdiction of the Federal Aviation Administration.

## **Fish and Wildlife Management**

Fish and Wildlife Management Jurisdiction. During the planning process, many comments were received on fish and game harvest. Some have argued that park wildlife has declined due to hunting pressure, and that non-consumptive activities like wildlife observation and photography have suffered. A planning issue concerns whether certain areas should be designated as wildlife viewing areas, with hunting limitations and restrictions intended to protect and attract wildlife. Except for small closures around roads and developed facilities to protect public safety, the entire park is open to hunting and other consumptive practices. Fish and wildlife in Denali State Park are managed by the state Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), under regulations adopted by the Board of Fisheries and Board of Game. State Parks does not regulate harvest and can only make recommendations to the Boards. They do, however, work closely with ADF&G and the Bureau of Wildlife Enforcement concerning the implementation of hunting, fishing, and trapping regulations and research. Only a few recommendations to the Boards are contained in the plan.

Lack of Reliable Fish and Wildlife Information. There is very little dependable information on the fish and wildlife of Denali State Park, due in large part to its being situated in two game management units and its distance from the biologists responsible for the area. Questions have arisen whether management unit boundaries should be redrawn, or a separate sub-unit created for the park, to enable a more comprehensive view of park resources and provide regulatory consistency.

Bear Baiting. Baiting bears is a common hunting technique that entails placing edible garbage piles to attract animals. At present, baiting grizzly bears is prohibited, but black bear baiting is legal. There is a concern that this practice teaches bears to associate humans with food sources.

## **Tourism**

Role of Park in Satisfying Tourism Demand. The Denali region is one of the most popular tourism areas in Alaska, and the number of visitors is growing at a steady annual rate. An issue, however, relates to the demand for new tourism facilities in the region, and the type of facilities that are appropriately located in Denali State Park.

Competition with Private Sector Tourism Providers. There is some concern that state, federal and borough efforts to develop facilities that will be used, in part, by the tourism industry will compete unfairly with private tourism firms already operating in the Denali region.

Community Lifestyles, Quality of Life. Concerns were expressed that some of the developments proposed in the plan, increasing development on private lands, and increased use of the entire region will degrade existing community lifestyles. Others see these developments and increased visitation as an opportunity to provide additional jobs and incomes in the upper Susitna Basin.

### **Governmental Coordination/Cooperation**

Parks Highway Right-of-Way and Buffer Management. The Parks Highway is the major means of park access, and most park use occurs within the highway corridor. Consequently, management of the highway right-of-way has a direct effect on recreational opportunities and enjoyment. Some have suggested that, in addition to the primary objective of providing safe and efficient travel, the highway corridor should be managed for scenic values and to provide for recreational access to the park. Large stretches of right-of-way are heavily forested, and distant views to the mountains and lowlands are obscured. Material sites, some still active, are regularly spaced along the highway. These sites are generally hidden by vegetative buffers and invisible from the roadway. They serve as informal campgrounds and access points, creating the potential for litter and waste problems. The design and location of trailheads and waysides is also an issue.

Fish and Wildlife Management. Several specific fish and wildlife management, research and monitoring issues are identified above, pointing to the need for an overall cooperative agreement among the agencies with jurisdiction or an interest in park fish and wildlife.

Boundary Adjustments. Denali State Park and Denali National Park & Preserve share a common boundary, which arbitrarily follows township lines rather than natural boundaries like rivers. Proposals have been made for the state and federal governments to exchange lands to create more manageable boundaries following natural features. Obvious boundaries would clarify management jurisdictions and avoid public confusion over the applicability of different regulations in the two parks.

Recreational Use Regulations. Regulations governing recreation, access, and other activities within the state and national parks are also a source of public confusion. At issue is the ability of the respective agencies to make regulations consistent and compatible, given their particular legal and regulatory mandates. To a lesser extent, there is also an issue of the consistency of state park use regulations with the general regulations governing activities on state lands outside the park.

Research and Monitoring Programs. In addition to the region’s land managing agencies, other agencies are responsible for managing fish and wildlife and providing park managers with various types of natural resource information. An issue concerns the level of research and monitoring conducted within the park, and the desirability of agencies coordinating their research and monitoring activities to avoid duplication and provide more comprehensive coverage.

Public Information Programs. Several public agencies and private groups are interested in providing information to park users and tourists. There may be cooperative approaches for providing information on the park and other visitor attractions in the region, including private accommodations and commercial ventures.

### **Commercial Activities**

Guiding/Outfitting. People with detailed knowledge of the park and specialized skills and equipment offer guiding and outfitting services to park users. Commercial guides and outfitters most commonly offer hunting, fishing, river boating, rafting, and wildlife observation services. At issue is the amount and nature of regulation which the state should exert over commercial operators, designed to ensure that safety and quality standards are maintained. There is also concern that commercial operators tend to displace private users through sheer numbers, intimidation tactics, or staking of prime camping/fishing/hunting sites.

Flightseeing. Flightseeing is an increasingly popular attraction in many parks nationwide. In the Denali region, scenic flights are offered over the Alaska Range. Usually based in Talkeetna, flight services offer trips over the state park enroute to the mountains of Denali National Park and Preserve. Flightseeing, however, has sometimes serious impacts on other park users. Noise from fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters travels long distances, disturbing ground-based recreationists seeking quiet and solitude. The Federal Aviation Administration regulates overflights. The Division regulates only ground operations, but can ask the FAA for special regulations for the airspace over the park. The issue of landings within the park by both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters is an issue over which State Parks has jurisdiction.

### **Park Operations and Staffing Requirements**

Funding Shortfalls. Budget cuts over the last 10 years have severely limited the Division’s ability to maintain an adequate management presence in the park. Present funding levels force rangers to confine their patrols primarily to the road corridor, limiting their ability to perform research, monitor backcountry uses, and identify potential management problems. Facility maintenance has also been reduced in recent years. There is concern that new programs and facilities proposed in this plan will add major new responsibilities to an already stressed operational budget.

Winter Operations. Winter park visitation is considerably less than in the summer, but there is still a substantial amount of skiing and backcountry use in the winter months. In recent years, however, declining budgets have resulted in staff cutbacks. The park is essentially unstaffed from October through April. Some highway pullouts are left unplowed. Sanitary facilities are closed. Trailheads are unmaintained and trails are ungroomed. An issue concerns whether a winter operational presence is necessary.