

Chapter 4: Park Use and Issues

This chapter lists and briefly discusses issues and uses raised during the planning process that affect park management. The recommendations in Chapters 5 and 6 address many of these issues.

Recreational Use and Trends

Activities and Trends

According to the latest Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2009-2014 (SCORP), Alaskans place a high value on the availability and quality of outdoor recreation opportunities. Hiking, fishing, hunting, snowmachining, and cross-country skiing were identified as the top five outdoor recreational activities enjoyed by Alaskans in the last SCORP. For many, the availability of recreation opportunities is a strong reason for their residence in Anchorage. Major activities occurring within Chugach State Park are camping, picnicking, berry picking, photography, wildlife viewing, backpacking, hiking, nature study, sightseeing, rock and ice climbing, hang gliding, boating, ATVir, fishing, hunting, cross-country skiing, and snowmachining.

The population of Anchorage and surrounding communities continues to grow and visitor counts indicate increasing use of the park. This use is increasing resource degradation, stressing park facilities and crowding established access points. Public demand for park access and use is strong and this trend will likely continue whether or not facilities are improved or new access and facilities are established. The increased demand on outdoor recreation facilities is reflected by the outdoor recreation equipment industry and Alaskan's willingness to purchase outdoor recreation equipment. The SCORP indicates that equipment ownership has increased in almost all areas since the previous 2004 survey.

Recreation User Conflicts

Chugach State Park is a source of recreation for a wide variety of park users, including hikers, bikers, equestrians, runners, snowmachiners, skiers, wildlife/birdwatchers, anglers, hunters, ATV riders, boaters, sightseers, and others. The demand for organized events and increased participation in events within the park continues to grow as does commercial interests in use of the park. People participate in outdoor recreation activities for many reasons, but mostly because they hope to gain certain rewards or outcomes. Each individual

has a set of experiences or elements that make a recreation activity enjoyable or satisfying. These outcomes can consist of a wide variety of experiences including solitude, challenge, experiencing nature, being with friends and family, or exercise. Certain recreational activities have inherent conflicts with others that can be mitigated, but sometimes with limited success. These include different modes of travel on trails and the varying speeds associated with the mode, crowding and aesthetic concerns. Existing park regulations and trail and facility development try to minimize some of the conflicts; however as use increases and new recreational activities are introduced, conflicts too are likely to increase.

Resource impacts such as soil erosion, damaged vegetation, litter, vandalism, and other indications of the presence of others such as noise, dust and fumes, and footprints can also lead to feelings of conflict. These perceptions can occur even when there is no actual contact among different park users. Chugach State Park is largely undeveloped, which makes it particularly attractive to wilderness advocates and others who enjoy self-sufficient recreation. Others argue for a greater level of facility development within the park. It will continue to be challenging to determine the appropriate level of facility development that will continue to support existing uses while providing new opportunities.

Nonrecreational Uses

Development Pressure

The land that is now Chugach State Park was used in a variety of ways before becoming protected as a legislatively designated area. The signs of this prior use can be seen in some of the existing infrastructure in the park such as driveways, roads, utility lines and easements, and power and water generation structures. In recent years, the private land surrounding the park has experienced a lot of development putting more pressure on park resources and affecting the viewshed. There is more demand for water and power infrastructure within the park and pressure to upgrade and maintain roads within the park boundary that also serve residential areas. Trespass issues associated with driveways and portions of private development continue. Drainage into the park from neighboring subdivision threatens not only the character of the park but also the resources themselves that are being altered by erosion and potential pollution as a result of these activities.

Land Management

Park Access

Access to the Chugach Range has long been an issue and one of the reasons that led to the establishment of Chugach State Park. As public use of park resources increases, the demand for additional and improved access to the park also increases stressing park facilities and

crowding established access points. The unwanted side-affects of this type of demand are being seen as certain areas along the boundary are experiencing illegal parking, trespass and increased traffic volume. In an effort to address access to the park, the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation with the Municipality of Anchorage engaged in a joint planning process to develop the Chugach Access Plan. This joint plan will guide both agencies as they work to establish frequent, secure access to Chugach State Park. Ultimately, the ideal situation would be to establish a mix of different types of access points along the boundary of the park to connect neighborhoods and to accommodate recreational use demands.

Land Status

When Chugach State Park was legislatively designated in 1970 the focus was to protect a vast natural area for people to enjoy and use for recreation. The final legislative boundary of the park took in large areas of land that were not in state ownership. The inholdings consisted of existing homestead sites, other types of private land, and large portions of federal land that had yet to be conveyed to the state or native corporations. With this complicated fabric of ownership, came various land disputes and new pressures on the newly created park. Over the years some of the private inholdings were purchased and some of the federal land conveyed to various entities creating new inholders and new management challenges.

Understanding the restrictions on certain properties within the park can also be a management challenge. Certain park acquisitions have come to the park with deed restrictions or conservation easements. Keeping track of all of the deed and easement restriction terms on the various properties can be difficult and does not lend itself to holistic management of area resources. Additionally, the boundary of Chugach State Park has never been fully surveyed or marked because doing so has proven to be prohibitively costly. There are areas of the park where boundary determinations will need to be made in the future to resolve ownership issues and trespass disputes. Some of the newly acquired parcels that are intended to be part of Chugach State Park are outside of the legislatively designated boundary and require agreements from other agencies to allow the park to manage them. There are a multitude of land management agreements with various stipulations and expiration dates between the park and other entities. Tracking the terms of these agreements and their expiration dates to remain in compliance has also proven to be challenging.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is a grant program that was used in Chugach State Park to partially fund the acquisition of outdoor recreation lands and development of outdoor recreation facilities. LWCF is a 50/50 federal matching grant program established to provide a nationwide legacy of high quality outdoor recreation.

While this funding source has benefited the park since it was first used in the early 1970's, it has also placed significant restrictions on how the park can be managed that are important to understand.

The program requires that property acquired or developed with LWCF funding be retained and used solely for outdoor recreation in perpetuity. All of Chugach State Park is considered an LWCF protected area and is subject to the program provisions. Any property within an LWCF protected area may not be wholly or partly converted to anything other than public outdoor recreation uses without the prior approval of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior. If for some reason the recreational nature of the property is lost, it represents a conversion of use requiring mitigation in the form of acquisition of other recreational properties or outdoor recreational enhancement as approved by the National Park Service, the LWCF program administrators.

Actions that may represent a conversion of use include installation of cell towers or above ground utilities, development of roads for primary purposes other than recreation, creation of indoor recreation facilities or private development encroachments such as driveways. The complicated land status within the park and development pressures associated with Alaska's largest population center have made for many conversion situations within the park over the years that threaten continued federal funding and make complying with the program difficult. Additionally, the program requires a 50% match which can be difficult to get and no other federal program or funding is eligible to provide the match.

North Anchorage Land Agreement (NALA)

Lands in the northern portion of the park, depicted on Figure 1, are affected by the North Anchorage Land Agreement (NALA). This agreement, whose authority is found in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), provides resolution of longstanding land ownership and management issues between the State of Alaska, the Municipality of Anchorage and Eklutna Inc. by establishing future ownership of military lands if and when those lands are declared excess by the military and by setting up a system by which lands within the park owned by Eklutna Inc. are transferred to the State. Because the provisions of the NALA are ongoing and will likely only be realized in the long term, there has been frustration among the parties over the years that are unable to capitalize on their eventual land holdings. It is important to realize however, that the agreement was considered by all parties at the time to be the best and perhaps only opportunity to settle these land disputes without complicated litigation that could have resulted in a winner takes all solution for one of the parties.

Military

Substantial portions of the park share a boundary with Fort Richardson and the military presence as a major park neighbor presents interesting challenges particularly to park access. The public has been accessing the park, often unknowingly, via military lands. Depending on the military mission at the time, these lands have, and in the future may be, restricted from public use. For instance, the main vehicular access for the Ship Creek Unit that leads to the Arctic Valley Ski Area is maintained, owned, and operated by the military and subject to closure by order of the Garrison Commander without warning. In recent years the military has proposed activities such as Stryker vehicle training, moving or adding firing ranges, expansion of drone training areas, and erecting a boundary fence, all of which would have significant impact on how the public access the park and the quality of their park experience.

Additionally, the military maintains an inholding in the park that was used for ordinance training purposes. They have in the past used the park and maintain interest for future use of park lands for some of their training needs. Some of the existing infrastructure in the park such as driveways, roads and gasline and pipeline easements are a result of past military activities and under certain circumstances the military still has patent to certain portions of the land estate.

Resource Management

Fish & Wildlife Management

One of the purposes for establishing Chugach State Park was to provide areas for the public display of local wildlife, but fish and wildlife management can be challenging within the park due to its proximity to Alaska's largest population center, the heavy use the park receives, and the diverse understanding of wildlife behavior by park users. Negative wildlife-human interactions are not common within the park, but public safety is a concern as visitors seek to view wildlife and use park resources for recreational pursuits. Most visitors seem to be aware of the potential threats that come with recreating along side wildlife and encountering bear or moose has not prevented the overwhelming majority of residents from using area parks and trails. In 2009, the Department of Fish and Game conducted a study to learn more about Anchorage residents' opinions on bear and moose populations, problems caused by bear and moose, and the management of their populations in the Anchorage area. The study report, "Anchorage Residents' Opinions on Bear and Moose Population Levels and Management Strategies"¹, issued in 2010, found that residents have a fairly high tolerance towards bears and moose. Most residents also indicated that with certain conditions, they still favored building trails in areas, such as along salmon streams, where authorities believe the threat of bear attacks is increased.

¹ Available online via the Department of Fish and Game website.

Recognizing the desire for park users to view fish and wildlife, the park has had to react by building facilities commensurate with the demand and appropriate to the setting. This is especially evident in areas of the park such as Bird Creek where the Department of Fish and Game enhances the fishery through their stocking program and as a result, fishing has become popular and the potential for bear-human interaction has increased. In order to protect park resources from heavy use, facilities have had to be developed to help appropriately accommodate public use.

Certain activities occurring within the park such as fishing, trapping and hunting have been the source of public contention over the years because of individual personal recreational perspectives. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation manages public safety as well as the land and recreation resources within the park and the Department of Fish and Game is responsible for the management of fish and game resources. The Boards of Game and Fish determine harvest levels and limitations to harvest method and means. Coordination and agreement between the agencies and Boards can be challenging because missions and responsibilities guiding their actions differ as do their constituents. While fish and game management decisions have been contentious over the years, for the most part current regulations reflect an understanding of the importance of the recreation resources within the park.

Watershed Protection

Approximately 248,000 people from Eklutna south to Girdwood are supplied drinking water from Eklutna Lake, Ship Creek, and a number of groundwater wells in Anchorage, Eagle River, and Girdwood. Water safety and distribution are managed by the Alaska Water and Wastewater Utility. One of the purposes of the park and reasons for its establishment was due to concerns regarding the protection of the watershed and the delivery of a satisfactory water supply to the people of the State of Alaska. Source water protection is a major concern because water resources are vulnerable to contamination from activities occurring in the watersheds within Chugach State Park supplying these sources. Additionally, storm water drainage into the park from sources along the park boundary is of concern and has been heightened in recent years as development increases along the park boundary. The way in which water is shed into the park creates the potential to threaten the watershed and change the character of a vital park resource.

Vegetation Management

One of the main park assets is the diversity of plant life from coastal forests to alpine areas but this resource is also being impacted by increased use of the park. Threats to park vegetation include development, climate change, pest and disease, invasive species, and wildfire. One of the most noticeable concerns is the spruce bark beetle outbreak that has

increased the risk for wildfire with the potential to impact park facilities and private land in the urban interface. Efforts to mitigate the risk and hazard of wildfire in the urban interface and within the park involve staff commitments and added expenses. Invasive plant species and noxious weeds are also becoming more pervasive within the park and controlling their spread is difficult. Additionally, greater use and harvesting of forest products can directly impact vegetation as well as the availability and sustainability of wildlife food sources.

Funding

Fees

User fees are collected in the park for day parking, cabin use, recreation site use, and camping. Permit fees are collected from commercial operators and from those required to obtain park use permits for various activities. Over the years the legislature has emphasized increased fee collection as a way of funding the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation as general fund contribution have decreased. As a result many of the areas that were once available for day use without a payment of a day use fee within the park have been converted to fee areas. Because a substantial portion of the Division's budget derives from fees, a dependency on fee collection has become the norm. Chugach State Park staff spends a considerable amount of time collecting and processing fees associated with day use and permits. Additionally, the administrative cost of collecting, sorting and counting these fees is burdensome and requires substantial investments of staff time.

Funding Shortfalls

Despite increases in fee collection and legislative budgetary contributions over the years, the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation's budget has not kept pace with inflation. Increased use threatens to damage park resources and challenges the Division's ability to sustain facilities and programs at acceptable levels. This trend is especially noticeable in parks that border large population centers like Chugach State Park that once had thirteen rangers on staff managing public safety and park resources and now only has four. The Division's small staff and budget make it particularly difficult to respond to changing budgets and a reliance on the use of volunteers and grant funding over the years has emerged.

Deferred Maintenance

The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation's deferred maintenance backlog for park facilities is over \$60 million. Over the years as little as \$50,000 has been allocated to address these issues which contributes to rapid growth in the backlog and shortens the useful lifespan of facilities. Chugach State Park has the largest deferred maintenance backlog of any single

park within the Division with approximately \$7 million needed to address facility upkeep. In recent years new strategies have been employed that have helped to reduce maintenance needs but much still remains to be addressed.

General

Park Hazards

Snow avalanches present a major hazard to park visitors. Although avalanches can occur any time of the year or on any slope given the right conditions, avalanches are most likely to occur on steep slopes during and after a heavy prolonged snowfall. Terrain traps such as gullies and areas below steep ridges can also be hazardous. Backcountry recreationists are most likely to trigger avalanches as they cross hazardous terrain, while non-recreational injuries and deaths are often caused when a naturally released avalanche buries structures or roads. Winter activities in the park offer additional hazards associated with reduced daylight, cold temperatures, and the effects of wind chill.

Other potential natural hazards within the park include landslides, falling rocks, glaciers with their hidden crevasses, turbid air currents, and sudden and severe inclement weather year-round. The mudflats in the intertidal areas along Turnagain Arm are dangerous due to extreme and rapid tidal variations and the possibility of becoming mired in the mud and drowning with the incoming tide. Also the rapidly advancing tide can trap unwary hikers along the Arm who venture too far out on rocks or spits of land and become cut off from the land.

Water hazards exist within the park as a result of the icy cold temperatures, fluctuating water levels, difficulty seeing sweepers/strainers and underwater obstacles, changing channels, and heavy loads of silt and rock that are present in most of the bodies of water. Some of the hazards to hikers, boaters, and anglers include the fording of glacial rivers along the numerous un-bridged trail segments, the swelling of rivers and streams during spring, summer, and fall afternoons as the sun and warming temperatures increase the melt of ice and snow or during big rain events, and issues relating to unprepared boaters and cold water immersion.

Hypothermia as well as frostbite and frostnip are possible risks to park visitors throughout the year. Hypothermia generally results from unanticipated exposure in an inadequately prepared person. However, it can happen to anyone under the right conditions. Additional hazards to park visitors are created by careless use of firearms while hunting, target shooting (prohibited throughout the park), setting traps carelessly or in areas subject to heavy use, and by the careless building of fires. Slips, trips, and falls are major causes of serious injury and death within the park and can occur even on the easiest of hikes.

Chugach State Park is home to a variety of wildlife, including large mammals like moose and black and brown bears and smaller mammals such as lynx, wolverines, and wolves, which park visitors have the potential of encountering. Negative encounters with wildlife are rare and most are the result of people getting too close to a wild animal either by accident or design.

The Seward Highway and railroad right-of-way along Turnagain Arm can present a variety of hazards to park visitors. Especially dangerous is the close proximity of visitors, using trailheads and pullouts along the road for access and sightseeing, to the fast moving traffic that is traversing this major transportation corridor. A number of pullouts and scenic overlooks are physically separated from the waterfront by the railroad tracks which results in the risky behavior of visitors trespassing across the tracks to gain access to the water's edge.