

Alaska's Wilderness National Parks

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Background

When President Jimmy Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) on December 2, 1980, conservationists looked forward to the conclusion of an intense four-year campaign to conserve 100 million acres of federal lands in the “Great Land.” The campaign of the Alaska Coalition, and of many hundreds of thousands of Americans in every state, had been engineered under the banner of “Do It Right The First Time,” which reflected both dissatisfaction with the plight of national parks in the Lower 48 states, and the expectation that the new Alaskan national parks and wildlife refuges would enjoy greater protection of their pristine wilderness character due to both legislative foresight and their inherent remoteness on the United States’ last great frontier.

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, Alaska can no longer be thought of as a frontier—considering the trans-Alaska pipeline, declining stocks of salmon and crab, expanding oil and gas infrastructure on the North Slope, the surge of off-road vehicle traffic into the backcountry, and instantaneous communication via satellite TV and the internet in small rural and even the more remote “bush” villages. Nevertheless, 100 million acres of comparatively pristine federal public lands creates an expectation, an opportunity, and an intense desire to demonstrate that through wise resource management based on sound science, it is both possible and desirable to preserve pristine areas in balance with subsistence and other traditional uses, including public enjoyment, for all time.

Throughout the debates leading up to ANILCA and those surrounding virtually every Alaskan park management issue in the 28 years since, the common mantra used by all interested participants has been that “Alaska is different.” Of course, this means different things to different interests, but broadly, it refers to Alaska’s immensity. It takes as long to fly from Anchorage to Nome as it does to fly from New York to Denver. The largest national park in Alaska, Wrangell-St. Elias (at 13.2 million acres), is larger than the states of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, combined. This size is a benefit for preserving wilderness character, but it presents special challenges for management and protection, and also for recreation and tourism.

Alaska is also wild. From Robert Service and Jack London to John McPhee and Jon Krakauer, writers have captured the grandeur, spirit, and wildness of Alaska. Nevertheless, the sheer scale of this wildness is daunting to fully comprehend. Wrangell-St. Elias not only has unclimbed peaks over 10,000 feet, but unnamed ones that dwarf all of the peaks in the Appalachians. A park ranger in Wrangell-St. Elias was noted for stating that he had flown his single-engine airplane on

patrol over the park every day that the weather allowed for 13 years, and had possibly flown over 25% of the park! Indeed, in sharp contrast to national parks in the Lower 48, the national parks of Alaska are more commonly accessed by small airplanes on floats or tundra tires than by automobile. Because of their sheer size, remoteness, and overall limited human development, it is still possible for people to have a true wilderness experience in Alaska's national parks. This is one big difference that NPS managers are striving to maintain in perpetuity.

Another big difference is the ecological integrity of the Alaskan parks. Because of their relative remoteness and wildness, the Alaskan national parks retain a full array of native species of wildlife in naturally abundant populations – moose and caribou, grizzly bears and wolves, Dall sheep, and salmon. Denali, in particular, offers the park's visitors a relatively accessible visual display of wildlife perhaps unmatched anywhere in the world except on the savannahs of the great national parks in Africa. Of even greater long-term significance, the large national parks and preserves in Alaska, with most boundaries drawn along geographic rather than political lines, offer NPS managers a much-improved opportunity to ensure the long-term viability of the full range of native species that have comprised these Arctic and sub-Arctic habitats since the last Ice Age.

A critical difference between national parks in Alaska and elsewhere is the presence of Native people residing inside and adjacent to the Alaskan parks, with ownership of key lands, subsistence rights throughout, and a keen desire to maintain traditional lifestyles and cultural practices. ANILCA contains a unique provision, in fact an entire title of the act, authorizing subsistence (hunting, fishing, gathering and trapping) by rural residents in most of the national parks. For Alaskans who live in the bush, especially Native peoples, many could survive only because of this subsistence authorization. ANILCA also designates portions of several large NPS units as “national preserves,” specifically to allow sport hunting, as well as subsistence. Thus, people who reside in the bush have subsistence rights to hunt, fish, and trap in almost any area of a national park for their personal consumption; and they and other people can sport hunt (for trophies or meat) in areas designated as national preserves.

The first NPS professionals assigned to the new Alaskan parks were greeted by some Alaskans with threats, vandalism of equipment, and burnings in effigy, largely due to fear of the unknown changes the national parks would bring to the state, and opposition to the strict preservation standards of management fostered by the National Park Service. Gradually though, some key Alaskans began to refer to the “rosy glow” that was emanating from these new parks—a recognition of their uniqueness, their value to our nation, and the purely economic fact that recreation and tourism were rapidly becoming the second largest revenue generator (and number one private sector employer) in the state, second only to oil and gas, but ahead of fishing and logging. The national parks in Alaska are leading the new economy of that state.

Alaska's national parks are on the verge of being discovered by hundreds of thousands of baby-boom-generation retirees with time and disposable income, who have saved for what was once billed as the trip-of-a-lifetime, but which is today more affordable and more accessible than ever. Similarly, these parks will be relatively close destinations for a large influx of tourists from Asia, where a rise in personal wealth and freedom to travel is sweeping many countries. Both domestic and foreign tourists will be more likely to visit the Alaskan parks as part of large commercial tour groups rather than family or small informal groups.

Challenges

Despite the obvious size difference, and the special subsistence provision, national parks in Alaska are not fundamentally different from those in the Lower 48. The 1916 NPS Organic Act and its various amendments, as well as the 2006 edition of NPS Management Policies all apply to Alaska's parks. And despite the vast remoteness of these parks, they face many of the same threats as the rest of the national park system, including incompatible development on private lands inside and adjacent to the parks; poorly sited private hotels, lodges, and private residences; threats of mining, oil and gas development, and logging on adjacent lands; air pollution from coal-fired power plants and long-range transport of air pollutants from Asia; and habit fragmentation and damage caused by pipelines, new roads, and cross-country use of snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles for recreation.

Attitudes about Wilderness

Many Alaskan state legislators, government appointees, and executives in the mining, timber, fishing, and even the tourism industries still too often think in terms of subjugating the wilderness, rather than preserving it, as the path to economic bonanza, although this attitude is slowly changing.

Alaska's Fish and Game department has an aggressive game management program aimed at killing wolves and grizzlies in order to increase populations of moose and caribou for both sport and subsistence hunting. This predator reduction policy is decidedly out of step with NPS policy for wildlife management and threatens the ecological integrity of the fully functioning ecosystems that are the very heart of Alaska's wilderness national parks.

Nonfederal Landownership in the Parks

There are about 3.3 million acres of privately held or selected (for future conveyance) lands within the boundaries of Alaska's 15 national parks. Each of these almost 1,100 separate parcels is a potential threat to surrounding parklands should it ever be sold and developed into a remote lodge or subdivided into house or cabin sites.

- Many of the park inholdings are owned by Alaska Native Corporations or individual Alaska Natives. The traditional cultural practices of Native people enrich the parks

and enhance the park experience for visitors; however, a challenge remains to secure appropriate economic activities for rural residents that perpetuate their traditions and culture and are also compatible with the national park mission. One economic opportunity anticipated by ANILCA, but yet to be fulfilled, is providing NPS jobs to residents in remote villages.

- The antiquated and much criticized 1872 Mining Law provision that allows patenting (privatizing) of public lands in the name of mining has already resulted in numerous housing developments, roads, and private lodges inside Alaska's national parks. Many of these developments splinter habitats and create unattractive nuisances in the wrong places. State land selections, such as those in Wrangell- St. Elias, have also resulted in ill-planned and poorly located housing developments and demands for community services miles inside national park boundaries.
- Increased demand by park visitors for amenity- supported remote park experiences— where guests fly or boat into lodges deep inside Alaska's wilderness parks—could result from increased visitation from travelers who are not accustomed to sleeping in a tent or on the ground.
- State rights-of-way through national parks and access to private inholdings are, and will continue to be, a major threat to both resource integrity and the quality of the visitor experience in national parks in Alaska. The State of Alaska has asserted ownership of many thousands of miles of road rights-of-way inside national parks under an obscure, long-repealed federal law, RS 2477.

The division of landownership in Alaska among federal, state, and Native allocations, each with implicit competing priorities, presents a unique and serious challenge but also a great opportunity for cooperative management on an ecosystem scale. Symbolized by the future of the caribou, which know no political boundaries and whose extraordinary migratory patterns are being altered by global climate change, the future environmental and economic sustainability of Alaska may depend on achieving such unprecedented cooperation.

Global Climate Change

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all, with even greater implications than in other national parks, is global climate change, and the accelerating melting of the permafrost that underlies much of Alaska. These long-frozen lands are no longer permanently frozen, and extremely dramatic change to the landscape will follow such melting.

Destry Jarvis

Destry Jarvis has spent the past 35 years working professionally in the parks, recreation, historic preservation, and open space protection field, in senior positions for both non-profit associations, the federal government, and as a for-profit consultant. Currently, he is President of his own consulting company, Outdoor Recreation and Park Services, LLC

(ORAPS), which focuses on parks and public lands, outdoor recreation, historic preservation, and tourism issues, primarily for non-profit and tribal clients. Mr. Jarvis has developed extensive expertise in policy and management of units of the national park system, natural and cultural resources management, tourism marketing and policy, historic preservation, and recreation programs, carrying capacity determination, eco-tourism, appropriate development in public spaces, and volunteerism. Prior positions have included Executive Director, National Recreation & Park Association, Assistant Director, U.S. National Park Service; Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior, Executive Vice President, Student Conservation Association, and Vice President for Policy, National Parks Conservation Association. Current clients include National Parks Conservation Association, The Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, the John Marshall Memorial Park Foundation, the Japanese American National Museum, The Fire Island Wilderness Committee, the Apostle Island Historic Preservation Conservancy, the Mountain Alliance of Conservation Corps, the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, and the Yurok Indian Tribe.