



National Parks Conservation Association®
Protecting Our National Parks for Future Generations®

FIELD REPORT

ALASKA REGION

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Denali National Park © Scott Kirkwood/NPCA

Denali Council to Address Impacts from Aircraft

Imagine you're in Denali National Park hiking across the tundra. In the nearby willows a varied thrush hums its song. The babble of water over stones gets louder as you approach a small creek. Up ahead a marmot calls, announcing your presence. Hearing the sounds of nature is a fundamental part of a national park experience and "soundscape" is one of many values our parks are managed to protect. But our ability to hear the sounds of nature even in places like Denali, is

diminishing. The number one complaint Denali's park managers receive from backcountry users is there's too much noise from aircraft, which has increased tremendously in the last 20 years.

Of course, seeing the park from the air provides visitors with an awe-inspiring experience of peaks and glaciers not readily seen from the ground. Deciding how to best balance these differing experiences is the primary purpose

of the recently formed Denali Aircraft Overflights Advisory Council. NPCA is fortunate that staff member Joan Frankevich was selected as one of the council's 12 members.

To learn more about the Advisory Council's charter and purpose and for information on when meetings are held and who else is on the council, check the NPS website: www.nps.gov/denali/parkmgmt/currentprojects.htm.

Wondering about those Wilderness Winds...

It's hard to believe that the average mercury concentration in fish found in Noatak National Preserve exceeds the health threshold for human consumption, given the site's remote location in northwest Alaska. But that's exactly the case, according to a Park Service report released in March. The federal Western Airborne Contaminants Assessment Project (WACAP) measured the presence of airborne contaminants (and their biological effects) in 20 national parks

across the Western U.S. from 2002 through 2007. Shockingly, tests at Burial Lake in Noatak National Preserve recorded the highest



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median levels of mercury concentrations in lake trout among all the parks studied.

“Contrary to the conventional wisdom that remoteness means less pollution... many of the parks—particularly those at higher elevations and colder climates—are actually at higher risk.”

– National Park Service report, March 2008

Mercury is a naturally occurring element, but it is also emitted from the burning of hazardous waste and fossil fuels, like coal. Noatak National Preserve is America's northernmost national park unit. No roads, no communities, and no public facilities exist within its 6.7 million acres, nearly 90% of which are designated wilderness. Yet Noatak's fish are accumulating

significant levels of pollutants that were likely generated on the other side of the globe, largely by consuming plants and other fish. According to the report, the source is airborne mercury emissions from overseas power plants, particularly China and Asia, which travel along global air currents and re-enter the atmosphere at higher elevations.

“Contrary to the conventional wisdom that remoteness means less pollution... many of the parks—particularly those at higher elevations and colder climates—are actually at higher risk.” – National Park Service report, March 2008

The report also reveals the results of site investigations in Denali, Gates of the Arctic, Wrangell-St. Elias, Katmai, and Glacier Bay, plus 14 more national parks across the West. Check out the findings on-line at: www.nature.nps.gov/air/Studies/air_toxics/wacap.cfm



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NPS Regional Director, Marcia Blaszk and NPCA's
Jim Stratton © NPCA

A Message from Regional Director Jim Stratton

Alaska is blessed with some of the grandest national parks in America. Not only are they large (I love bragging that Wrangell-St. Elias is as big as six Yellowstones), but, they are also home to so many wolves and bears that most biologists consider these parks the most intact functioning ecosystems

left in all of the United States. The connected park cluster of Kobuk Valley, Gates of the Arctic, and Noatak, for example, provides 16 million acres where nature can really run wild. So it was a bit of a surprise when the long arm of air pollution blowing in from Asia raised mercury levels in this part of the Brooks Range to levels that exceed the health threshold for human consumption. Our story in this issue about the Western Airborne Contaminants Assessment Project (WACAP) details this surprise.

Solutions to this problem, or any park-management problem, are much more easily reached when you are working with smart and dedicated partners. The chemistry created by multiple minds working to solve a common problem is very powerful. It was with this synergy in mind that NPCA's Alaskan Regional Office gathered a group of committed and dedicated Alaskans to form the Alaska Regional Council. Meeting over dinner recently, this group of Alaskans – Wally & Jerri Cole, Fran Ulmer, John Schoen, Deb Liggett, Ron Peck, Tom Meacham, John Shively, Lowell & Tay Thomas Jr., Kathy Hart, and Bob Kauffman – envisioned what Alaska's national parks should and could be like as we approach the National Park Centennial in 2016.

Nationally, NPCA has chartered the Second Century Commission to look at this very same issue – what do we want our park system to look like for its 100th birthday. Again, when it comes to partners, we are pleased that former Governor Tony Knowles is one of the group's 25 commissioners. Chaired by former senators Bennett Johnston (D-LA) and Howard Baker (R-TN), the commission hopes to have its recommendations completed by fall 2009.

Unfortunately, one person who won't be around to implement those recommendations is the Park Service's Alaska Regional Director Marcia Blaszk, who retired in early May. Marcia has been wonderful to work with. She is passionate about parks, pragmatic about solving problems, yet fearless in the face of those who would diminish the health of the natural and cultural resources that make Alaska's parks so special. Our thanks to Marcia, for a job well done. We will miss her.



The best way to stay informed about the latest in park protection is to sign up for our online network. You'll have an opportunity to help protect parks in Alaska and beyond, learn about NPCA's work in the parks and more. To sign up, visit us online at www.npca.org/takeaction.

Valley of 10,000 Smokes, Katmai © NPCA

Access Improved in Alaska's Parks

Two years ago, NPCA and its partners The Wilderness Society and Alaska Center for the Environment, challenged the illegal use of ATVs off the Nabesna Road in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve, with the help of legal representation from Trustees for Alaska. The Park Service's own rules say that issuing permits for recreational ATV riding on "existing trails" can occur only after an evaluation to determine if such use is compatible with the park's purposes, but no such analysis existed. Our lawsuit was settled when the Park Service agreed to undertake an environmental review and, if even minimal environmental impacts were revealed, would also explore whether or not the activity was compatible with the park's creation. That process has started this spring with scoping meetings in the Copper Valley at Slana, Tok, and Glennallen and also in Fairbanks and Anchorage. The Park Service expects to have a range of trail management alternatives identified by summer and a draft Environmental Impact Statement out for public review by fall 2009.

Wrangell-St. Elias is also implementing the Alaska Region's first batch of "right-of-way certificates of access" – the new mechanism for private inholders to



Hey Park Service! Thanks for the new rest stops along the McCarthy Road – what a relief!
© Melissa Blair/NPCA

secure recognized access, like a driveway, to their property across Park Service lands. NPCA was active in developing the Interim User's Guide to Accessing Inholdings in National Park System Units in Alaska (www.nps.gov/akso), which set up this new process. In January, the Park Service released a draft Environmental Assessment that evaluated a set of standards for approving up to 60 existing access routes that are "established and maintainable." In support of recognizing legitimate access routes in a manner that protects park resources, NPCA commented favorably on the process while making several suggestions to improve the clarity of the standards.

At Denali National Park & Preserve, a small trail system outside of Cantwell has been reviewed and approved for subsistence ATV use. This process began more than three years ago when local hunters provided information to park managers detailing historic, multi-generational use of motorized vehicles for moose hunting near Cantwell. NPCA has supported this effort and is satisfied that the restrictions and rules for this trail system will protect the park while allowing for subsistence activities. The final step in this process is to adopt regulations for implementing the program. NPS hopes to issue a final Record of Decision in late July, just in time for this year's hunting season.

Alaska Parks Budget Receives a Boost

It didn't happen last fall as originally scheduled, but Congress finally passed the 2008 appropriations bill and it included significant new funds for Alaska's national parks. Thanks in large part to NPCA's work, 123 new seasonal positions will be created to fill maintenance, interpretation, and resource-protection needs in 14 of Alaska's 15 parks. In addition, six parks saw an increase in their base operations budget beyond the new seasonal staff positions. These increases will help restore staff over the years

due to "budget erosion." According to Park Service budget documents, this means more backcountry rangers in Denali, more interpretive rangers in Glacier Bay and Sitka, increased aircraft operations in Lake Clark for research and support of backcountry patrols, and funds to operate the new visitor center due to open in Kotzebue later this year.

Full funding for national park operations remains the top legislative priority for NPCA nationally, and

through the work of regional offices like ours, we hope to see another budget increase in 2009. The President's proposed budget calls for a \$161 million increase for general operations of the National Park Service. This translates into more than \$2 million for targeted increases in the base budget of 11 Alaska parks, as well as additional funding to cover increases in fixed costs and maintenance. Senator Lisa Murkowski recently signed onto a letter with 34 of her colleagues supporting these funding increases.



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On the ridgeline—Grizzly. Denali National Park
© Ron Harden, Loveland, CO

Photos Welcome

We always welcome photos from members enjoying Alaska's National Parks. If you have pictures to share please send them to us. They may be included in future NPCA publications. Digital images can be emailed to: jhanneman@npca.org.

Alaska Wildlife Management

Mismanagement has emerged as one of the biggest threats to the ecological integrity of Alaska's national parks, right alongside climate change. In 2005, NPCA worked closely with the National Park Service to remove portions of Lake Clark National Park & Preserve from a state Predator Control Area and rewrite state regulations to prevent the Board of Game from imposing predator-control measures (such as shooting wolves from airplanes) on park lands unless the Park Service concurs.

But in their ongoing war against wolves and bears, the state of Alaska continues to alter bag limits and lengthen the sport hunting season in Alaska's national preserves. All this in spite of the fact that the Park Service has the authority to reject actions by the state Board of Game that conflict with park purposes. NPCA is pushing the Park Service to use this authority, which is detailed in a comprehensive discussion written by University of Alaska Fairbanks Associate Professor for Natural Resources Law and Policy Julie Lurman and Park Service Regional Subsistence Manager Sandy Rabinowitch. The article is available in the latest Alaska Law Review at www.law.duke.edu/journals/alr.

NPCA's Alaska National Parks Discovery Series – Success!



Travels Through a Troubled Arctic
© Melissa Blair/NPCA

This winter, NPCA's Discovery Series shined the spotlight on Katmai's brown bears, Lake Clark's historical trails, observations of a changing climate in Central Arctic parks, and a production team determined to capture Gates of the Arctic in high-definition. Special thanks to our generous presenters for sharing their stunning photos and tales inspired by adventures in our national parks: Ken and Chris Day, Dan Oberlatz, John Branson, Craig Coray, Brad Meiklejohn, Daniel Zatz, and Richard Nelson.

NPCA's Discovery Series will return next winter! For information about upcoming events, please visit: http://www.npca.org/alaska/regional_events.html