



Newsletter • January 2016



Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve is in the process of preparing a Backcountry and Wilderness Stewardship Plan. The purpose of this plan is to guide the management of backcountry and wilderness character and resources in Wrangell-St. Elias within the legal framework of the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, and National Park Service (NPS) policy and regulations.

Public scoping process

Official public scoping for the Backcountry and Wilderness Stewardship Plan occurred from May 2015 through November 2015. Public scoping consisted of three primary components – interviews held with stakeholders, public meetings, and briefings to stakeholder groups. For an in depth description of the public scoping process and analysis of comments received, see the [“Public Scoping Report”](#) released in January 2016.

The dominant themes received in public scoping were as follows: 1) there are currently very few issues or visitor impacts in the backcountry and wilderness and we should manage to keep it that way; 2) the current lack of regulations is part of the character of this wilderness and should be retained if possible; and 3) NPS administrative use contributes to impacts to wilderness character and should be acknowledged and managed.

Topic areas – as defined by public comment

The topic areas described below have been revised based on public input. Specific feedback on topics and subtopics is identified here and will correspondingly be addressed in the plan.

Airstrip maintenance and management

Identifying which airstrips are maintained, if any, and how maintenance will occur is part of this topic - for instance, if maintenance is conducted by the NPS or in coordination with commercial operators. Development of new airstrips will be evaluated in this topic, as will potential limits to establishing new airstrips. How airstrips facilitate or hinder dispersal of use across the park will be considered.

Cabin maintenance and management

How cabins are used and how maintenance should occur is the focus of this topic area. Identification of which cabins, if any, should be actively maintained by the NPS or other user groups will be addressed. How cabins are managed, including options relating to reservation systems will be considered, as will the role of cabins in providing for public health and safety.

Motorized use

Use of snowmachines, ORVs, and helicopters by visitors, local residents, and the NPS is the primary focus of this topic. How, where, and for what purposes these technologies are used will be addressed, including the recreational use of snowmachines. Based on impacts to wilderness resources and character, possible limitations will be considered to some forms of motorized use and for certain purposes.

Visitor use & impacts

This topic will address potential impacts to visitor experience and wilderness resources stemming from increased visitor use, as well as temporal and geographic concentration of use. Concerns associated with different user groups and particular types of use, such as private pilot use, base camping, and horse use will also be addressed. Evaluation of impacts will focus on social trails, campsites, campfire rings, garbage, human waste, and other similar impacts. The role of the NPS in facilitating visitor experiences relating to trails, signs, and advertising, among other factors will be addressed. Defining elements of the desired “visitor experience” and “visitor expectations” for different areas in Wrangell-St. Elias will be part of this topic.

Commercial use

It is anticipated that commercial use by air taxis, sport hunting guides, and guiding services will be addressed as separate, but interrelated uses. Self-regulation by commercial operators will be considered, as will methods for the NPS to supplement this process. An extent necessary determination, which addresses levels of use by commercial operators, will be part of the plan.

Subsistence

Subsistence use and traditional activities in backcountry and wilderness will continue to be provided for in this plan.

Cumulative effects

This topic will address how different actions and activities conducted by visitors, administrators, commercial users, and scientific researchers cumulatively effect wilderness character. The character of Wrangell-St. Elias as predominately unregulated will be considered. Contributions to cumulative effects by the other topic areas in the plan will also be addressed.

Miscellaneous

This topic will address items raised in public scoping that do not fall within one of the other topic areas. Installations in wilderness, use of modern technology, how the park is advertised, and the role of the NPS in day-to-day activities will be addressed here.



Data collection

Assessing on-the-ground impacts

Quantifiable data regarding impacts created by visitors has been collected since 2014, including information on social trails, campsites, campfire rings, airstrips, cabins, and other information. The purpose of this information is to evaluate how on-the-ground impacts are changing over time given site-specific conditions and how the impacts correlate with trends in visitor use over time.

In 2014 and 2015, a total of approximately 510 miles were traveled looking for impacts. Of this total distance travelled, approximately 72 miles were found to have discernable impacts from social trails – though most of the impacts observed have been extremely minimal. A summary of the trips conducted and impacts observed is available in Table 1.

The impact assessments conducted to date have observed relatively few impacts. As a result, Wrangell-St. Elias generally has the opportunity to make small revisions in management as necessary to preserve existing conditions.

Table 1. Summary of trips conducted and impacts observed.

Trip Location	Percent of route with discernable impacts	Condition class* and explanation of rating
Allie's Valley to Bremner	5%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Baultoff to Horsfeld	90%	4 – Extensive horse trails, many impacted campsites, and some trash associated with camps were observed.
Black Mountain	N/A**	
Bremner to Tebay Lakes	1%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Donoho Basin	48%	5 – Extensive social trails, trash, campfire rings, were observed, as well as instances of improperly disposed human waste.
Dadina to Sanford Plateau	1%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Glacier Creek	12%	2 – Minimal impacts, including minimal social trails and some impacted campsites were observed on this trip.
Hanagita Lake	N/A**	
Hidden Lake to Lakina	6%	2 – Minimal impacts were observed on this trip. Impacts observed included social trails, some impacted campsites, and campfire rings.
Huberts Landing	13%	2 – Some impacts, including social trails, trash, and some impacted campsites, were observed on this trip.
Iceberg to Bremner	4%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Jaeger Mesa	5%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Jacksina Creek	0%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Kotsina River	N/A**	
Nutzotin Mountains	21%	3 – A relatively high number of social trails, as well as campsites, campfire rings, and trash were observed on this trip.
Ross Green Lake	1%	2 – Minimal impacts were observed, namely impacted campsites and human waste.
Skolai Pass	9%	3 – Some social trails, campsites, and campfire rings were observed.
Skolai to Wolverine	26%	4 – Social trails, as well as campsites, campfire rings, and trash were observed on this trip.
Solo Creek to Chisana	37%	4 – Many horse trails, as well as some impacted campsites and associated trash were observed on this trip.
Steamboat Hills	0%	1 – Essentially no impacts from modern human activity were found.
Tana and Chitina Rivers	N/A**	
Wolverine to Amphitheatre	6%	2 – Minimal impacts were observed, namely social trails.
Wrangell Plateau	13%	2 – Minimal impacts were observed, namely social trails and some trash.

* Condition class is a comprehensive evaluation of the overall condition of the route/trip on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 as the least impacted and 5 as the most impacted. This scale is relative to conditions observed here at Wrangell-St. Elias and incorporates observations of social trails, campsites, trash, human waste, and other factors.

** These trips were conducted in a way that precluded their being counted proportionately to the other trips; for instance, when the trip did not allow continuous data collection or the primary purpose of the trip was for another project.

Data analysis

Analyzing visitor use trends

The majority of access to park backcountry and wilderness is facilitated by commercial operators, including air taxis, guided recreational services, and hunting services. Commercial operators are required to submit actual use reports to the park each year. The park is currently analyzing data in these reports to determine trends in visitation, including levels of use, the popularity of various locations, and types of use, among other variables. The purpose of this information and analysis is to use trends in visitation to inform future management strategies. This project is ongoing and more results will be released in the near future.

Data from the past five years of visitor use facilitated by commercial operators is summarized below. In general, visitor use in the backcountry and wilderness has increased since 2010 (Figure 1). The average trip length in backcountry and wilderness areas from 2010-2014 was 4 days. Sport hunting was the activity which received the highest number of user days (Figure 2).

Top 10 most visited locations:

- 1. Skolai Pass
- 2. Iceberg Lake
- 3. Nizina
- 4. Wolverine
- 5. Fosse
- 6. Solo Creek
- 7. Mac Coll Ridge
- 8. Snag Creek
- 9. Lakina River
- 10. Glacier Creek

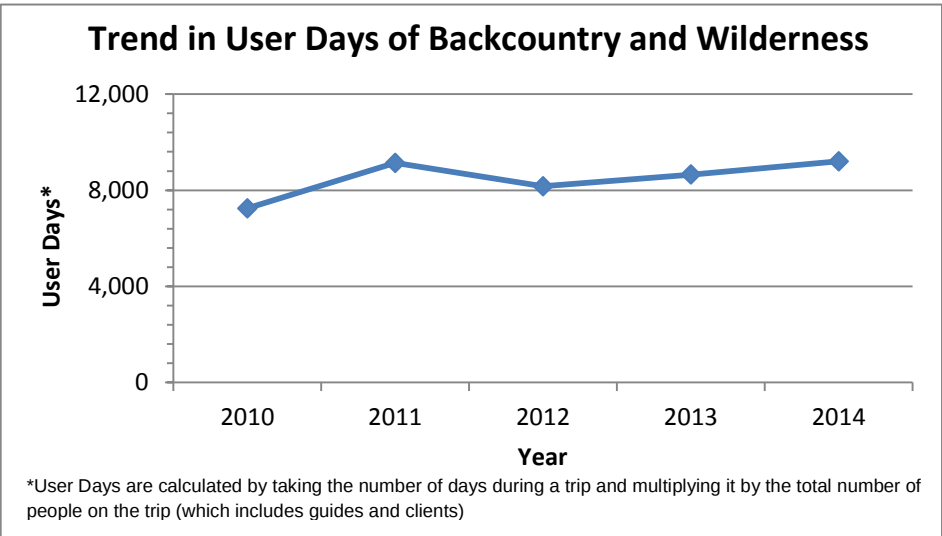


Figure 1. Trend in user days of backcountry and wilderness from 2010-2014.

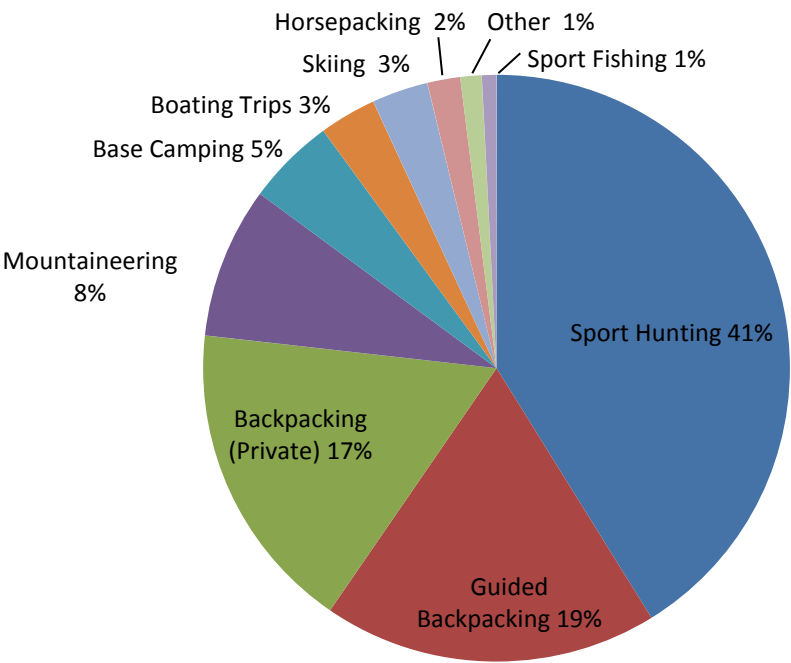


Figure 2. Summary of user days by activity, from 2010-2014.

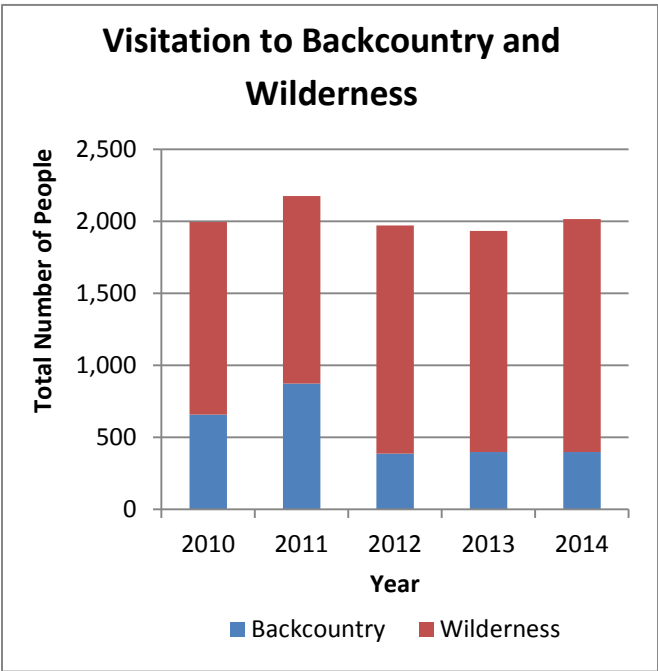


Figure 3. Dispersal of visitors across backcountry and wilderness.

Next steps in the planning process

Proposed action development

Based on the feedback received in public scoping, a Proposed Action will be developed. This Proposed Action will delineate management zones, and will identify desired future conditions, indicators, measures, standards, and thresholds for each zone. It is anticipated that the Proposed Action will be released by the summer of 2016. Public comments on the Proposed Action will be solicited.

Development of management alternatives

Based on the comments received on the Proposed Action, a suite of Management Alternatives will be developed. The Management Alternatives will articulate a variety of approaches regarding desired conditions, indicators, measures, standards, and adaptive management actions. Public comments on the Management Alternatives will be solicited.

Draft EA

Based on the comments received on the Management Alternatives, a Draft EA will be developed. The Draft EA will synthesize the management alternatives into a comprehensive document that analyzes the affected environment, impact topics, and identifies an NPS preferred alternative. Public comments on the Draft EA will be solicited.

Final EA

Based on the comments received on the Draft EA, a Final EA will be released, accompanied by a Finding of No Significant Impact statement.

How to stay involved

Staying up to date

The plan email list is the best way to make sure you are kept up-to-date about the planning process and opportunities for participation. To verify that you are on the email list or wish to receive updates via mail, please contact us at the information provided in the “Submitting Comments” section below.

Submitting comments

Official public comments will be accepted at several stages of the planning process, as outlined above. You can submit comments via email, regular mail, or on the internet at: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectID=44299>

Written comments may be mailed to:
Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve
ATTN: Bruce Rogers
P.O. Box 439
Copper Center, Alaska 99573

Comments may be emailed to:
Bruce_Rogers@nps.gov

For more information about the plan or planning process, please contact Bruce Rogers, project manager, at 907-822-7276.