

STATE OF ALASKA

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Neal Christensen
Denali Visitor Study Project Manager
Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute
Box 8089
Missoula, MT 59807

Dear Mr. Christensen:

Thank you for the early draft of the Denali National Park and Preserve Fly-In Recreation Visitor Study Plan. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide comments relatively early in the design of the study plan. We apologize for our delayed response and hope our input is still useful. These comments include the consolidated views of the state's resource agencies.

General Comments

Through discussions between the State and the National Park Service at the regional and local level, Park staff recognize that implementation of use limits by regulation is just one of many tools available to manage visitor use and should only be used as a last resort. Much of the study plan appears to be developed with use limits in mind. Other tools that may be considered include education, improved enforcement of existing regulations, etc. We recommend editing the study plan and instruments to recognize a full spectrum of management options, consequently broadening the applicability of the study.

Page 3, Background. Please revise the next to last sentence in the second paragraph. The upcoming Revised Backcountry Management Plan will no longer feature a commitment to determining visitor capacity. Instead the revised plan is expected to focus on a variety of management tools to enhance visitor experience and minimize resource impacts.

Page 3, Background. To broaden the intent of the study, we recommend revising the last sentence in the Background discussion as follows:

This survey will provide information which to: 1) assist park managers can use to inform decisions regarding visitor capacity in understanding the variables influencing visitor satisfaction, and 2) support management actions that reduce user group conflicts and improve overall visitor experiences.

Page 3, Study Objectives. Consistent with the comment above, we recommend revising the first study objective as follows:

- Identify indicators that could be used to ~~determine visitor capacity~~ evaluate visitor satisfaction in the Ruth Amphitheater, Kahiltna Base Camp, Pika Glacier, Buckskin Glacier, and Eldridge Glacier.

Page 3, Study Objectives, 1st Objective. We suggest the term “quality” be used in concert with a definition or criteria; no manager intends to manage for poor or low quality. We recommend adapting the following definition provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Alaska Peninsula/Becharof National Wildlife Refuge, currently out for public review. (Glossary, page xx)

Quality is defined as the degree to which recreational opportunities and related experiences meet the objectives for which they are planned and managed. The Service develops visitor services programs in consultation with state fish and wildlife agencies and stakeholder input based on the following criteria:

- Promotes safety of participants, other visitors, and facilities
- Promotes compliance with applicable laws and regulations and responsible behavior
- Minimizes or eliminates conflict with fish and wildlife population or habitat goals or objectives in a plan approved after 1997
- Minimizes or eliminates conflicts with other priority general public-use participants
- Minimizes conflicts with neighboring landowners
- Promotes accessibility and availability to a broad spectrum of American people
- Promotes stewardship and conservation
- Promotes public understanding and increases public appreciation of America’s natural resources and our role in managing and protecting those resources
- Provides reliable/reasonable opportunity to experience wildlife
- Uses facilities that are accessible and that blend into the natural setting
- Uses visitor satisfaction to help define and evaluate programs

Page 5, Study Objectives, 5th Objective. Please provide further clarification on encounters with airplanes and people. Does this objective measure airplanes on the ground, in the air, or both? Please provide time/spatial guidelines to measure a valid encounter. Also, provide criteria for measuring aircraft seen “flying around.” Are these encounters measured while in the air, on the ground, or both? In general, we think that it would be very difficult for visitors to recollect how many aircraft they “saw flying” on a busy day in the Ruth. In the 4th bullet, does “have to move” actually mean “choose to move”? In the 12th bullet, in many instances it would be difficult for a visitor to determine (not to mention recollect later) whether a party or an aircraft was commercial or non-commercial. The 5th bullet has the same concerns – will the visitor be able to determine or recollect which type of aircraft noise generated from? Along these lines, would it be useful to collect some baseline data for a few sample days to correlate actual aircraft use with the perceptions reported by the surveyed visitors?

Page 7, Research Methods. Displacement of Park users is important to understand and avoid; yet determining displacement in a large multi-use park such as Denali is difficult. This study provides an excellent opportunity to determine displacement of mountaineering participants within the Park by using previous registration lists. We recommend the Service conduct a qualitative study on previous visitors by using registration lists from previous years to determine the level and causes of displacement amongst mountaineers.

Page 9, Qualitative Research Analysis. We recommend more than one researcher interpret the meaning and significance of the qualitative interviews. Coding of qualitative data is subjective and can vary widely in interpretation. One or two additional analyses (by conducting the analyses independent of the primary qualitative researcher) provide greater control over bias and less subjectivity to the product.

Page 19, 2004 DENA Interview Guide, Question 10. We assume the bulleted items listed in Question 10 are potential factors that respondents may talk about instead of prompts by the researcher to facilitate discussion. Crowding and air traffic are likely only a few factors that contribute positively or negatively to a visitor's experience.

Page 24, Day-Use Quantitative Study, Experience Outcomes. We assume this question will be re-formatted to facilitate easier responses by the participants. We recommend starting with whether or not the reason is important. If it is not, then there is little value in pursuing the rest of the question. In addition, we recommend including a write-in response, (such as Other _____), to capture motivations not included in the list.

Page 27, Day-Use Quantitative Study, Q4a. Please provide time-spatial measurement criteria for questions on number of people and number of aircraft. (See comments concerning Page 5.)

Page 29, Day-Use Quantitative Study, Q6a. See general comments on setting limits. Add additional measures that could reduce noise impacts such as

- “adjusting flight patterns to reduce the number of overflights in heavily used areas,”
- “encourage use of larger planes with more passenger capacity to reduce the number of trips”
- “encourage use of quieter aircraft”

The same comments apply to **Q6** in the **Multi-Day Quantitative Study**.

Page 34, Multi-Day Quantitative Study, Q2d. We assume this question will be re-formatted to facilitate easier responses by the participants. (See comments concerning Page 24.)

Page 37, Multi-Day Quantitative Study, Q4a. Please provide time-spatial criteria for the questions on number of people and number of aircraft. (See comments concerning Page 5.)

Page 39, Multi-Day Quantitative Study, Q6a. See general comments on setting limits.

Question Q6b. “Overuse” is not defined or quantified in option c, so it is not possible to learn how much additional use or level of impact is envisioned by either the Service or the respondent.

Question Q6d. It would be helpful to provide some examples of non-regulatory management options (e.g. education/information about areas that have less use to encourage more dispersed use and reduced user conflicts).

Page 43, letter to air taxis, third paragraph. Are there other glaciers where air taxi passengers land? If so, consider surveying a sample of all visitors who land on glaciers, not just on those listed, to develop data on a broader spectrum of use.

Thank you for your consideration of these suggestions. If you have any questions, please call me at 907-269-7477.

Sincerely,

/ss/

Sally Gibert
State CSU Coordinator