

# Chapter One

# *Introduction*

**South Denali Visitor Center Complex: Interpretive Master Plan**



Alaska State Park staff enjoy the view of Denali on Curry Ridge. September, 2006

## Importance of the South Denali Visitor Center

The South Denali Visitor Center on Curry Ridge promises opportunities for people to experience the iconic natural and cultural heritage of Alaska at one exquisite place. This location offers a premier view of the Alaska Range which stretches out as a backdrop behind the deep Chulitna River Valley. The Ruth Glacier glimmers down through the Range into the valley and leads the eye up to the shining peaks of Denali that loom majestically over the site.

A shuttle tram ride to the visitor center immerses travelers in the shelter of dark spruce forests, which provides a dramatic contrast to the sunlit alpine and bright views from the visitor center on the summit. The trails on the ridge provide people the unique opportunity to experience the mountain breezes, smells, and quiet solitude of this special place.

This site, which arguably offers the best view of Denali, is strategically located within the primary travel corridor to Denali National Park and to Fairbanks. It is within 150 miles of more than half of Alaska's residents and can serve diverse audiences in multifaceted ways. It has the enthusiastic support of agencies like the National Park Service, Alaska State Parks, and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Each has provided support and insight into the development of this plan.

Unlike many tourist attractions, this visitor center has the potential to serve the recreational needs of Alaska residents, especially in the shoulder and winter seasons. The facility is designed to serve multiple uses and to adapt to changing needs and audiences. In summer, it will accommodate thousands of Alaska tourists; in spring and fall it will provide a staging area for community festivals, weekend getaways for families, and an accessible facility for school outdoor programming. Its comfortable multipurpose room will draw conference and business meetings, providing a uniquely Alaskan theme and environment to their experience.

This facility is intended to stimulate economic growth in the region. It will attract visitors, both tourist and Alaskan resident. It will hold them in the area for extended periods and will motivate them to explore the region's other attractions and amenities. It will rely on concessionaires to provide food, beverage, lodging, and guiding services. The *South Denali Economic Impacts Assessment*, completed in 2008 by the Institute of Social and Economic Research (University of Alaska), projects major increases in regional employment opportunities, local business owner income, and tourism expenditures. The key findings are included in Appendix 3.

This project offers a singular opportunity to create a world class, multi-use visitor center that can adapt to the changing needs of the area and adjust to the ever evolving demands of the tourist industry in Alaska. It is designed as a dynamic and responsive place that will motivate people to return frequently.

## Background Information

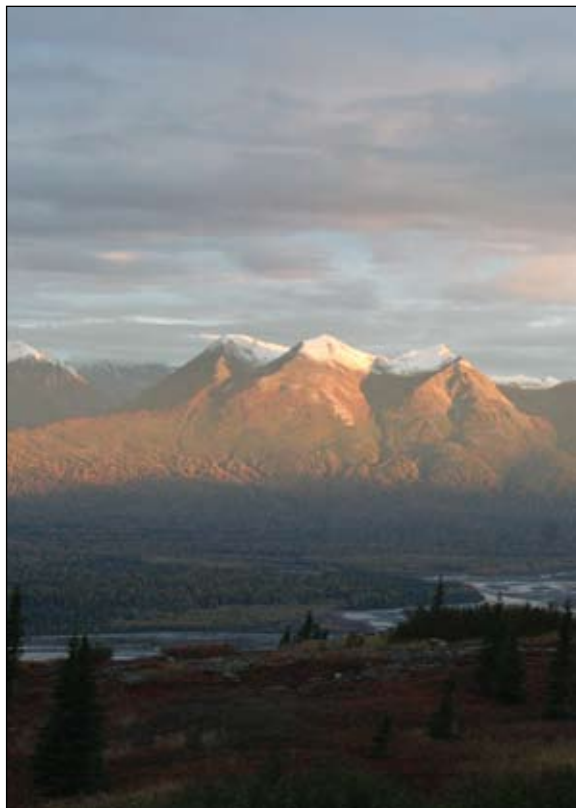
Since the 1960s there has been a shared vision among public land managers in the South Denali region that the area had potential for greater use and development for visitors. Various proposals and feasibility studies have been developed for sites in the Peters Hills and along the Parks Highway. The designation of Denali State Park in 1970 was intended to provide the land base and protections needed for a major public tourism facility. In 2006, Curry Ridge was selected as the preferred site for a South Denali Visitor Center Complex. The long planning history leading to this selection is documented in the Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.

## Purpose of this Document

This conceptual plan has three primary purposes:

1. It documents the vision, mission and goals for this project, examines the public needs, and identifies the resources to be interpreted.
2. It communicates concepts and parameters for site, building, and interpretive media development to stakeholders to provide them with an opportunity to review and comment on the project before any construction begins.
3. It provides an architectural program and media concepts that will guide architects, engineers and media fabricators.





*Sunrise over the Chulitna River from Curry Ridge. September, 2007*

## South Denali Visitor Center Complex at Curry Ridge

The 2000-2001 Denali National Park Business Plan recommends a South Denali development as a more easily accessed alternative tourist destination to Denali National Park and Preserve: “The area offers beautiful views of Mount McKinley and the Alaska Range, glaciers, streams, and much of the impressive array of wildlife for which the Denali Park Road is famous. This alternative visitor destination would be created through partnerships with the state, local communities, and native corporations.”

The National Park Service received a fiscal year 2004 Congressional appropriation to develop facilities in the South Denali region, and a Notice of Intent to prepare a South Denali Implementation Plan was published in the Federal Register in February 2004. The South Denali Implementation Plan and EIS were developed between 2004 and 2006 with a rigorous public involvement process that identified Curry Ridge as the preferred alternative. In April 2006 the Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement was published. As stated in the Introduction, “This implementation plan represents a cooperative effort between the State of Alaska, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the National Park Service. The

visitor center proposed in this plan will be cooperatively managed by the State of Alaska and the National Park Service.”

In July of 2007, a Memorandum of Understanding for Development of the South Denali Master Interpretive Plan was entered into by the DNR Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation and Schmeckle Reserve Interpreters of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The purpose of the project was to “develop and produce a master interpretive plan for a new visitor center complex to be constructed in Denali State Park.” A 2008 amendment expands the scope to provide design concepts for the base transportation facility.

*Bee on monkshood on Curry Ridge. August, 2007*



## The Planning Process

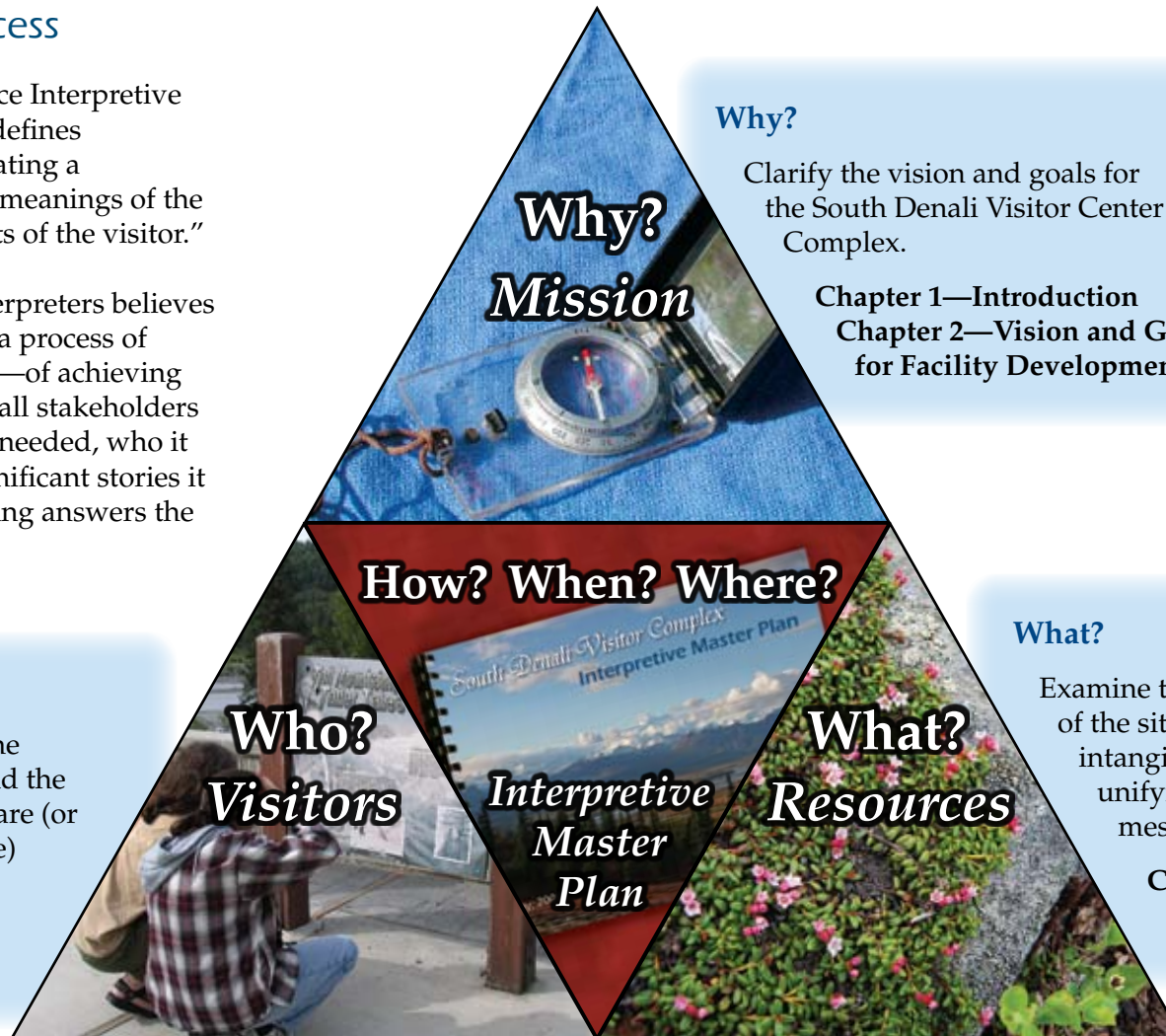
The National Park Service Interpretive Development program defines interpretation as “facilitating a connection between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor.”

Schmeckle Reserve Interpreters believes interpretive planning is a process of consensus development—of achieving a shared perspective by all stakeholders of why interpretation is needed, who it will serve, and what significant stories it will tell. Effective planning answers the following questions:

### Who?

Document who the visitors will be and the experiences they are (or will potentially be) seeking.

**Chapter 3—  
The Audience**



### Why?

Clarify the vision and goals for the South Denali Visitor Center Complex.

**Chapter 1—Introduction  
Chapter 2—Vision and Goals  
for Facility Development**

### What?

Examine the tangible resources of the site, then distill their intangible meanings into unifying themes and messages.

**Chapter 4—Resources,  
Themes, and Messages**

### How? Where? When?

Based on the why, who, and what, develop conceptual plans for facilities and media that best promote visitor/resource connections.

**Chapter 5—Interpretive Facility and Site Development**

**Chapter 6—Interpretive Media**

**Chapter 7—Base Transportation Facility, Site, and Media Development**

