

CHAPTER 4

TRAIL MANAGEMENT

Much of the trail management effort in Chugach State Park until recently has been directed to the management of trails that were inherited when the park was established; trails that had evolved through use. While much of this basic network will continue, there will be more of an emphasis in the future to provide better recreation opportunities and greater resource protection. This will be done by establishing new trails which direct use to areas which disperse activities, and by directing use to areas where it can be sustained without damage.

The use of trails in Chugach State Park is strongly influenced by topography and the regulations for the park. Patterns of use and types of uses encouraged in various portions of the park are the product of topography that is suitable for the activity, and regulations which promote resource protection and visitor safety.

Topography

Chugach State Park is a mountain park on a grand scale. Except for the relatively flat ice fields of Whiteout Glacier, Eagle Glacier and Eklutna Glacier, over 90% of the park is steep terrain (over 35% slope). This reduces the area suitable for most activities except mountain hiking or climbing to less than 10% of the park or 49,500 acres. When areas under 35% slope but subject to avalanche run-out or other hazards such as marshes, rocky zones or wind prone ridges are subtracted, one finds most of the use in Chugach State Park occurring on less than 40,000 acres, most of which occurs within the fifteen major valleys of the park. These valleys are:

1. Eklutna Valley;
2. Thunderbird Creek Valley;
3. Peters Creek Valley;
4. Little Peters Creek Valley;
5. Meadow Creek Valley;
6. Eagle River Valley;
7. South Fork Eagle River Valley;
8. Ship Creek Valley
9. North Fork of Campbell Creek Valley;
10. Middle Fork of Campbell Creek Valley;
11. South Fork of Campbell Creek Valley;
12. Rabbit Creek Valley;
13. Indian Creek Valley;
14. Bird Creek Valley;
15. Penguin Creek Valley.

Understanding this provides one with an insight as to why users of the park are frequently competing with each other to use the "best" areas. If we're looking at just 40,000 acres on which to provide snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, dog mushing and horseback riding winter activities for over 50,000 active potential users of the park, the management becomes a real challenge to provide users with satisfactory experiences.

The type of activity also has a marked effect on the apparent size of the suitable area. Motorized activities, because of their speed, reduce the apparent size of the area by the inverse of their speed. Thus 100 skiers in a square mile would experience no more crowding than 20 snowmobilers moving at five times their speed. Or, because of the 5X increase of speed over the skier, the motorized rider would perceive the area as one-fifth the size. The implications of this phenomenon are significant when dealing with limited areas but constantly increasing numbers of users.

Regulations

Regulations are designed to protect park values and resources, to protect users from particularly severe hazards, and to provide for those activities which could not or would not occur successfully without a separation of uses.

For example, non-motorized recreation seldom occurs in areas open to motorized uses. The ALASKA RECREATION TRAIL PLAN states: "The response to our questionnaire on compatibility of use indicates that most trail users find mechanized and non-mechanized use of the same trail or area incompatible due to the impact of noise and exhaust fumes". (p. 81)

Management direction and signing is also needed to guide users away from particularly hazardous conditions such as known avalanche chutes following a heavy snowfall or wind-loading; or away from cliffs that have taken their human toll in the past, yet seem to invite use.

Park values and resources are also protected by regulation. Fragile alpine vegetation will be quickly lost if repeated motor vehicles or horses use an area. The Flattop area suffered motorized damage before the park was created that will take a hundred years to heal. Now, the foot traffic is so heavy that significant additional damage is occurring and reaching a crucial stage that only regulation of use can reverse.

The Present Pattern

When one considers the combination of topography and regulation in Chugach State Park, interesting patterns of use emerge, or more significantly, may occur in the future.

Winter Use

Of the 15 major valleys in the park, seven are open to snowmobile use. Eklutna Lake (the largest valley in the park), Peters Creek, Little Peters Creek, Eagle River, South Fork of Campbell Creek (the third largest valley), Bird Creek and Penguin Creek are open. Of the potential skiing valleys, Thunderbird Creek is virtually impassible currently, Meadow Creek has no legal access and is avalanche prone, South Fork Eagle River has virtually no access (steep, icy road), Ship Creek has only limited access due to military constraints, North Fork of Campbell Creek likewise, Rabbit Creek is difficult to access because of the steep road and private land, and Indian Creek access is very narrow and using it becomes increasingly tenuous as more houses are built. Of the remaining valleys, Eagle River seldom has enough snow for skiing, Peters Creek is allotted to skiers, but only after traveling six miles from the trailhead as is Bird Creek Valley. Looking at these areas

on a map provides a much clearer picture. The usable areas shown on the map are constrained by terrain (under 35% slope) and the regulations.

Other Uses

Horse use is permitted in most of the park in summer, with only a few small areas excluded from use. The closed areas are Eklutna Lake Campground, Thunderbird Falls, Eagle River Visitor Center and Valley (open under special permit), Susitna View Picnic Area, Glen Alps Flattop trails, the Old Johnson Trail, McHugh Creek Picnic Area, Meadow Creek drainage and Bird Creek Campground. In winter, several additional trails are closed to allow for set ski trails, and most trails are closed during break-up when little trail use of any kind occurs.

As additional horse use occurs in the park, it will be necessary to carefully monitor use to prevent damage to trails in alpine areas and wet spots. Changes in regulations or trail routes may be necessary to prevent resource damage or annoyance of other users.

Three-wheel vehicles and dirt bikes are allowed in Eklutna Lake Valley following the road between campground "A" and the glacier on Sunday through Wednesday, and in Bird Creek Valley (old logging trails). In addition, four-wheel drive vehicles are permitted on Peter's Creek Road and Bird Creek Valley logging trails. This is the only legal off-road location in the park for four-wheel vehicles, primarily because it is the only location in which use can be confined to trails thus preventing excessive resource damage, particularly to alpine areas.

Bicycles (no motors) are allowed in campgrounds, on the Eklutna Lake Road, the gasline service road (trail) from Prospect Heights to Indian, and Bird Creek logging trails. This includes the so called "mountain bikes".

The wilderness zone of the park is closed to motorized and mechanized vehicles by definition of the wilderness concept. Present regulations for motorized and mechanized uses carefully observe this zoning concept.

The steeper portions of Chugach State Park, which is the other 90%, is available to hikers and mountaineers throughout the year. This is the true wilderness of the park, nearly all of it being within the spectacular alpine zone. It is here, more than anywhere else however, that weather and climate restrain outdoor activities far more than the sheltered, forested valleys of lower elevations. To most users, the mountains are the "scenery", the spectacular landscape that gives this park its special flavor and definition.

Findings and Recommendations

In this sub-chapter there will be specific recommendations made for each trail and trailhead. This recommendation may include a new trailhead and trail, expansion of an existing one or deletion. A justification will accompany each recommendation, together with relevant comments from the Chugach Master Plan.

Eklutna-Peters Creek Planning Unit

This 190,00 acre planning unit would feature 27 marked and maintained trails and routes (glacial and alpine traverses) totalling 165 miles. The majority of trail mileage would be in the alpine zone, above both brush and tree line. Most of these trails are also Class C trails, the lowest standard. Many of these trails were proposed to meet the expressed need for more access into major drainages for hunting, wildlife observation and backcountry camping. This unit contains four public cabins:

- 1) Pitchler's Perch at Eklutna Glacier
- 2) Whiteout Glacier
- 3) Eagle Glacier
- 4) Peters Creek ski cabin

Much of this unit is wilderness area and the lower standard of trails would retain that quality.

In this unit, careful route selection will be necessary to avoid heavy alder-covered slopes wherever possible. In most cases, this will mean selecting the south-facing slopes of a drainage where vegetation is much more open-growing and loses snow cover earlier in the summer.

Eagle River Planning Unit

This 136,000 acre planning unit would feature 22 marked and maintained trails and routes (glacial and alpine traverses) totalling 119 miles. The majority of trail mileage would be in the alpine zone above the timber and brush line. Most of the trails are also Class "C" trails, the lowest standard. Many of these trails presently exist and would be merely upgraded and marked. Additional trails will be built primarily for wildlife observation, nature interpretation and canoe trail access. This unit contains one public cabin in Eagle River Valley upstream of the narrows. The upper valley and glacier area is in the wilderness zone. The lower standard trails there would help retain that quality.

As in the previous unit, careful route selection will be required to avoid as much brush clearing as possible, and to avoid particularly dangerous avalanche areas for winter trails. Trails should be maneuvered wherever necessary to avoid large trees. In most cases, the south-facing slope of the valley will be the best trail location because of the more widely spaced trees and brush, and earlier snow melt.

Ship Creek Planning Unit

This 46,000 acre planning unit would feature 5 marked and maintained trails totalling 39 miles. Most of the trail mileage would be below the alpine zone, in open timber and shrubs. In many respects, this gentle and spacious valley is perhaps the most beautiful and appealing area in Chugach State Park, yet it has received little use because of limited access through Fort Richardson Military Reservation. The entire unit is classified as wilderness area except a small portion at the downhill ski area and trailhead. Only two trails presently serve the area - a biathlon trail and a main valley access

which has become badly damaged by horses where it crosses a series of springs and wet seeps. Important remedial efforts will be necessary to harden and relocate short portions of the horse trail. A new general purpose foot trail and ski trail will be located uphill to the east where parking can successfully accommodate vehicles without horse trailers. This trailhead will also serve Rendezvous Peak and other popular destinations along the ridge. Most trails in the unit will be Class "C" to lessen impacts, and the North Fork of Ship Creek route will not be marked or signed to maintain its present wilderness character.

Hillside Planning Unit

This 29,000 acre planning unit would feature 40 marked and maintained trails totalling 86 miles. Approximately 26 miles of these are alpine zone routes above tree and brush line which require no clearing and little maintenance. Several will be marked, but not all. This leaves 60 miles of cleared, marked and maintained trails as recommended in the Chugach Master Plan.

Trail development in this unit will be more concentrated or intensive than in other planning units. There are several reasons for this. First, much of the western portion of the unit was heavily modified by homestead clearings and access roads, powerlines and gaslines. Secondly, the existing trail system, though quite extensive because it follows many of these old roads, is generally inadequate for many of the recreational activities that have a high potential in this unit because of inadequate linkages, too steep or sustained grades and aesthetic problems. Third, the gentle terrain and open forest conditions west of Campbell Creek are ideal for trail development, particularly cross country skiing. Fourth, the Chugach Master Plan has targeted most of the hillside sections for more intensive recreation development zones, as shown on the Park Zoning Map. Fifth, because the hillside sections are adjacent to urban Anchorage, they are highly accessible to many users, and this pressure can best be handled by providing a substantial number of loop trail experiences which will be designed to satisfy the 90% or so of users who want a satisfying trail experience for 2 or 3 hours. In this way, additional pressures can be deferred from sensitive back country areas and the wilderness zone.

In addition, the winter snowmobile route will be relocated to lessen penetration into closed areas and to reduce conflicts with skiers and winter equestrians.

Most of the trails in this unit will be Class A and B trails, with Class C trails into the wilderness zones and alpine areas to reduce adverse impacts.

Major revisions of the Glen Alps to Flattop trails will be required. Dozens of small trails have evolved in the last decade and many wander aimlessly over the fragile tundra. This plan recommends the establishment (after very detailed field investigation) of 3 or 4 loop trails that will include a route to Flattop Mountain and a representative sample of sub-alpine flower, berry and scrub forest environments. Other trails should be closed and comprehensive signing of the area will be required to confine users to the hardened trails. Barriers may be necessary in some instances. The situation in this area is

critical, and another decade without intensive management could mean the loss of most of the attractive flowering and berry plants that make this area so appealing.

Turnagain Arm Planning Unit

This 94,000 acre planning unit (of which 13,000 acres is tidelands and waters of Turnagain Arm) would feature 20 marked and maintained trails totalling 128 miles. About a third of the trail mileage would be in the alpine zone. Most of these are existing trails that would be upgraded or recleared after years of not being maintained. Several important new trails such as a loop trail at McHugh Creek and a tie into the Hillside Trails from there, as well as the California Creek trail providing access into the eastern park from Girdwood Valley, are also planned. An especially significant new addition is the continuation of the Old Johnson Trail from Bird Creek bikeway to Girdwood Valley following the north side of Seward Highway. Parts of the old trail can still be found east of Bird Hill. Parts of this trail are seasonally avalanche prone but would provide an excellent summer trail.

The selection of south facing slopes for trail location is especially important in this planning unit because these slopes are much more open and inviting for use. North-facing slopes generally feature dense Sitka spruce forests or alder brush, and heavy accumulation of late-melting snow pack.

The eastern part of this planning unit is mostly wilderness area and trails will be Class C to lessen impacts on wilderness values, and to restrict access into Bird Creek, Penquin Creek and Camp Creek valleys. Should closures ever become necessary in some of these drainages to protect park resources, a five year period without maintenance will generally close the trail because of heavy alder growth.

Trail Inventory

The following is an inventory of existing and proposed trails. Trail projects that are recommended in the Chugach State Park Master Plan and this plan are denoted by "*" under Trail Name.