

Ninilchik/Deep Creek State Recreation Areas Management Plan

May, 2001

**State of Alaska
Alaska Department of Natural Resources
Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation
P.O Box 1247
Soldotna, AK 99669
(907) 262-5581**

STATE OF ALASKA

*TONY KNOWLES,
GOVERNOR*

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

DIVISION OF PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION

550 W 7th AVE., SUITE 1380
ANCHORAGE, AK 99501-3561
PHONE: (907) 269-8700
FAX: (907) 269-8907

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Dear Alaskan:

The community of Ninilchik is bounded on either side by two of Alaska's most popular State Recreation Areas: Deep Creek State Recreation Area and Ninilchik State Recreation Area. Characterized by both beach and river access, the popular campgrounds and day use areas host thousands of visits each year during the busy summer season.

Ninilchik is a community that is very dependent upon tourism and we recognize that our Deep Creek and Ninilchik state park units are a key foundation for much of the area's tourism economy. Key elements of this Management Plan focus on protecting the quality of the recreational experience for visitors, while protecting the resources upon which outdoor recreation depends. This plan provides guidance for the future management of these park units.

The Ninilchik/Deep Creek State Recreation Areas Management Plan was developed with the help of the South Peninsula State Parks Citizen's Advisory Board with assistance from interested members of the public. Public involvement in the development of this plan was essential in developing a plan that meets the needs of the park visitor, protects the natural and cultural resources, and provides for the needs of the community.

I am pleased to adopt this management plan for the Ninilchik and Deep Creek State Recreation Areas.

Sincerely,

Jim Stratton,
Director

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Chapter 1 – Introduction and Scope of Plan

The Ninilchik/Deep Creek State Recreation Areas Management Plan (Management Plan) provides guidance for development and management of the state lands and waters within the Ninilchik State Recreation Area (SRA) and the Deep Creek SRA for the next ten years. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR) is responsible for managing these areas for the safe enjoyment by the public, while protecting the natural and cultural resources.

This plan is being developed to address the growing number of issues with park use and management. Over the past few years, there has been increased involvement and interest by the community of Ninilchik with the establishment of the South Peninsula State Parks Citizen's Advisory Board (Advisory Board). One of the Advisory Board's goals is to develop management plans for the Ninilchik and Anchor Point areas that will help guide the future management of recreational use and development, commercial use, and protection of the park resources.

AS 41.21.020 provides the authority of DPOR to develop management plans. Many of the State Parks and State Recreation Areas around the state of Alaska have existing Park Management Plans that have been developed to guide their management. This plan will address the Ninilchik and Deep Creek State Recreation Areas within the community of Ninilchik.

Planning Process

In 1998 and 1999, the Advisory Board met to discuss how to start the process for this management plan. In March, 1999, a public workshop was held in Ninilchik to identify what citizens of the community wanted to see in the management of the State Parks within their community. From the issues and recommendations identified at that meeting and by the Advisory Board members, a draft set of goals, objectives and recommendations was developed. Further input by citizens of the community and Advisory Board members has resulted in the management plan recommendations that follow. Following final review and approval by the Advisory Board, it is expected that the Director of DPOR will adopt this plan during the spring of 2001.

Following more review over the summer of 2000 by community members, visitors to the park areas and the Advisory Board, the Advisory Board will convene in the fall, 2000 to develop a final recommendation for the Ninilchik/Deep Creek Management Plan. Adoption by the Director of DPOR is expected during the winter of 2000/2001.

Plan Organization

This plan is organized into the following sections: Introduction, Background Information, Issue Identification, Goals, Objectives and Recommendations, and Plan Implementation.

Chapter 2 - Background Information

The community of Ninilchik is framed on either side by two important streams, the Ninilchik River and Deep Creek. These popular salmon-producing rivers support an important sport fishery and thriving tourism industry geared toward hosting many thousands of visitors each year. Located on the shores of Cook Inlet, the community enjoys the richness of the area's scenic beauty with active volcanoes and snow covered mountains of the Alaska Range across Cook Inlet, as well as the area's varied recreational opportunities. Fresh water sport fishing for King and Silver Salmon, Dolly Varden Char and Steelhead Trout, digging for the popular razor clams, and pursuing halibut and King Salmon in the marine salt water fishery all combine to attract visitors and occupy local residents.

Ninilchik got its start as a retirement community for Russians. In the early 1800's Ninilchik was settled by Russian colonists. They lived a subsistence lifestyle, fur trapping, hunting, fishing and panning for gold. In the early years, approximately 200 colonists lived in the native village. Today in the "old village" some of the original buildings and root cellars are still standing and many are still in use. Many of the descendants of those early families still live in the village today.

Ninilchik State Recreation Area

The Ninilchik State Recreation Area is comprised of four distinct, developed facilities: Ninilchik River Campground, Ninilchik River Scenic Overlook, Ninilchik View Campground and RV Dump Station, and the Ninilchik Beach Campground. These four camping and day use sites combine to accommodate hundreds of visitors. Of the four, the View Campground and Beach Campground are the oldest facilities, dating to the earliest days of the Alaska State Park system in the early 1970's. Incessant erosion by Cook Inlet fall and winter storms has resulted in a marked reduction in capacity at the Beach Campground over the past decade. This campground continues to be popular by visitors wishing to access the nearby clam beds or to enjoy the scenic views from this unique beach. The View Campground is small, but largely popular due to the stunning views afforded by its bluff edge location above Cook Inlet and the village of Ninilchik below. An adjacent RV Dump Station serves RV owners throughout the area.

The Ninilchik River Campground was constructed in 1982, following the purchase of property for park purposes from the Simonds family, who originally homesteaded the property. This 43 unit campground is very popular with anglers during the early summer King Salmon sport fishery, and later, as a spacious, quiet campground.

The Ninilchik River Scenic Overlook was constructed in 1993 with Federal Highway Administration funds as a highway enhancement project. This site is located on lands owned by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), and managed by DPOR under a Cooperative Management Agreement. Before the 1993 construction project, this site was a large, unsightly gravel parking pad with numerous public use problems. The 1993 project provided for improved parking, tables, rest rooms, interpretive signs and viewing areas, trails and a water well.

Deep Creek State Recreation Area

The Deep Creek SRA is comprised of three developed facilities: Deep Creek North Scenic Overlook, Deep Creek South Scenic Overlook, and the Deep Creek Beach Campground. Deep Creek North and South were both constructed with Federal Highway Administration funds in 1993 when the Ninilchik River Scenic Overlook was constructed. These two sites sit on opposite sides of Deep Creek adjacent to the Sterling Highway bridge. Facilities include paved parking, rest rooms, interpretive panels, and trails. Prior to construction, these two sites were undeveloped gravel parking areas primarily within the Sterling Highway right of way. They are popular sites for sport fishing and highway rest stop use, and serve as overflow camping areas during the busiest times of the year.

Deep Creek Beach Campground is the busiest State Park facility within the Ninilchik area. This facility contains nearly 300 parking sites for day use parking and camping, a double boat launch into Deep Creek, and a tractor boat launch business operated under a concession contract. Private property owned by the Ninilchik Native Association, Inc. is located adjacent to the area used by the tractor boat launch operation in the park, and is used for a similar operation for launching boats into Cook Inlet.

In 1989, DPOR issued the first Non-competitive Park Use Permit for Commercial Activities for boat launching services with tractors. In 1992, DPOR determined that the business was viable and should be limited to just one operator due to limited space available at the Campground. A Request for Proposals was issued and a Concession Contract was awarded to a business that best met the needs for service, seasonal schedule and price. Since that time, one operator has been permitted to provide the boat launch services annually. Since the early 90's, charter businesses began to utilize the tractor services for launching charter fishing boats, and this industry grew quickly as a result of the ease and safety of launching into Cook Inlet with this service. The increase in the charter industry also generated a corresponding growth in the tourism industry in the Ninilchik community, with a number of new businesses springing up to accommodate the increased tourism activity. A great deal of the current tourism growth in the Ninilchik community can be attributed to the expanded charter industry that was enabled by the tractor boat launch service, as well as a healthy fishery for halibut and salmon.

Chapter 3 – Planning Issues

A number of issues were identified during public workshops or meetings or in Advisory Board meetings. The following is a brief description of the issues that have been identified to date.

I. Resource Management

A. Stream bank erosion and fish habitat loss

The popularity of the fresh water sport fishery along the Ninilchik River and Deep Creek have resulted in impacts to the riparian areas along these important anadromous streams. Biologists have clearly identified how important the near shore area is to rearing salmon fry, with overhanging vegetation providing cover and protection from predators and the introduction of insects for the fry to eat. When the stream banks are denuded of natural vegetation, this cover and food is diminished, and the water velocity can increase, causing small salmon fry to use more energy in moving to feeding and resting areas. While the loss of a small amount of rearing habitat may not have a noticeable affect on the river's fishery, the cumulative affect of the loss of extensive areas of habitat will certainly impact the river's ability to continue to produce healthy runs of salmon.

Thousands of booted anglers have carved trails into the natural river banks, causing the loss of vegetation and increased erosion along the streams. Determining methods of providing access for anglers while reducing the impacts of their use is a key issue.

B. Spruce Bark Beetle Impacts

Many of the large spruce trees in the Ninilchik community have succumbed to the onslaught of the spruce bark beetle from the late 1990's to the present time. Concerns about fire danger from forests of dead, flammable trees, danger from trees falling onto campers, increased management costs for removing downed trees, and the loss of aesthetics due to the dead forest have all been mentioned as concerns.

C. Beach Erosion

Powerful fall and winter storms on Cook Inlet have caused progressive erosion of the beach campgrounds at Ninilchik and Deep Creek. This has resulted in the loss of parking and camping areas to a lesser extent at Deep Creek, and to a greater extent at the Ninilchik Beach Campground.

D. Fish Waste

Evidence of inappropriate dumping of large quantities of fish carcasses and fish waste on area beaches has been a concern. When large quantities of waste is dumped at high tide in heavily used public access sites, it can create a noxious and unsanitary problem. Additionally, when

clam shells and waste or halibut carcasses are deposited into area streams, it can overload these natural systems. Developing a plan for returning fish waste to the appropriate area waters without creating sanitary problems is needed.

II. Recreation

A. Commercial versus private use of the recreational facilities

Growing demand for commercial recreational access at facilities like Deep Creek Beach Campground has caused concerns that private recreational users may be crowded out. Determining how to allocate space between the various demands is an issue.

B. Community recreational needs

Ninilchik residents have increasingly expressed concern that they can no longer enjoy access to the beach and other local recreation sites due to competition from other recreational users. They have requested that some sites be designed and managed to facilitate their needs.

C. Recreational access

Lack of trails has caused poor access to fishing sites, dangerous access for pedestrians, bike riders and equestrians, or impacts on sensitive resources along streams and in wetlands, etc. Inadequate road designs have caused congestion and dangerous traffic conditions at peak use times. Trails that are accessible for persons with disabilities are needed so this group may also access fishing opportunities.

D. Impacts on private property owners

Private property owners adjacent to heavily used public access sites have experienced trespass problems, with litter, fires and waste. Developing a method for educating park users about private property is an issue.

E. Winter recreational access

The growing interest in winter recreation and the need to provide better access and parking for snow machine users has been identified as an issue. Segments of the community's tourism industry may benefit from improved winter access opportunities, some of which may be possible within the State Park areas.

F. Interpreting Ninilchik's historic resources

The richness of Ninilchik's history is an area that has not been fully interpreted for visitors. Sharing this history will help visitors and local residents appreciate the unique story of this area.

G. Develop new facilities or keep lands natural?

Growing demand for improved access combined with an increasing number of park users will prompt discussions on whether undeveloped lands should be developed with new recreational facilities and access. Balancing this need with the desire by some people to keep some park areas in their natural state is an issue.

III. Commercial Use

A. Amount and type of commercial use in the parks

Concerns that commercial use is the biggest changing factor in recreational use at Deep Creek SRA have prompted concerns that this use be limited to control its growth and impact on other users. Additionally, requests to permit commercial ventures such as food, beverage and tackle retail sales have been more common. At issue is what levels should be placed on commercial use, and what types of commercial activity should be permitted in the future?

B. Tractor Boat Launch Business

Some persons have proposed that DPOR consider eliminating the tractor boat launch activities on State Park lands and allow the activity to occur on the adjacent private lands. Others have suggested that DPOR and the Ninilchik Native Association, Inc. consider combining the tractor launch operations to increase efficiency and reduce the total area needed for this operation. Still others have requested that DPOR continue to permit the tractor launch activity on park lands to ensure that competition will continue for the boat launching business. These competing requests will need to be sorted and a solution determined.

IV. Land Use

A. Acquisition of new lands

Increasing demand for recreational access, or the need to protect sensitive habitat lands or wetlands may dictate that additional lands should be acquired. Additionally, the interest in protecting historically important lands and facilities may be desired by the community.

As land becomes available through purchase, donation or land exchange, what criteria should be used to decide whether these lands should be added to the state park system? What other management options might be considered for managing lands, such as Interagency Land Management Assignments, conservation easements, cooperative management agreements, public access easement acquisitions, etc.?

V. Public Education

While the public's awareness of angler impacts on riparian fish habitat is increasing, numerous visitors to the community are unaware of how their actions might negatively impact important fish and wildlife habitat or other resources.

Determining where public lands end, and where private lands begin can sometimes be confusing to the public. Reducing incidents of trespass on private lands has been expressed as a concern.

Reducing conflicts between the various recreational user groups as a way of improving the quality of recreational experience for all users has been mentioned as a concern.

Chapter 4 – Goals and Objectives

Relationship to Goals and Objectives

A statement of goals and objectives precedes the recommendations for each subject category. The recommendations are meant to implement one or more of the objectives associated with that category. The reader should consult the goals and objective statements that precede the recommendations, to get a sense of the relationship between the desired end state and the recommendations.

I. Resource Management

A. Goal: To protect, maintain, and manage park uses while minimizing environmental or resource impacts.

1. Objective: Resource Management

- a. To identify important habitat areas.
- b. To manage park uses so that important habitat areas are protected and maintained, resource degradation is limited, and impacted areas are restored.
- c. To restore forest health in the aftermath of the spruce bark beetle impacts.

Recommendations:

1. In conjunction with ADF&G Habitat Biologists, develop an inventory of habitat types, identifying important habitats that are being threatened by public use.
2. Prioritize sections of stream banks needing restoration. Seek funding and volunteers to assist with restoration.
3. Work with the Kenai Peninsula Borough's Kenai River Center to seek Habitat Protection Ordinance permits for any activities within 50 feet of the Ninilchik River or Deep Creek.
4. Develop angler access trails away from river banks to reduce damage to riparian areas along the rivers. Include other access improvements that serve to minimize habitat impacts (i.e.: stairways into river, light penetrating walkways or fishing platforms, etc.).
5. Reduce the presence of fish waste on area beaches and in rivers through education, applying for grants to assist with providing waste disposal facilities, regulatory changes, or through permit stipulation changes for commercial operators.

6. Identify sites needing removal of spruce bark beetle killed trees to mitigate public safety, improve aesthetics, and reduce fire damage.
7. Monitor levels and affects of vehicle traffic on beaches.
8. Maintain or enhance wintering moose habitat in the Deep Creek and Ninilchik River lowlands.

II. Recreational Use

A. Goal: To provide for the enjoyment and access to recreational opportunities for users of the Deep Creek and Ninilchik State Recreation Areas while maintaining the diversity of the recreational experience.

1. Objective: Management of Recreational Use

- a. To improve recreational access and opportunities while respecting the rights of private property owners.
- b. To manage recreational use to provide opportunities for a wide variety of users and interests.

2. Objective: Recreational Facilities and Development

- a. To provide for waste management alternatives. (i.e. restrooms, fish carcasses, etc.)
- b. To provide infrastructure to meet diverse recreational demands.

Recommendations:

1. Area-wide recommendations:

- a. Provide for community-oriented recreation facilities.
 1. Investigate park areas or existing state lands for a potential community park.
- b. DPOR should consider developing a multi-use trail system linking community and park destinations, such as for non-motorized, motorized and seasonal uses. This may require acquiring voluntary trail easements across private parcels.

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- c. Provide special areas for short term, non-commercial day use parking for picnicking, beach walks, etc. at Deep Creek and Ninilchik Beaches.
 - d. Evaluate locations and access to additional rest room facilities in busy recreational fishing areas, seek funding to construct and maintain.
 - e. Develop program to interpret historic resources in cooperation with local citizens and DPOR's Office of History and Archaeology.
 - f. Develop program to provide wildlife viewing opportunities in cooperation with the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game, US Fish and Wildlife Service and local citizens, etc.
 - g. Develop winter access improvements for snowmachine parking access improvements.
 - h. Evaluate undeveloped lands to determine future management: recreational development versus maintaining in a non-developed status.

2. Recommendations for Deep Creek

- a. Provide improvements to access at Deep Creek Beach by widening the access road and providing a staging lane, reducing the radius of the road's curve, reducing the steepness of the road, and providing a pedestrian access adjacent to the roadway. This recommendation is currently listed as a priority within the 2001-2003 State Transportation Improvement Project List, but will require continued local support to ensure project completion.
- b. Develop alternatives for off-beach parking to serve charter activities or other user groups.
 - 1. On existing public lands, determine management and location for parking for a variety of user groups.
 - 2. Collaborate with charter operators to minimize parking congestion on beach.
- c. Ensure that public access is maintained onto beach and in front of tractor launch and other park areas.
- d. Evaluate current ratio of use by different user groups (i.e.: day use vs. camping, private vs. commercial use), and determine whether shifts should be made in use ratios.

3. Recommendations for Ninilchik Beach

- a. Provide short term staging area for off-loading ATV trailers or for other drop off purposes, and coordinate for off-beach parking for these vehicles.

III. Commercial Use

A. Goal: To manage appropriate commercial use and provide for a balance between commercial use and non-commercial use of the Ninilchik and Deep Creek SRA's.

1. Objective: Management of Commercial Use

- a. To designate types and levels of commercial activities to be permitted in park units.
- b. To develop a program that manages the impacts of commercial activity.

Recommendations:

1. Reduce parking congestion and space needs required by commercial tractor launch operations through a cooperative agreement with adjacent private property owner.
2. Require charter operators to limit the number of client vehicles on beach.
3. Evaluate alternatives for developing off-site parking and transportation for boat launch activities for commercial boat launch operators.
4. Evaluate continuing to provide boat launch service availability on State Park lands, to encourage multiple operators on beach; or, to consolidate tractor launch service with adjacent private property owners.
5. Limit or prohibit non-charter related commercial use of parks.
 - a. Examples of uses which should be prohibited: food and beverage vending, tackle sales, fuel delivery, RV holding tank pumping, etc.
 - b. Commercial activities that should continue to be permitted: charter activities, boat launching, and firewood sales.

IV. Land Use

A. Goal: To ensure that lands that are important for recreation, historic preservation, or habitat protection are maintained or acquired, as necessary.

1. Objective: To identify lands that may be acquired or managed for public uses in the Ninilchik/Deep Creek area.

Recommendations:

1. Through a public input process, identify lands that may be needed for various public uses:
 - a. Historic importance
 - b. Habitat importance
 - c. Recreational access or opportunities
 - d. Community-based recreation
2. Acquire lands important for park purposes through purchase or donation from willing landowners.
3. Coordinate with other public land managers or private landowners on a variety of land management options, including:
 - a. Land exchanges
 - b. Public access easements
 - c. Cooperative agreements
 - d. Conservation easements
 - e. Other creative solutions

V. Public Education

A. Goal: To provide for public education resulting in responsible park use.

1. Objective: Public education

- a. Improve public safety

- b. Improve recreational experience for park users
- c. Improve local citizen's quality of life
- d. Reduce conflicts between park users through public education.

Recommendations:

1. Develop methods for educating visitors and local citizens regarding habitat concerns.
2. Develop methods for educating visitors and local citizens for reducing conflicts with other recreational users.
3. Develop methods for educating visitors regarding private property concerns, through the use of boundary signs and site maps, etc.
4. Develop methods for educating anglers about proper fish waste disposal.
5. Involve citizens in "solution-orientation" roles.
6. Seek grants to achieve education initiatives.
7. Educate park users about environmental impacts from improper disposal of sewage, fish carcasses, trash, or fuel.
8. Investigate developing an "adopt-a-stream" program in the community.
9. Develop an overall safety plan, including:
 - a. Evacuation plan for area facilities
 - b. Danger of tides for clam diggers
 - c. Hypothermia and safe boating practices
 - d. Emergency contacts and resources
 - e. Safe recreation in crowded areas (i.e. rules of the road for traffic on the beach, etc.)
10. Develop education for private property owners regarding stream bank restoration, and resources available to assist them.
11. Utilize commercial operators to help educate park users.

12. Investigate whether to develop a volunteer “Stream Watch” program to help educate park users.
13. Investigate what incentives might be provided for litter pick up along streams or in parks.
14. Maintain active involvement by the community in educational programs.

Chapter 5 – Plan Implementation

This chapter describes the actions and procedures that DPOR will take to implement this plan and describes the process for plan review, modification, and amendment.

Implementation Recommendations

The real worth of any plan is its ability to be implemented and thereby direct management actions to achieve some desired future state. Much rests on the ability and willingness of the managing agency to carry out plan recommendations.

DPOR should review the status of the recommendations identified in Chapter 4 on an annual basis with the Advisory Board, and set priorities for implementation. This review would measure efforts toward plan implementation, stop implementation efforts for recommendations that are proving unworkable, and make modifications to plan recommendations that will improve their feasibility.

Plan Review, Modifications, and Amendment Procedures

This Management Plan is intended to be effective until revised or updated. The plan should be reviewed at least once every ten years, and preferably, every five years, to determine if revisions are necessary. The plan review will be coordinated by DPOR. During the review, the South Peninsula State Parks Citizen's Advisory Board, the Ninilchik community, interest groups, affected agencies and the general public should be contacted for comment and input.

The decision to review the plan may be indicated by:

- Written public or agency requests for review;
- Policy changes within the Division
- Availability of new data
- Changing social or economic conditions that place different demands on the park areas or affect the Division's capabilities

A minor change may be made if it does not modify or change the basic intent of the Plan. Minor changes may be necessary for clarification, consistency or to facilitate the plan's implementation. Minor changes do not require public review but must be coordinated with the Area Superintendent and appropriate staff in consultation with the Advisory Board.

The Plan may be amended as needed. An amendment might add to or modify the basic intent of the Plan. Amendments require public notice and consultation with affected agencies, users and land owners. Amendments may require public meetings if the Director decides the level of controversy warrants. The Director of the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation must approve amendments.