

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Park Overview and Regional Characteristics

Chugach State Park is located in Southcentral Alaska mostly within the Municipality of Anchorage. The park contains approximately 495,000 acres of land and is one of the four largest state parks in the United States. Southcentral Alaska is an area of diverse land forms and rugged topography, bounded on the north and west by the Alaska Range, and on the east by the Chugach and Wrangell mountains and Prince William Sound. The region contains extensive ocean shoreline, abundant lakes, massive glaciers and ice fields. The park's westernmost boundary lies in the western foothills of the Chugach Mountain Range and is a mere seven miles to the east of downtown Anchorage. The park is further defined by Knik Arm on the north, Turnagain Arm on the south, and Upper and Lower Lake George and the Chugach National Forest on the east. Within minutes of the park are the communities of Palmer, Eagle River, Chugiak, Indian, Bird Creek, and Girdwood, the village of Eklutna, Elmendorf Air Force Base, and Fort Richardson.

Although vast portions of the Southcentral Alaska region are sparsely populated, almost half of the State's population resides in or near Anchorage. Anchorage represents the most highly developed urban area of Alaska. Over 286,000 people reside within the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) where the median age is 33. The diversity of cultures within the MOA is increasing with roughly 30% of the MOA's population represented by different ethnicities and over 95 different languages spoken among students within the Anchorage School District. This increased diversity among the population has led to new family structures and trends in how outdoor spaces are being used in the Anchorage area.

### Chugach State Park Management Plan Scope and Purpose

The Chugach State Park Management Plan is the basis for the management and development of the state-owned land and water within the legislatively designated boundary of the park as well as for areas managed by the park under special agreement. This plan is based on an analysis of the park's natural and cultural environment, current and anticipated trends in use and human demands on resources in keeping with the park's enabling legislation and guiding principles. The primary purposes of this plan are to provide a land use plan that allows for optimum recreational use of the area while protecting the natural and cultural resources, and to provide a consistent set of principles and policies for park management and a listing of development projects to facilitate future funding requests and project phasing.

## **Park's Enabling Legislation**

In 1970 the legislature restricted the state-owned land and water described in Alaska Statutes (AS 41.21.120-41.21.125) to use as Chugach State Park. In doing so, this land was closed to multiple purpose use and designated as a special purpose site in accordance with Article 8, section 7 of the Constitution of the State of Alaska. Because these lands are not available for multiple purpose use, leasing and subsurface development is precluded. Five primary purposes were outlined for Chugach State Park in statute:

- To protect and supply a satisfactory water supply for the use of the people.
- To provide recreational opportunities for the people by providing areas for specified uses and constructing the necessary facilities in those areas.
- To protect areas of unique and exceptional scenic value.
- To provide areas for the public display of local wildlife.
- To protect the existing wilderness characteristics of the easterly interior area.

Additionally, the statute provided that “the eastern area of the park shall be operated as a wilderness area, the central area as a scenic area, and the periphery areas as recreational areas.”

Management responsibility for the park, described in AS 41.21.122, is assigned to the Department of Natural Resources for control, development and maintenance, except that the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities is responsible for the repair and maintenance of all existing public roads within the park. The control of highway access and roadside structures within the Chugach State Park is the responsibility of the Department of Natural Resources. Statute states that the Department of Fish and Game shall cooperate with the Department of Natural Resources for the park purposes described above (AS 41.21.121) relevant to the duties of the Department of Fish and Game.

Additionally, statute guides park boundary adjustments and purchase authority:

If, in the exercise of management responsibility under this section, conflicts of land ownership, jurisdiction, or authority are unreconcilable or unmanageable other than at an unreasonable cost and expense to the state, the commissioner after public hearing in accordance with AS 44.62 may modify, subject to the approval of the legislature, the boundaries of the Chugach State Park not to exceed 20 percent of the total acreage described in AS 41.21.121.

The commissioner may acquire, by purchase in the name of the state, title to or interest in real property lying within or abutting the boundaries of Chugach State Park (AS 41.21.125).

Finally, provisions for incompatible uses in this park are also provided for in statute under AS 41.21.123 which states that the commissioner shall designate by regulation incompatible uses within the boundaries of the park. Those incompatible uses are prohibited or restricted by regulation.

## **Plan Study Area and Park Boundary**

The legislative boundary of Chugach State Park, described in AS 41.21.121, encompasses a mix of land ownership patterns including state, federal and private. The recommendations in this plan apply to state-owned lands and water within the legislative boundary of the park as well as those lands managed by the park under special agreement. Figure 1 depicts the legislatively designated boundary of the park as well as the state-owned and managed land. Recommendations are at times given in this plan for areas that are anticipated to be acquired or managed by the park within the planning outlook for this document. The recommendations attach after acquisition or the promulgation of a management agreement.

## **Reason for Plan Revision**

Since the last plan was adopted in 1980, much has changed. The population of Anchorage and surrounding areas has grown resulting in increased use of the park. This use has stressed park facilities that are often beyond capacity and caused access impacts to neighboring communities. Recreational uses and technology have changed since the park was established placing new demands on park facilities that could not have been previously anticipated. The previous plan was published with the knowledge that nearly 10% of the park area was selected by Eklutna Inc. and there would be land management implications associated with their selections. Land selection decisions have been made and management implications need addressing. Additionally, as with all management plans, continuous review is necessary to insure that the concepts and recommendations reflect the changing needs of the public and the purposes for which the park was created.

## **Planning Process**

The Department of Natural Resources began a comprehensive planning process to revise this plan in the Spring of 2008. The planning process not only included a revision of the 1980 Master Plan but also a revision of the 1986 Trails Plan for the park and the development of a joint State/Municipality of Anchorage Chugach Access Plan. Public scoping workshops were held in Anchorage, Eagle River and Indian to gather information and identify issues and concerns. Over 170 people participated in these workshops and over 135 written comments

were received during the scoping period. To learn more specifically how people wanted to use and develop the park, additional focus group meetings were held throughout the remainder of 2008 with a variety of user groups.

The Department decided after the scoping phase to focus on the development of the trail management and access plans initially. The thinking was that the input received on these plans would help inform the development of the overall management plan and ultimately make it a more comprehensive document. The draft trail management plan was issued for public review in August of 2009 and the comment period extended until mid October 2009. The draft access plan was released for review in January of 2010 and the comment period ended the beginning of May 2010. Public meetings were again held during each comment period in a variety of communities and a tremendous amount of input was received. The input resulted in a clearer vision for access and park trails as well as for the management concepts and facility proposals contained in this document.

This plan has been issued for public review. After the public comment period is over, the plan will be revised as needed based on the input received. A final plan is then prepared for the Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources to adopt. Once adopted, the plan becomes the policy of the Department and is implemented by staff.

## **Plan Organization**

The first portion of this plan provides a set of goals and objectives, background information on the natural and cultural resources within the park, and a discussion of special management issues. The second part of this plan provides the management recommendations, facility proposals, and implementation directives. Park lands have been classified into three land use zones which direct the establishment of uses and facilities. These land use zones are explained in the second part of the plan along with the area-wide management recommendations. The plan also divides the park into five planning units (see Figure 2) by hydrographic boundaries: Eklutna-Peters Creek, Eagle River, Ship Creek, Hillside, and Turnagain Arm for planning and management purposes. Recommendations for facility development, use, and special management considerations are also made for each of these units in the second part of the plan.

**Figure 1: Generalized Land Ownership**

**Figure 2: Planning Units**