

The Original

American



Alaska is home to Denali National Park, which has the most restrictive public traffic policy of any national park.

Marvel



In America, glaciers have been slowly carving out valleys for thousands of years. The largest canyon in the world is still growing, some of the highest peaks on Earth reach to heaven, and forests are thousands of years older than the country itself — and we have the opportunity to explore it all. We can walk through the Grand Canyon and investigate the cliff dwellings left behind by the Anasazi or Pueblo Indians, hike through a Redwood forest between trees 10 times the height of a house, or watch geysers shoot water hundreds of feet into the air.

National parks comprise more than 30 percent of the United States — 84.4 acres, or an area five times the size of Texas — and the privilege of visiting them is at the core of an ongoing national debate over the trade-off between public access and preservation of such national treasures.

Since its inception in 1916, the National Park Service's goal has been to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein ... for the enjoyment of future generations.” The Department of Interior, which houses the National Park Service, has a similar mission to “protect and provide access to our Nation's natural and cultural heritage ...” In other words, lands set aside by the federal government must be preserved and protected from pollution, development and the impacts of man, but, at the same time, every citizen and visitor has the right to enjoy them. This is a constant balancing act: the parks provide an escape from the ever-growing and sprawling American urban areas, but these lands must also be kept unspoiled to regenerate that resource for escape.

The debate about which aspect of the Interior Department's mission is most important has been going on since its infancy. But new circumstances have set the stage for a renewed and increasingly urgent debate over where the lines should be drawn. The federal government is setting aside more lands for protection, tourists are traveling to those lands in unprecedented numbers, and parks are building more roads within their borders, thus diminishing the amount of land intended for preservation in the first place. Almost all U.S. national parks, even those in the most remote places, are near their maximum visitor capacity. But the nation's rediscovered love for the wonders of its natural wilderness is a double-edged sword.

Denali National Park and Preserve, in the heart of Alaska and the Alaskan Range, is emblematic of such pressures.

PARK AT THE LAST FRONTIER

Denali was named after North America's tallest mountain. Denali is an Athabaskan word, which

The National Park Service must provide access to public lands while protecting them, a balancing act that gets more difficult every year.

**STORY & PHOTOS
BY MARC ERBISCH**



Park visitors tour Denali National Park in buses, which often get caught up in ‘animal jams’ around moose, bears and other wildlife.

literally translates to “the high one,” and its name-sake covers more than 6 million acres, houses dozens of animal and plant species — famously including the grizzly bear, wolves, Dall sheep, moose and caribou — and is the destination of more than 400,000 visitors every year. It’s also the only national park in the U.S. that uses dog sled patrols during the winter months instead of snow machines to minimize ecological impact.

After its inception in 1980, Denali quickly established policies and practices that distinguished itself from any other national park. There is a single, 90-mile road into the interior. The first 15 miles are paved and travel through the front country, but after crossing the Savage River, the remaining 75 miles are all dirt road through the backcountry. This was done to keep down maintenance costs caused by permafrost and the freeze-thaw cycle. Although the dirt road requires maintenance seven days a week after it opens in the spring and throughout the summer months — when the number of visitors in the park is at its highest — it’s cheaper than an entirely paved road.

The paved section of the park road is open



Due to budget constraints, the National Park Service bus tours, many campgrounds and a restaurant are run by a private corporation.

Package tourism has resulted in Disneyfication of the great outdoors. Bus drivers report hearing questions like: 'What do you do with the animals at night?'

to all traffic. As visitors turn into the entrance from the Parks Highway, they travel past campgrounds, various buildings to buy permits and tickets, and a visitor's center, complete with bookstore and restaurant, before starting a climb through black spruce forests to a level above the tree line of open tundra in a valley between ridges of the Alaska Range. On clear days, the peak of the mountain is visible in the west. At mile 15, the pavement ends and so does visitor's access by private vehicle. The road continues westward, but it's only open to buses and a few photographers, artists, campers and government workers. Denali has the most restrictive public traffic policy of any national park.

Despite the restrictions, the increased bus traffic caused by the surge in visitors still causes bus riders to get caught in "animal jams" as buses pull up for bears and moose in picture-perfect places along the roadside. There is a mix of official and unofficial rules in place to minimize the impact of such interactions: Buses may only stay in one spot for a certain amount of time, the number of buses that may stop for an animal sighting is limited, and engines are turned off to reduce noise.

After the bridge, the road continues to climb, traveling ever nearer to Denali, up Sable Pass, before dropping down into Sanctuary Flats, where the mountain is lost behind ridges and peaks surrounding the road. It travels further down to the Teklanika flats and across the Tek River before entering Igloo Canyon. Here the road narrows, traffic slows and the chance of spotting one of the popular mega fauna increases dramatically.

The road begins another slow climb, exiting the canyon and working its way up Polychrome Pass, where it seems to be cut into the side of a sheer cliff fading from the color of sulfur to an unnaturally bright orange, then back to sulfur again.

At the top of the pass is a rest area and a breathtaking view of mountains, glaciers, rivers and sky. As the road makes its way down from this overlook, it crosses the Toklat River and begins another climb to Eielson. The mountain slowly climbs with you, gradually overtaking every peak around it until it finally stretches to its full height.

After Eielson, the road winds though more open, tundra plains and eventually comes to Wonder Lake, carved from the face of the land thousands of years ago by a massive glacier 37 miles from the base of Denali. On clear days, the mountain draws all eyes and demands attention as it dominates the jagged skyline.

To experience more than what the road trip offers, campers blaze their own paths through the tundra and over ridges and peaks. It can be a completely natural experience for those who are willing to go exploring. There are only a few trails in the park and almost all of them are located in the front country, but five other campgrounds can be found along the park road, and visitors are also free to hike and camp almost anywhere in the backcountry with the proper permit.

Still, the bus tour system is the most effective way to maximize the number of visitors in the park and the only option offered to almost every tourist who wants to see more than the front country. The number of round trips on the road was restricted to 10,512 per year in 1986 by the park's general management plan. The quantity was based on road use from 1984 and allowed for a 20 percent increase in bus traffic. The park is fast approaching the limit with visitor traffic presently increasing by 2 to 5 percent every year.

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National parks: Continued from page 35

As their budget fails to increase to meet the rise in visitor demands, the National Park Service finds itself in a bind to provide every service on its own. Many parks have instead turned to private corporate concessionaires. At Denali, the bus tours, many of the campgrounds and even a restaurant in the park's visitor center are all run by the corporation Doyon/ARAMARK, one of the 13 Native regional corporations established by Congress under the terms of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Doyon/ARAMARK is also the largest private landowner in Alaska and one of the largest in North America.

Cruise lines operated by Royal Caribbean and hotels and tour packages of the Princess Cruises group also thrive on bringing visitors to Denali. As they build newer and larger establishments and increase spending, they expect to increase revenue and bring even more people to the park. These new guests are usually making a one- or two-day stop while on a cruise around the north Pacific or a bus tour through the state. They're not interested in spending a few days camping and hiking; they want to experience as much as they can from the comfort of a tour bus. But because the number of tour buses and tours are limited, so is the ability to expand business and profit.

Package tourism has resulted in Disneyfication of the great outdoors that results not only in private control over public lands, but a lack of understanding that while the park may be the most natural place on earth, it's not necessarily the happiest place on earth. Bus drivers report hearing questions like: "What do you do with the animals at night?"

EXPANDING THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Not surprisingly, the push to expand access and capacity



Photos by Marc Ehrlich

People wait outside of buses, which will take them on a tour of Denali National Park.

at Denali has become political. To date, there have been no studies aimed at determining the capacity of the road. Several conducted in the past attempted to define the impact traffic had on the popular animal species, but results were often inconclusive and contradictory.

A new study is underway to discover the actual capacity of the road and determine if expansion is possible. It's a two-part study consisting of: 1.) Research to build a working computer model of the current road traffic, animal movement patterns and visitor satisfaction, and 2.) A Before-After-Control-Impact study. No park policy changes will be made until the results are analyzed thoroughly.

Robert Manning, a professor of natural resources at the University of Vermont and director of the school's Park Studies Lab, is heading the research focused on the social implications of increasing Denali's road capacity. It is

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**Philip Hooge,
assistant superintendent for resources, science and learning
Denali National Park**

the first time any research into visitor satisfaction has ever been conducted in the park. In the past, policy decisions were always made from presumptions about visitors' likes and dislikes. Manning and his research team are using surveys and personal interviews to determine exactly what riders on the bus tours enjoy most, as well as what they generally dislike.

The team is also using computer-generated crowd scenes at some of Denali's most popular sights to determine tolerance levels to traffic

numbers.

"The concessionaire, cruises and hotels would love to get rid of restrictions [on capacity], but they don't want to destroy the visitors' experience because then they'd be hurting themselves," said Philip Hooge, the assistant superintendent for resources, science and learning at Denali, who recruited Manning and is supervising the road capacity study.

Research on the impact of increased road capacity on wildlife is also underway. At the beginning of this research, ►

sets of Dall sheep, grizzly bears and wolves were fitted with tracking devices to plot the animals' movements. Researchers are paying particular attention to how often and when these animals are near the park road. Even the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park weren't monitored this closely.

"The impact on the movement of animals is going to be the hardest to study," Hooge said. "There are so many different factors that could alter an animal's movement patterns; it's going to be hard to prove the road is having an effect.

"Also, the road has been around for a long time and most animals have lived around it their entire life," he said. "They've become acclimated to it. A lot of people don't think it has much of an effect on them at all anymore."

The possible impacts of dust kicked up by trucks and buses and the noise from traffic might affect wildlife. Microphones have been set up at various points to record how much sound anything along the roadside is exposed to.

During the summer months, when traffic is at its highest, "quiet nights" are enforced, during which no traffic can be on the road. These nights act as controls, against movement patterns from average, "noisy" days.

The final component of the study is a traffic model constructed by a research team

from the University of Minnesota. All tour buses in Denali have had GPS units installed to track speed, movement and stopping patterns. This data will be compared to the movement patterns of the tagged animals to look for correlations, and those will then be compared to the results of the social impact study to look for further relationships between animal and traffic movements and visitor satisfaction. All these results will be used to create a computer model that will predict the biological and social impacts of road capacity changes. The results will then be tested in real life.

Under this approach, the number of buses on the road will be left alone for a few days and then increased for a few days. Changes in visitor satisfaction and animal movements and behavior will be tracked. Any policy change in road capacity will depend on the studies' results.

Although no official results have been released, everyone seems to think there is room to grow in Denali — if not by increased road capacity, then by other means. Other options include adding to the number of trains that stop in the park, creating different schedules for trains to arrive or constructing a second entrance to Denali.

The current entrance is in the northeastern corner of the park, and there is talk of building another in the southeastern corner,

near the town of Talkeetna. There is already a ranger station in the town, but its focus is patrolling the climbers on Denali itself, providing base camps at various altitudes, search and rescue services and emergency care. The station would need to expand, but because park service operations are already established there, the impact of the new entrance wouldn't be extreme. However, impacts would include increased traffic within Talkeetna and, of course, increased visitor impact. And since the new entrance would be only two — instead of six — hours from Anchorage, visitors coming through that city would almost certainly increase. Nearby visitors may impact Denali's land less than other visitors because they'd be less apt to camp overnight.

Regardless of what changes are eventually made, the number of people who want to visit Denali will increase. The conflict between making room for such expansion and maintaining an active and watchful stewardship over natural lands is still in the balance, just as it was in Roosevelt's era. But protecting the land and the public's interest in it lies not only with its public guardians at Denali, but also with the people themselves. 🌍

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Scientists are studying traffic patterns at Denali National Park and how increased road capacity may impact wildlife populations.