



Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan Summary of Scoping Comments



In creating a vehicle management plan, the public asked us to protect both the park resources, such as wildlife, and the visitor experience.

The National Park Service (NPS) is preparing an environmental impact statement (EIS) to develop and implement a plan to manage vehicles along the Denali Park Road, including carrying capacity (the maximum number of vehicles that can be accommodated on the Denali Park Road May-September). The goal of the plan is to provide a high quality experience for visitors while protecting wilderness resource values, scenic values, wildlife, other park resources, and maintaining the unique character of the park road.

The NPS will evaluate the existing system and develop a transportation plan that will ensure we're meeting the needs of Denali's visitors; handle the projected growth rate in visitation; and ensure that Denali's transportation system protects wildlife, wilderness, and other park resources and values.

This planning effort was officially launched in August 2008. In September, NPS distributed a scoping newsletter and held public scoping meetings in Anchorage, the Susitna Valley, Denali Park, and Fairbanks.

We appreciate the feedback we received at the meetings and during informal discussions over the past couple months. This newsletter summarizes the innovative ideas and creative thought shared regarding managing vehicular traffic on the Denali Park Road.

What we heard

Vehicle Type

We received comments that encouraged us to examine a range of vehicle types, from a monorail to double-decker buses to smaller vans that would provide a more intimate experience. When examining vehicle types, the public asked us to evaluate quieter vehicles, gas efficient vehicles, buses that could allow people to stand, the visitor's relationship with the bus driver, safety, the amount of dust a vehicle generates, and the possibility of having different vehicle types for different sections of the road.

While some people appreciate the primitive character of the buses, others suggested we improve the quality and comfort of the buses. Ideas included improving windows, increasing leg room, adding bathrooms, and meeting the audio and visual needs of passengers. People also suggested making it easier to bring bicycles on buses.

Type of Services Offered

We received a wide range of comments that discussed the pros and cons of various services offered by the park and its concessionaire. Comments generally encouraged us to protect park resources and offer the highest quality visitor experience possible, regardless of the type of services offered.

People suggested 3 general needs for the types of services offered: narrated, non-narrated and drop-off experiences. We also heard ideas for specialized tours including family friendly, birding, and photography tours, and for making general improvements to opportunities for cyclists, families, and Alaska residents. While many people wanted more choices, others commented that there are already too many choices and that bus trips should



Shuttle bus riders would like more assurance of being able to get back on a bus if they choose to get off.

differ only in length.

It was recommended that we develop a separate West End shuttle system that serves Eielson to Kantishna and/or run the buses on a point to point system instead of roundtrips. We also received comments suggesting that all buses, including shuttles, pick up visitors in Nenana Canyon, or that a community transportation system be used to transport visitors from their lodging into the park.

Many people urged us to consider ticket prices to make sure visitors get a fair value and that people aren't being priced out of the park, and they also emphasized the importance of providing equal opportunity for independent travelers to get on a bus. It became clear that flexibility and freedom are important, that is, making sure visitors feel comfortable getting on and off buses wherever and whenever they like.

A number of comments heard during scoping made it evident that there is interest in increasing options for guests of larger tour companies and allowing package tour visitors to make their own choice about what visitor services to partake of while in the park. There was interest in expanding op-

tions to include experiences that are independent of the park road including entrance area excursions, South Denali experiences, and winter activities.

People also asked that we consider opportunities for shoulder season and winter activities along the park road.

Scheduling

We heard a number of ideas for scheduling and spacing buses, including spreading out the morning and evening pulses of traffic, and offering buses that start earlier and end later in the day. Others suggested that buses be scheduled to pick up visitors at specific points along the road when a certain activity (such as a day hike) is done, and that bus groups be scheduled to allow longer quiet periods between buses for visitors to have an improved experience walking or cycling along the road. We were also asked to evaluate the current schedule and routing to look for efficiencies within the system without increasing buses, and to consider arrival and departure times of trains and coaches when designing the schedule.

Vehicle Numbers

We heard a strong concern about vehicle numbers and crowding on the park road. There is an interest in making sure that park resources (including the road character) are protected and that visitors have an opportunity for the best Denali experience possible. Some people would like to see the park maximize the number of vehicles so that more visitors can experience the park, while others would like to see traffic levels lowered to meet soundscape standards.

We heard a suggestion to allow flex-

ibility in the current allocation of vehicle permits in order to meet changing demands. With any changes to the current system, people asked that the shuttle system have enough vehicle permit to allow plenty of space for users to get off the bus without the fear of being unable to board another shuttle.

Other suggested changes to vehicle permit allocations included establishing hourly limits in addition to daily limits, and having different and decreasing allocations for road segments moving west of Teklanika. Some people also expressed interest in moving the regulated section of road to Teklanika from the current check station at Savage River.

Some people expressed concern over the growing number of buses associated with west end lodges in Kantishna. Conversely, some lodge owners told us they'd like to have more buses allocated to them.

The public also commented that they'd like to see the NPS address its use of administrative vehicles. Additionally, comments addressed the pros and cons of the existing allocation of professional photographer permits and vehicles driving to the Teklanika Campground.

Information, Reservations, and Booking

There was a desire for all visitors to have the opportunity to choose the bus experience that best fits their needs and to have that choice be based on accurate, fair, and readily available information. The public urged NPS and its partners to do a better job of providing visitors with information about services and activities offered, fees, length of bus trips, and logistics of



People expressed interest in seeing increased opportunities for guided hiking, such as Discovery Hikes, in the park.

accessing the park. People commented that the green VTS shuttle bus system is not marketed well to the public and that there are misconceptions about the term “shuttle” since this term can mean something different in the Lower 48.

We were asked to create a reservation and booking system where the allocation of bus seats is transparent, fair and based on a first come, first served premise. Some people felt that this could be accomplished through the creation of a reservation system concession that was separate from the bus operator(s). Comments also addressed the pros and cons of allowing package tourism, other tourism companies, and independent travelers to block bus seats in advance.

Interpretation

People would like to see the best possible interpretation offered at Denali. Some shared that narration on buses was good, while others commented

that the quality and consistency of narration on buses needed to be improved. There was some concern both about the safety of bus drivers delivering an interpretive program while driving and about the seat that would be lost if there was a designated interpreter on the bus in addition to the driver. Some people suggested having a roving ranger on buses. Others felt that the park should promote and expand Discovery Hikes and/or provide opportunities for visitors to interact with rangers stationed along the road. Regardless of how interpretation is delivered, people felt that visitors need an introduction to and a facilitated connection with the national park.

Note: Please remember that this is only a sampling of the comments we received and certainly is not meant to be an all-inclusive list.



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Contact Information

We request that comments be submitted at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov>. Select Denali National Park and Preserve and scroll down to the Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan.

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For more information, please visit our website at www.nps.gov/dena/parkmgmt/roadvehmgteis.htm

The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

What's Next

A reasonable range of alternatives will be developed and considered for the EIS that are responsive to significant issues identified through agency and public involvement. The EIS will evaluate a No Action alternative of maintaining the existing vehicle management system on the Denali Park Road including current bus schedules, vehicle allocation, and carrying capacity. Action alternatives will consider potential changes to transportation system components.

We plan to release the Draft Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan and EIS in early 2010. After a 60-day public comment period, we will revise the Draft plan and publish a Final plan. We expect a Record of Decision by December 2010.

Stay Involved

Please continue to tell us what you think! We are always interested in hearing your thoughts about how to best meet the goals of this project.