

# Park Purpose And Significance

## (from Statement for Management, Sept. 1995)

The park purpose, or the reason for which it was set aside, can be found in the area's authorizing legislation and legislative history. Park "significance statements" identify the area's important resource values and their significance relative to similar resources elsewhere in the U.S. and the world. They capture the essence of the park's importance to our nation's natural and cultural heritage. The following purpose and significance statements are used as a fundamental guide for all general objectives and specific strategies used to develop plans and make management decisions for Denali.

### PARK PURPOSE

Denali National Park and Preserve is a vast area that provides visitors of all abilities with opportunities for superlative, inspirational experiences in keeping with its legislative mandates. Over the long term, preservation of the wilderness and its continually evolving natural processes is essential to providing the opportunity for outstanding resource-based visitor experiences.

Terms and phrases are found throughout the park's legislation and legislative history that address this fundamental purpose of the park.

In 1917, Congress established Mount McKinley National Park to "set apart as a public park for the benefit and enjoyment of the people... for recreation purposes by the public and for the preservation of animals, birds, and fish and for the preservation of the natural curiosities and scenic beauties thereof... said park shall be, and is hereby established as a game refuge" (39 Stat. 938).

In 1980 Congress passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and enlarged the park. Section 101 describes the broad purposes of the new and enlarged national parks and preserves. These include:

- Preserve lands and waters for the benefit, use, education, and inspiration of present and future generations
- Preserve unrivaled scenic and geological values associated with natural landscapes
- Maintain sound populations of, and habitat for, wildlife species
- Preserve extensive, unaltered ecosystems in their natural state
- Protect resources related to subsistence needs
- Protect historic and archeological sites
- Preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities
- Maintain opportunities for scientific research and undisturbed ecosystems

- Provide the opportunity for rural residents engaged in a subsistence way of life to continue to do so

Congress renamed and enlarged Denali National Park and Preserve under ANILCA, sec. 202, to be managed for the following purposes, among others:

- Protect and interpret the entire mountain massif, and the additional scenic mountain peaks and formations
- Protect habitat for, and populations of, fish and wildlife including, but not limited to, brown/grizzly bears, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves, swans, and other waterfowl
- Provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreational activities

The intent for Denali is further clarified by the legislative history on ANILCA. The northern addition was to provide large sanctuaries for wildlife, protect entire ecological systems, and preserve the critical range. The southern addition was to include the entire Mount McKinley massif and provide ecological diversity and opportunities for recreation and access.

The purpose of Denali is also tied to the traditions of the other parks and preserves added to the system through ANILCA. The park includes several administrative subsets with different legislative histories and legal mandates (original national park, national park additions, national preserve, and designated and proposed wilderness), and it is a place where special uses related to subsistence and a frontier-type way of life continue, subject to regulation to ensure they do not jeopardize the integrity of park resources.

The park's administrative history also clarifies the park purpose. The park's origins are loosely linked to the "old-line," large, western parks that were established during the first two decades of the last century. Because of its early designation within the park system, Denali has evolved to become one of the most well-established of the national parks. Outstanding natural resources in general - and accessible wilderness in particular - have resulted in Denali becoming the most heavily visited of the national parks in Alaska. Still, development and use have been limited because of the park's remote location (compared to lower 48 states) and by park plans and management decisions aimed at achieving its legislative purposes.

These legislated purposes and administrative history set a high standard for park management, public use, and resource preservation for this unit of the national park system. Key concepts include the immense scale, whole systems management, and minimization of human disturbance. Denali's rich legislative and administrative history affords a very special opportunity to the public: the possibility of observing free-roaming wildlife at close range and spectacular, world-class scenery in a rugged wilderness setting. Opportunities for this experience are rare in other regions of the country and the level of access is unusual for Alaska. Yet the park's impressive wildlife, premier vistas, opportunities for solitude, and limited development remain consistent with the Park Service's understanding of visitor expectations for the nation's parks, particularly those in Alaska. Even the intrinsic value of the park, for people in the lower 48 that may never even visit the place, is recognized.

The nation's public lands offer a spectrum of recreational opportunities to their users. All national park system units, by virtue of planning and administrative decisions, fall somewhere in that spectrum, which ranges from highly pristine, remote and sparsely used lands to highly developed, readily accessible, and intensively used recreation areas. Denali's legislative mandates and administrative history places the park toward one end of that spectrum with parks that can be characterized as wild, rustic, and expansive. Denali rests somewhere between the extremely remote, lightly used Alaskan national park units and the large, wilderness parks of the lower 48 states that are highly accessible and more developed. This blend of largely pristine conditions and an intense focus for use and access in a relatively small but critical portion of the park, coupled with the unique provisions of ANILCA, creates unusual management challenges and is often the core of most controversial issues (see appendix A in Statement for Management, Sept. 1995 for additional information on ANILCA).

## PARK SIGNIFICANCE

- **International Significance:** Denali National Park and Preserve is a park of international significance. The United Nations proclaimed it a biosphere reserve under its Man and the Biosphere program, significant for its potential for subarctic ecosystems research.
- **Large Protected Area:** The vast protected area of Denali, over 6 million acres or about the size of the state of Vermont, enables a spectacular array of flora and fauna to live together in a healthy natural system, over 2 million acres of which has been in a protected status since 1917. This is the largest continuously protected area in the world. The park offers excellent opportunities to study large area natural systems in settings that are primarily undisturbed by humans.
- **Mountains:** The park contains a major portion of the Alaska Range, which is one of the great mountain uplifts in North America. The Denali fault is North America's largest crustal break. The Alaskan Range is dominated by North America's highest peak, Mount McKinley, with its summit at 20,320 feet above sea level. Towering 18,000 feet above the adjacent lowlands, the mountain's dramatic vertical relief rivals any other mountain range in the world; it exceeds the vertical relief of Mount Everest.
- **Glaciers:** The park contains a number of large, active glaciers and major glacier-fed rivers and streams. Its glaciers are some of the longest in North America, up to 45 miles long and 4 miles wide.
- **Wildlife:** The park was originally established in 1917 as a refuge for large mammals. Dall sheep, caribou, wolves, grizzly bear, moose, and fox are often observed in the park, especially along the park road on the north side of the Alaska Range. While populations fluctuate, nowhere else in America can such concentrations of these large species of wildlife be observed in a natural setting in so readily accessible a place. The park is also significant for its waterfowl habitat. The area from Wonder Lake northwest to Lake Minchumina is a large nesting area for great numbers of migratory waterfowl.
- **Plant life:** Denali contains outstanding examples of subarctic plant communities. Only plants that have adapted to long, bitterly cold winters can survive in the various plant communities in the park. Even with these extreme conditions, over 650 species of flowering plants inhabit the slopes and valleys of the park. Denali offers extensive opportunities to observe tundra plant life in a natural setting.
- **Air Quality and Scenic Resources:** The exceptional air quality in Alaska and the lack of city lights near the park provide the conditions for outstanding daytime views and excellent night sky visibility in fall and winter. On a clear day, Mount McKinley can be seen from Anchorage, over 130 air miles to the south. Denali National Park and Preserve is a designated Class I airshed. Outstanding

views of natural features, including mountains, glaciers, faulting, and other geological processes dominate the park landscape. The lower southern slopes of the Alaska Range are steep between glaciers, containing some spectacular lower elevation wells, spires, and peaks. Views of Mount McKinley from the south are much different than the classic views from the north side, offering alternative but equally impressive viewing opportunities at certain locations on the south side.

- **Cultural Resources:** There are over 180 known cultural sites and complexes located within Denali's boundaries, many of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Because cultural resource inventories have been limited to date, this number most likely represents a fraction of the total sites contained in the park. Known resources include archeological and historical sites associated with Athabaskan Indian groups, early explorers, mining history, and the early days of the park. Major prehistoric sites in the park include the Teklanika Archeological District, a property listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Numerous historic structures are found in the park headquarters area (a national historic district), along the main park road, and on the boundaries of the Denali Wilderness (along the original park boundary). These are mainly patrol cabins and other structures dating back to early years of park management, mines, and related mining structures. Historic mining activity dates back to 1903 in the Kantishna Hills (which includes the Kantishna Historic District), the Stampede area, and the Dunkle Hills near Cantwell.

- **Access and Tourism:** A convergence of factors puts Denali among the most popular visitor destinations in Alaska and makes it a symbol of what Alaska offers. The Alaska Railroad links the park with Anchorage, Fairbanks, and the ports of Whittier and Seward, a direct access route that is available to only two national parks in Alaska (Denali and Kenai Fjords National Park). The railroad also links Denali to major international package tours that carry visitors by ship, bus, rail, and air in a route generally running from Seattle, through Interior Alaska, and back. The George Parks Highway roughly parallels the railroad, and provides similar access for both out-of-state visitors and Alaska residents. Most visitors to Denali want to travel all or a portion of the 90-mile road into the heart of the park. The mountain, wildlife viewing, and park road experience are broadly marketed as a "must do" adventure. The park road is, therefore, a significant visitor use resource, offering an experience distinctively different from that found in typical national parks in the lower 48. It offers a unique bus trip that is rustic and that transports people through a narrow corridor into the wilderness, containing prime wildlife viewing areas unlike any other.

- **Mountaineering:** Because it is the highest peak in North America, has a high northern latitude location, and is relatively accessible, Mount McKinley is considered one of the world's premier mountaineering destinations, drawing climbers from all over the world. It is touted as one of the "seven summits of the world." Numerous other peaks in the park, including Mount Foraker, also offer outstanding climbing opportunities. The remote Kichatna Spires offer another spectacular area for climbing.

- **Wilderness Recreation Opportunities:** Denali offers superlative opportunities for primitive wilderness recreation. Outstanding cross-country hiking, backcountry camping and winter touring possibilities are available for one willing to approach the area in its natural condition. This huge park contains large, almost entirely trailless areas where evidence of human use is minimal to nonexistent. These backcountry conditions are in contrast to most lower 48 wilderness areas where maintained trails, designated campsites, footbridges, and signs are the norm.