

# Denali: Looking Forward

By Ingrid Nixon

National parks have been called America's best idea. Since the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872, the idea that a nation should preserve aspects of its heritage for the benefit of all citizens is an idea that has spread to countries around the world.

Establishing a park requires looking forward and realizing that the qualities of a resource are special and worth preserving. In the early 1900s, when the idea was first proposed for creating a national park in the heart of Alaska's Interior, all of Alaska seemed wild. Wildlife was plentiful in many areas. Majestic mountains were not hard to come by. But here, just north of the Alaska Range, one could find a region with the magic combination of wildlife and scenery that typified the territory.

The territory, however, was changing just as the landscape had changed in the Lower 48. Miners combed drainages throughout the region looking for gold and other valuable minerals. A railroad would soon connect Fairbanks to the coast. Early park proponents Charles Sheldon and Belmore Browne realized that the vast quantities of wildlife found north of the Alaska Range would come under increasing hunting pressure to feed railway workers, miners, and populations of growing communities.

Signed into being by the United States Congress in 1917, the original Mount McKinley National Park preserved roughly two million acres. Wildlife protection was the backbone of the park's enabling legislation, which set the stage for Denali's modern role as a wildlife refuge of international importance. Not only can today's visitors thrill at finding a wolf track or seeing a wild grizzly bear, but scientists can study wildlife populations that have seen minimal impacts from humans.

Passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980 expanded the park boundaries,

added preserve lands, and changed the name to Denali National Park and Preserve. Boundaries were expanded in part to accommodate migration patterns of caribou and other wildlife, and to take in the entire Mount McKinley massif. Protecting vast landscapes preserved the rich complexity of living organisms and their interactions that woven together make up the fabric of life. More and more in this changing world, researchers look to vast landscapes



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like Denali to collect baseline data on how natural systems function so we can better detect how things are changing and why.

By managing our landscapes under a variety of land designations — national parks, preserves, and reserves — society preserves a diversity of experiences. Once a national park is established, the delicate tight rope walk begins as park managers balance preservation of the park resources with providing for visitor enjoyment of the same. Since its inception, Denali has fueled passionate debates in different sectors of society as to what are and are not appropriate

behaviors that should be allowed to take place within its boundaries.

Most visitors who come to the park today will travel some portion of the Park Road. Whether they are in their own car within the first 15 miles, on a bus or a tour, or backpacking, most everyone will still have the opportunity to see, smell, and touch the Alaska frontier. Whether it's sharing the landscape with large mammals or finding solitude or taking in vistas tremendous in their beauty, the experience can still be personal and authentic. That experience is what park founders and the Congress sought to preserve in perpetuity for people of this nation and of the world when they created this park 90 years ago. What that experience looks like in another 90 years is our challenge.

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