

Introduction



- Dierdre Shaw

Glacier National Park (Glacier) in northwest Montana is a unique national treasure. Its topography and geography are diverse, making for spectacular and dramatic scenery. Wildlife and vegetation are abundant in tremendous variety. Natural and cultural heritage are preserved along with large expanses of remote wilderness.



Taking in Glacier's expansive views is a favorite pastime for many visitors, whether by transit or private vehicle.

This park has been designated the world's first International Peace Park, as well as a Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. The park is also unique because, despite its substantial distance from any major transportation hub, visitation to the park runs between 1.5 and 2.2 million people per year. Visitors travel thousands of miles from within the United States and internationally to take in the majestic beauty of Glacier.

As with most of America's national parks, visitor use continues to increase at Glacier, albeit somewhat inconsistently from year to year. Higher visitation means increased traffic in the park and surrounding areas, as well as increased demands on parking, facilities, and resources. Carefully thought out actions addressing these issues are necessary to preserve the historic, natural, and cultural resources that make Glacier so special.

Going-to-the-Sun Road

The most visited areas of Glacier are accessed by the Going-to-the-Sun Road (the Road). The Road officially opened to the public in 1933 and runs approximately 50 miles through the park from West Glacier on the southwest side of the park to St. Mary on the eastern side of the park. Going-to-the-Sun Road has been designated a National Historic Landmark, and because of the numerous visitor attractions from one



An historic guardwall adds to the unique visual appeal of Glacier, and helps keep visitors safe as they travel Going-to-the-Sun Road.

end of the Road to the other, it carries the majority of traffic in the park.

The Road is in need of rehabilitation, as there has been no substantial reconstruction in the critical alpine section since the 1950's.

Road damage, particularly in the higher elevations between the west tunnel and Siyeh Bend, creates a safety hazard that can diminish the visitor experience as travelers have to

navigate a deteriorating roadway that presents a potential danger to errant drivers due to missing guardwall and guardrail in some areas. Maintenance of the Road is difficult due to budgetary constraints; extreme weather conditions; significant drainage challenges; and topography that includes rocky cliff faces, avalanche and debris chutes, and unstable slopes. The Road's rehabilitation must be accomplished while preserving the quality of the visitor experience to the greatest extent possible.

Some visitor use areas along Going-to-the-Sun Road have already reached or exceeded their capacity. Several parking areas are routinely full during peak use periods with congested approaches and hazardous (unauthorized) parking nearby. Other facilities and resources show similar signs of overload.

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The Road's National Historic Landmark designation carries with it significant restrictions on what changes can be made to the Road. Legislative mandates, supported by Glacier National Park policy as stated in the park's General Management Plan, prohibit widening the Road or unnecessarily disturbing its classic stone masonry walls and structures. This and other related restrictions substantially define the parameters within which the park must work while planning transportation and visitor use improvements for the Road.

Purpose of and Need for This Study

The *Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for Glacier National Park* (GMP) examined the actions and direction necessary to ensure a quality experience for future users of Glacier. Approved in 1999, the GMP identified eight critical issues that must be addressed to ensure the long-term viability of the park and safeguard the quality of park resources and the visitor experience. One of these critical issues was visitor use on the Going-to-the-Sun Road.

To address the critical issue of visitor use on the Going-to-the-Sun Road, the GMP concluded:

“The National Park Service will continue to protect the Going-to-the-Sun Road as a national historic landmark, retaining the historic character of the road and thus maintaining its traditional use. Visitors will continue to have the freedom to drive personal vehicles. An efficient public transportation system will be sought. A comprehensive use plan will be developed to address the increasing use of the road corridor and the accompanying congestion.”

To formulate and implement strategies addressing this critical issue, the GMP recognized the need to explore public transportation options and develop a visitor use plan for the park. This *Transportation and Visitor Use Study* (Study) is instrumental in providing a summary of existing conditions and a broad base of transportation and visitor use enhancement options for the Road. The options presented are for discussion and consideration, and are not intended to be an all-inclusive list. The future visitor use plan will draw on this document as a resource for the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and select the most appropriate enhancements for preparation and implementation. Information in this study will also

provide guidance on transportation and visitor use issues for the road rehabilitation period.

This Study in no way supersedes the GMP, the Commercial Services Plan, the Cultural Resources Report, or any other park report, study, or guideline. Instead, this study is to be used in concert with these other documents to help formulate a comprehensive strategy for the future of the Going-to-the-Sun Road. The Commercial Services Plan (currently being prepared by Architectural Research Consultants, Inc.) will incorporate the findings of this Study in its analysis.

This Study addresses visitor use experiences and opportunities including biking, interpretation, picnicking, etc. in a broad, general sense, as well as discussing specific locations along the Road (Avalanche, Logan Pass, etc.) where visitor use enhancement options are presented in detail. This Study also addresses the subject of improved public transit on the Road and in the park as an opportunity to further enhance the visitor experience. This is achieved by reducing vehicle congestion at key locations along the Road and providing a viable alternative means of traveling the Road for those seeking it.

Other Relevant Completed Studies

Listed below are completed plans, studies, and reports developed for Glacier or the National Park Service that are relevant to this Study:

The National Historic Landmark Nomination and Designation for Going-to-the-Sun Road, 1997. As a federally-owned National Historic Landmark, the Road is protected by stringent federal guidelines designed to ensure the preservation of exceptionally significant historic resources. These mandates require preservation, if possible, of those roadway features which contribute to the Road's historic significance and character. Items in these categories include both physical structures and objects associated with the roadway itself, and other features and locations critical to the roadway's historic setting.

The Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for Glacier National Park, 1999. The GMP is very important and relevant to this Study as it sets out the overall management plan for the Park and defines the need for a visitor use and transportation study.

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The *Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) Framework – A Handbook for Planners and Managers*, 1997. This document provides the underlying methodology adopted by the National Park Service for visitor uses planning and management.

The National Park Service Transportation Planning Guidebook, 1999. This document provides guidance and direction for addressing transportation within the National Park Service planning process.

Transportation Plan – Glacier National Park, 1990. This plan proposes actions to provide for safe and enjoyable travel in and around Glacier National Park.

Current Related Studies

The *Going-to-the-Sun Road Engineering Study*, the *Going-to-the-Sun Road Socioeconomic Study*, and the *Going-to-the-Sun Road, Glacier National Park, Montana Cultural Landscape Report* are being prepared concurrent with development of this study to document historically and culturally significant features of the Road and look at alternatives for the Road's rehabilitation. Each of the rehabilitation alternatives take into account issues important to the integrity of the roadway, including historical, cultural, and environmental values; roadway longevity; and long-term maintenance and operations. (See the *Going-to-the-Sun Road Engineering Study* for a detailed description of the rehabilitation alternatives under consideration.)

The *Commercial Services Plan for Glacier National Park* is currently being prepared to address commercial visitor facilities along the Road at Apgar Village, Lake McDonald Lodge, and Rising Sun. It will include improvement options for visitor services in these areas as well as addressing concessions in the park such as lodging, boating, horseback riding, etc. The items being addressed in the Commercial Services Plan are critical elements of the visitor experience at Glacier and that plan is an important counterpart to this study.

Once again, this Study has as its primary focus the Going-to-the-Sun Road for the time period both during and after rehabilitation of the Road. A discussion of the visitor experience and visitor use opportunities in all geographic areas of the park is presented in Appendix A for background information.

