

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve  
Alaska

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## **Wilderness Character Narrative**



## GATES OF THE ARCTIC WILDERNESS CHARACTER NARRATIVE

The 1964 Wilderness Act established the national wilderness preservation system “for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character” (section 2[a]). Wilderness character, which is defined below, is at the core of wilderness and its stewardship. It affects and is integrated with park planning, management, and monitoring. Preserving wilderness character is crucial to preserving the enduring benefits and values of wilderness for future generations.

The publication *Keeping it Wild* (USFS 2008) defines wilderness character based on the statutory language of the 1964 Wilderness Act in terms of four qualities of wilderness character that are tangible and directly link agency stewardship to the legal mandates of law and policy. The four qualities of wilderness character are:

- *Untrammeled*: Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human control or manipulation
- *Natural*: Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization
- *Undeveloped*: Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvements
- *Solitude*: Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation

## WILDERNESS AND ALASKA

In 1978 President Jimmy Carter set aside 8.22 million acres of diverse arctic ecosystems as a national monument. Two years later the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act was signed into law, creating Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve with over 7 million acres of park wilderness and more than 1 million acres of wilderness eligible preserve land for a total of over 8.4 million acres. Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve currently contains 7,167,192 million acres of designated wilderness and much of the remaining lands are eligible for designation. When combined with the wilderness of Noatak National Preserve, this area equals 12,743,329 acres and comprises the largest contiguous wilderness in national park system. The ANILCA legislation effectively established the largest expanses of wilderness this country had ever seen. This unprecedented legislation set new visions for wilderness stewardship on a scale largely defined by the preservation of ecological, cultural, and historical integrity.

Gates of the Arctic has a gaunt beauty where humans do not dominate the landscape but are deeply interconnected by 12,000 years of continuous existence. The wilderness at Gates of the Arctic is a place where people are integral components of the larger landscape; it's a place where people do not live with wilderness so much as they live as part of it. This wilderness has invisible traces of nomads that lived, hunted, and traveled in the park and stories unfold of unbroken lineages of humans residing amongst the natural world. Spiritual ties to the land are still interwoven among Native Alaskans, residents and visitors alike. Visitors get the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Robert Marshall, to stand at the “Gates” where Marshall had a revelatory experience that forever influenced the development of wilderness

preservation ideals in America. Here, located completely north of the Arctic Circle, the park's natural arctic ecosystem is functional and intact. Within the park boundary is the central Brooks Range, boreal forests, huge expanses of tundra, and six designated Wild Rivers. Wandering through the rugged landscape are significant predator/prey populations, caribou migration corridors, migratory bird and fish species, and a substantial population of Dall sheep. The vast, endless landscape is scoured yearly by extreme seasons where "winter is the reality, summer is just a lie" (Ray Bane). Existing in this harsh, wild indifference teaches us humility and the need for restraint, and serves as a reminder of what it means to be human. It is here in Gates of the Arctic where humans and nature continue to weave a story of mutual existence.

## **WILDERNESS CHARACTER AND GATES OF THE ARCTIC NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE**

The following text describes how the Gates of the Arctic Wilderness meets each of the four qualities of wilderness character.

### **Untrammeled Quality**

The wilderness of Gates of the Arctic represents the essence of the term "untrammeled". It is an awe-inspiring, at times harsh, landscape of a massive size and scale that over the course of time has not allowed humans to exert overt control over it. The remoteness of this wilderness from other centers of human settlement has protected its ecosystems, leaving them by and large intact and robust, predominantly under the control of natural processes and not under the control of civilization.

In contemporary times the most significant trammeling of the wilderness's systems and processes come not from within the massive wilderness itself, but instead occurs from external locations. Populations of wildlife which frequent the wilderness are managed outside the park's boundaries. The expansion of invasive species presents the potential need for more rigorous manipulation of the wilderness in order to protect ecosystems. Perpetuating the untrammeled quality may require great restraint on the part of managers. At times, upholding the untrammeled quality can detract from another wilderness quality, such as "naturalness," as is the case when managers decide to not eradicate or otherwise control an invasive species.

### **Undeveloped Quality**

Gates of the Arctic contains one of the largest wildernesses in the national park system and it is also one of the least developed. Even the manner in which people access this wilderness highlights its undeveloped nature. There are no trailheads, there are no trails. Primary access is through airplanes, yet the park is without any developed airstrips. Except for cabins currently retained for emergency purposes and safety, cabins and other structures are in a state of benign neglect, slowly folding back into the natural landscape. The National Park Service has not, in its time at Gates, increased development within the wilderness. Instead, the developed footprint has been decreased. A deliberate, conscious effort has been made to not include amenities such as designated campsites, groomed trails, and hardened access portals; instead undeveloped conditions prevail and people must rely upon only themselves for comfort, shelter, and safety.

Gates of the Arctic has an extensive history of humans and their relationship to the wild lands prior to and after its wilderness designation. This unbroken tradition of living on the land has

been woven into the framework of this wilderness, where man exists as the top predator while exploring, settling, and adapting to the harsh Arctic environment.

Historical and archeological remains of camps, villages and human activities show the spiritual tie humans have to this land, water and wildlife. Ancestors of Iñupiat and Athabascan peoples hunted for migratory caribou, trapped small game, and pulled fish from these lakes and streams. They used the area's natural resources to survive and create a subsistence lifeway in an unparalleled wild and intact ecosystem.

Degradation in the form of the elimination of ancestral/historical stories about the land and its place names is a potential threat to the understanding of this wild lands origin. These stories add layers of depth and dimension to the meaning of this wilderness. The potential loss of discovered and undiscovered tangible evidence in the form of artifacts and cultural landscapes decreases our educational opportunities for understanding the parks past and present relationship with the land.

Remoteness and cost has helped protect the undeveloped quality. The intense and often severe climatic and geographic conditions found within the Gates of the Arctic wilderness inhibit human activities on the landscape. Preserving the undeveloped quality of Gates can make the study of its natural and cultural resources difficult.

Even a landscape as vast and devoid of development as Gates of the Arctic still has the potential for development within its boundaries. While the park has strategically purchased as many inholdings as has been feasible since establishment, there are dozens of privately held parcels that are immersed within Gates' wilderness, and could potentially affect its undeveloped quality, over which the National Park Service can exert no formal influence.

Beyond the park's boundaries the future for the region is one of development and civilizing progress. Roads will be built. Mines will appear on the horizon. People on ORVs will ride to the edge of the wilderness and begin to gaze in. Technology will allow people to engage the wilderness with greater ease, flexibility, and safety. New demands on this wilderness will require proactive, responsive management of its resources to ensure they are preserved. Sometimes, protecting wilderness values may be in conflict with the mandated protection of resources.

## **Natural Quality**

Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve is one of four contiguous national parks. These park units encompass peaks of the Brooks Range in the east and end at the shores of the Bering Sea. Above the Arctic Circle the vast extent of wilderness connects the rugged Brooks Range with icy blue glaciers to an intact boreal forest, tundra, geological features, complete watersheds, and six designated wild rivers. Ecosystem processes are intact throughout the park. Habitats are seamlessly interconnected and provide the scene for supporting wholly intact, naturally occurring species of plants as well as wildlife populations.

It is here above the Arctic Circle that many species have adapted to life on the edge. Extreme seasonal variations provide for long winters with little light. What winter light that does shine across the skies comes from hours of alpenglow and the dancing lights of the aurora borealis. Short springs give way to summers that welcome long hours of daylight and a quick fall season begins to repeat the extreme cycle again.

In a place with extreme seasonal variation, wildlife not only exists but thrives. One of the largest aggregations of caribou migrates unimpeded by human infrastructure. One of the largest populations of spawning sheefish migrates between spawning and feeding grounds. Millions of insects attract an abundance of bird species including the arctic tern, a bird known for the longest migration in the world. These species, along with the large population of Dall sheep, moose, small mammals and other arctic whitefish provide enough food to sustain the land's top predators, wolves and grizzly bears. The ruggedness of the landscape and movement of wildlife creates a vast natural arctic ecosystem with no sense of borders. Together, the land and wildlife play a role in creating the inescapable chorus of natural sounds.

Although seemingly remote and uninhabitable, Gates of the Arctic has supported 12,000 years of interaction between people and the landscape. Human presence and connection with the land is a natural part of the functioning healthy ecosystem. The realities of these harsh wild places make subsistence lifeways a necessity. There are few remaining places in the United States where subsistence lifeways are an active part of the ecological integrity.

The naturalness and inaccessibility of the park has helped contribute to high air quality levels. Potential for outside influences such as mining and building of roads could have a negative impact on air quality in the future. Also, pollutants and fine particles from faraway places are being transported into the park through wind and air currents, resulting in arctic haze and deposition into soils and waters that effectively alter nutrient cycles.

The park remains one of the largest, most remote and difficult to access wilderness areas in the national park system. Consequently, little biophysical degradation has occurred. Conducting research and effectively reporting results will help management make sound decisions about climate change and potential impacts such as loss of biodiversity, introduction and spread of exotic species, overfishing, over hunting, and looting. Results of research will help park staff inform visitors about having minimal impacts on the land. If deemed necessary at some point in the future, reintroduction of native species or extirpation of exotic species may be considered in an effort to maintain the natural integrity.

### **Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Quality**

Rolling out over 8.4 million acres of designated and eligible wilderness, Gates of the Arctic is a massive landscape of a scale that defies belief. The park is remote and isolated. It is miles from the nearest highway, hundreds of miles from the nearest suburb, and many thousands of miles from the nearest major metropolitan area. With the exception of a few commuter aircraft corridors and localized air tour activity, the wilderness is largely free from aircraft overflights and contrails, a condition rarely experienced in even the wildest wilderness areas in the Lower 48. The empty skies and soundscapes in Gates of the Arctic are dominated primarily by the natural sounds of wind, water, and wildlife, all melding into a peaceful chorus.

Because it is free from roads and other infrastructure it is a hard, sometimes painful journey to enter it. Other than flying into a lake or gravel bar in a bush plane or boating for days from a remote village, the only way to gain access is to walk across tundra, through forest, and across rivers before finally crossing over into the park's boundary. Even the plane ride can push visitors to the edge of their comfort zone. Few people forget the sudden drop of a bush plane as it slips over a gravel bar and the ground rushes towards you. Nor do people forget the feeling of excited adventure and looming isolation as the same plane disappears into the horizon and they find themselves absolutely alone on some remote river bank.

A landscape so raw and wild demands absolute self-reliance; this is a wilderness where there are no second chances. No mistakes are forgiven and the consequences can be grave. Every hike across the tundra or paddle down a river is an extreme experience not for the novice or ill-prepared. Recreational opportunities abound and they are the epitome of “unconfined” and “unrestrained”. Travelers to this wilderness must balance their expectations for recreational wilderness experiences with the realities of existing as part of a truly wild place.

The powerful isolation, vastness, and wildness of the Gates wilderness can be daunting, but its climate and latitude can also challenge preconceptions as well. The wilderness at Gates of the Arctic can be bathed in endless sunlight in June or see wisps of alpenglow twilight during December, either extreme removing your internal rhythms, causing disorientation but also liberation from the clock and the banality of routine.

This magnificence of solitude can be threatened by factors both internal and external. As the park becomes more well-known there is the potential for more and more people to be drawn into this wide open country, crowding the most majestic spots and eroding that strong sense of isolation and discovery. Heavy use in some areas could require the park to more tightly regulate visitor activities, thereby affecting the unconfined nature of this ultimate wilderness. Development on the plains to the north could disrupt natural viewsheds, reducing the sense of solitude and isolation from the modern world. Modern technology can close distances in the flash of satellite signal while the need to ensure safety and preserve visitor experience can necessitate burdensome regulation such as the use of bear barrels.

## REFERENCES CITED

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As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has the responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering sound use of our land and water resources; protecting our fish, wildlife, and biological diversity; preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historic places; and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of all our people by encouraging stewardship and citizen participation in their care. The department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. Administration.