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Denali Air Taxis: Unique Relationships with the Park and Visitors

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Introduction and background

Denali National Park and Preserve is located in south-central interior Alaska and includes over 2.4 million hectares (6 million acres). Approximately one-third of the area is designated wilderness. Development inside the park is limited to visitor facilities, maintenance and administrative support facilities, and an employee-housing complex near the entrance area of the park at mile 237 of the George Parks Highway. The Parks Highway connects Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska's two largest cities. The gateway communities of Healy and Cantwell are located near the park entrance, while Talkeetna and Trapper Creek are to the south of the park along the Parks Highway corridor.

The primary access into the interior of Denali is by bus, since private vehicles are restricted on the park road beyond the Savage River at mile 15. Air taxi services based primarily in Talkeetna provide access to the park additions and preserve areas outside the designated wilderness (see Figure 1). Air taxi services transport visitors for a variety of back-country recreational uses, including mountaineering, hunting, fishing, boating (kayaking and rafting) hiking, and camping. Mountaineering constitutes the majority of the air taxi trips for the services operating within the park and preserve. Mountaineers are landed on glaciers on the south side of the Alaska Range to begin their expeditions.

The most common destination for air taxis is the base camp for climbing access to Mount McKinley. The base camp is located just outside the wilderness boundary on the Kahiltna glacier. Air taxis also provide access to climbing areas by landing on other glaciers in the Alaska Range outside the designated wilderness, including the more remote southwest preserve. Air taxi

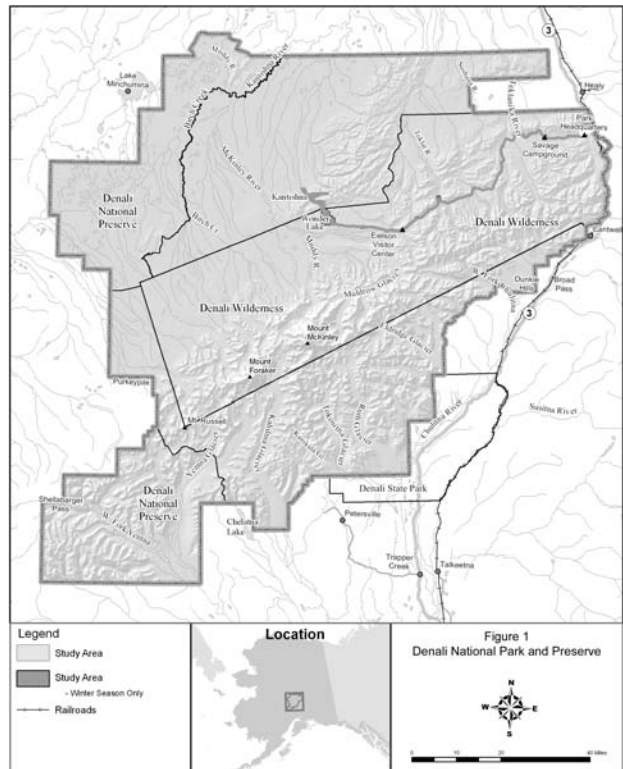


Figure 1. Denali National Park and Preserve.

landings on the north side of the park, while allowed in some areas, are infrequent (Tranel 2000; NPS 2005).

Scenic air tours are offered by the Talkeetna-based companies that provide air taxi services and by both fixed-wing (Figure 2) and helicopter operators based near the park entrance on the north side. An air taxi is a commercial flight in which visitors and/or their equipment are taken to a location and left or picked up. A scenic tour (flightseeing) is a flight in which passengers remain with their aircraft for the entire trip, although authorized concessioners may offer their passengers the opportunity to land briefly on the glacier as part of the tour. There are six businesses with concession contracts authorized to land on glaciers in the southern park additions and 14 holders of incidental business permits (IBPs) to land elsewhere in the park. No commercial landings are permitted in the backcountry of the Old Park.



Figure 2. A fixed-wing airplane above the park. Photo courtesy of the author.

The same companies that provide air taxi services make scenic tour landings, and they land in the same areas as air taxi flights. However, scenic tour flights concentrate their landings in just a few locations, with the Ruth Glacier as the primary landing area.

Air taxi flights and air scenic tours vary in duration. Because of the nature of the service provided, air taxi flights vary in length depending upon the drop-off or pick-up location, air traffic, and weather. The length of time between drop-off and pick-up also varies depending upon the recreational activity and volume of business being handled by the service. For mountaineers, the duration is typically between 15 and 25 days, while a scenic tour flight generally lasts between one and two hours depending on whether or not it includes a glacier landing, which usually lasts between 15 and 30 minutes (Figure 3; NPS 2005).

Challenges for National Park Service management of air taxi operations

The challenges for National Park Service management of air taxi operations in Denali National Park and Preserve are in three primary areas.

These activities pre-date the establishment of Denali National Park and Preserve.

Air taxi operations and scenic air tours have been occurring for a long time in Denali and were well established when the original Mount McKinley National Park was expanded to become Denali National Park and Preserve in 1980. Scenic air tours were offered as early as the 1920s, before the 90-mile road into the interior of what was then Mount McKinley National Park was complete. Once the West Buttress route for climbing Mount McKinley was established in the early 1950s, flying by small airplane to the base camp at the 7,000-foot level on the Kahiltna Glacier became the predominant method of access for climbers. Scenic

Figure 3. An air tour party on one of the park's glaciers. Photo courtesy of the author.

air tours and mountaineering and glacier travel in nearby areas, such as the Ruth Amphitheater, expanded from this transportation service to the Kahiltna base camp.

ANILCA, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, significantly expanded the



original Mount McKinley National Park and renamed it as Denali National Park and Preserve. The south additions to the national park included all of the Kahiltna and Ruth Glaciers, where air taxi and scenic air tour services were already well established. Companies operating in these areas now were subject to National Park Service commercial operations regulations and policies. In 1996, the National Park Service began to require concessions permits for glacier landings, which were becoming the most rapidly growing segment of all air taxi and scenic air tour services.

Air tour and air taxi operators were accustomed to being very independent in their operations and some had difficulty with new National Park Service regulations. At the same time, the National Park Service came to increasingly understand and respect the needs of the operators, recognizing the challenging conditions in which they operate and the essential service of transportation to wilderness that they provide. In addition to air taxi services and scenic air tours, these commercial operators provide invaluable assistance to the National Park Service with search and rescue and with visitor use management, such as ensuring compliance with permitting requirements.

Current and future challenges generally come from differences in the planning horizon for aircraft operators and the National Park Service. Air taxi and air tour operators plan for the next several operating seasons, while the National Park Service looks 15–20 years into the future in general management planning documents such as the new backcountry management plan that is currently in progress (NPS 2005).

Potential for conflicts among different park users. There are inherent differences between the expectations of visitors who take a scenic air tour when compared with those who are using air travel primarily as a means of access to climbing, mountaineering, or glacier travel. During public scoping for the new backcountry management plan for Denali, the National Park Service received numerous comments from climbers and climbing organizations that noted concern about aircraft noise during the time they are on the ground—often up to three weeks—in Denali (NPS 2005). Air taxi and scenic air tour operators have stated that these complaints may not be valid if an airplane is being used for access. However, the

National Park Service has continued planning based on the premise that using airplanes for access does not render invalid the desires of backcountry users to enjoy wilderness values such as solitude and the opportunity to experience the natural soundscape.

Differing views over the definition of resource values and impacts to those values.

ANILCA noted resource values for conservation system units—including Denali National Park and Preserve—such as “benefit, use, education, and inspiration of present and future generations.” Preserving “wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities” was also mentioned. Specific purposes for Denali also included providing “continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities” (Public Law 96-487, 94 Stat. 2371, 1980).

Proponents of expanding airplane access to, and scenic tours within, Denali National Park and Preserve have argued that this means of access has minimal impact and is self-limiting because of changing natural conditions such as weather and the constantly shifting surfaces of the glaciers on which they land. National Park Service planning, particularly the new backcountry management plan for Denali, has been based on the premise that a broad range of resource values, including soundscape and opportunities for solitude, need to be protected to guarantee a full range of visitor opportunities well into the future (NPS 2005). These values were important to park visitors early in the history of the former Mount McKinley National Park; for example, opportunities to enjoy the natural soundscape were mentioned as early as the 1920s (Brown 1993). In recent general management plan revisions such as the backcountry management plan, the National Park Service has defined the resource values that contribute to the “wilderness recreational activities” specifically mentioned by ANILCA, consistent with language found in the 1964 Wilderness Act (Public Law, 88-577, 78 Stat. 890, 1964). The agency has also assumed that Denali National Park and Preserve, because of its international significance and public expectations, should be held to a high standard of care (Tranel 2000; NPS 2005). The agency places a high priority on minimizing resource impacts and protecting a full range of visitor opportunities. Public comment on the draft backcountry management plan in 2003 widely supported this concept (NPS 2005).

Meeting the challenges

In dealing with these challenges, the National Park Service has learned valuable lessons, which are outlined in the four categories below.

The importance of more effectively listening to park users. Concessions management and park planning in Denali over the past decade have improved considerably by incorporating a wide variety of methods to exchange information with park users, including the commercial services providers. Staff at Denali have found informal meetings to be among the most effective opportunities for genuinely listening to the concerns and the new ideas of air taxi and air tour operators. Most of these companies are very interested in having a significant role in planning for the future, since potential limits on levels and types of visitor use could directly affect their businesses.

The importance of clarifying park purposes and values. A critical step in resolving controversy in parks and protected areas is clarifying the purposes and values for which the area was established (Tranel and Hall 2003). The National Park Service has been effective in

doing this with the recent closure of the former Mount McKinley National Park to all snowmobile use, and in the new backcountry management plan.

Alternatives to regulation, such as incentives, have proven more effective when working with commercial operators. The experience at Denali National Park and Preserve is that commercial operators have a very strong preference for making their own decisions as to types of aircraft being used, methods of operations, and visitor experiences that they offer. Recent concessions management decisions and planning documents related to commercial services reflect this. For example, the new backcountry management plan for Denali includes voluntary measures for dealing with the impacts of aircraft overflights, especially noise. A working group representing a broad range of interests will be established, with the effect of setting a high standard for aircraft operations in Denali.

The new National Park Service regulations for commercial activities emphasize protecting park resources as one of the most important criteria for selecting a commercial operator for any given activity. This will help considerably as Denali implements its new backcountry management plan.

The National Park Service and commercial operators in Denali share many common values, and this provides a solid basis on which to work in partnership for the future. Air taxi and air tour companies operating in Denali generally advertise a wilderness experience and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see a scenic and fascinating landscape. These goals are consistent with the goals of the National Park Service that come directly from the park's enabling legislation, such as "wilderness recreation." This is evidenced through the following excerpts from interviews with air taxi and air tour operators conducted in the spring of 2004 in Denali.

How do visitors to the Denali backcountry by air describe a visit?

It's kind of like flying into a whole other world.... I've had people describe it as going into orbit around another planet.

... you land and get out and actually the engine stops and you hear the silence and the occasional avalanche rumbling in the background....

What makes Denali unique?

... being in an environment that's totally, totally alien to them.

... the scenery is awesome and it's something that they've never seen before and have never experienced.

... the flight is unique in the world.

I think McKinley and the Alaska Range is something set apart from everything else. Period. There's no comparison, comparing that, the Alaska Range, to other mountain ranges.

Is it wilderness?

... it's wilderness that's really unlike any other wilderness that most people have been

exposed to.

I would call it more of a wilderness experience because they're in an area ... where there's very little support from the outside world.

There's nothing there. It's all pretty much wilderness.

And it's just what you happen to have in the airplane is what you have until you can take off again.

How do the customers react to what they see?

A lot of people get there and they just go, now I see why people come here. So they see why it's a park and they see why these types of areas are special.

I've had them just be in tears, you know, thinking, well, that it was the most awesome thing they've ever done in their life.

It's the ultimate experience of our vacation, is a very normal reaction.

These and other statements from air taxi and air tour operators are remarkably consistent with the goals of the new backcountry management plan for Denali National Park and Preserve and with the National Park Service mission to care for “special places saved by the American People so that all may experience our heritage” (National Park Service 1997).

Conclusion

While the National Park Service faces several challenges in managing commercial air taxi and air tour providers in Denali National Park and Preserve, the agency has learned a great deal over the past decade to be able to work in partnership with these companies. Developing an effective working relationship with air taxi and air tour operators has been essential, and this has been possible by building on the shared values of the companies and the National Park Service for providing outstanding visitor experiences.

Denali National Park and Preserve will have considerable challenges in implementing the new backcountry management plan and setting limits on the numbers and types of visitor uses to protect internationally significant resources and high-quality visitor experiences. However, there is a high likelihood for success if the park can build upon past achievements and the effective working relationships with commercial services providers. For air taxi and air tour companies in particular, it will continue to be important for the National Park Service to clarify and promote the full range of park values in Denali and to rely upon built-in incentives rather than strict regulations.

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