

Drawing a Line in the Tundra: Conservationists and the Mount McKinley Park Road

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Today, Denali National Park and Preserve is one of the largest units in the national park system. The entire unit encompasses about 6.1 million acres, of which a little over three-quarters (4.7 million acres) are national park, with the remainder being a national preserve, where sport hunting is allowed. About 425,000 people visited Denali in 2006. Most of them arrived at the park's eastern entrance and boarded either a tour bus or shuttle bus and headed down the park road in search of one of the "big five" wildlife species that inhabit the area (mountain sheep, caribou, grizzly bear, moose, and wolf), along with great views of Mount McKinley (Figure 1) and the chance to enjoy a series of remarkable wilderness landscapes. Many others, however, enjoy the park's backcountry on hiking and backcountry trips; more than a thousand people every year try climbing Mount McKinley or one of the other high Alaska Range peaks; and a number of local residents take advantage of the park's subsistence hunting opportunities.

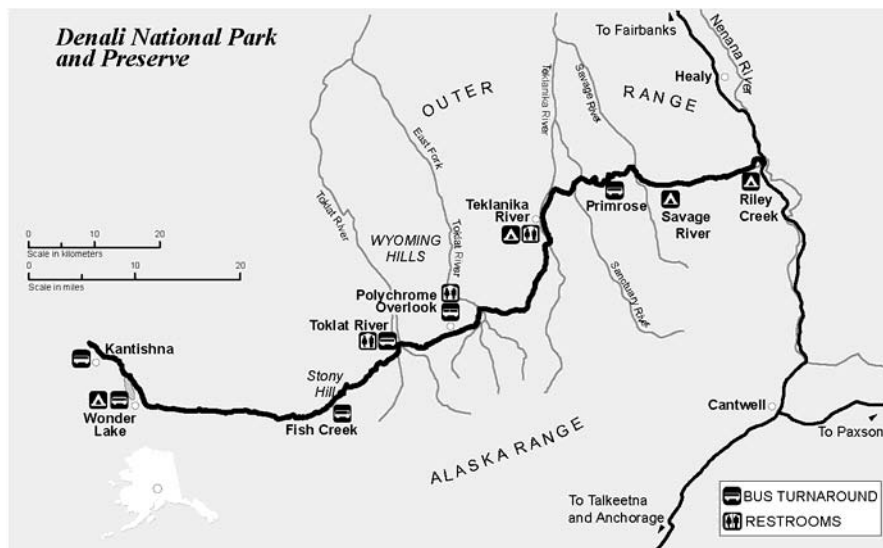
Figure 1. Mount McKinley (elevation 20,320 feet) is North America's highest peak. Charles Ott photo, DENA 3557, Denali National Park and Preserve Museum Collection.



As many of you know, large mammal species don't mix well with large numbers of people, and a major management theme that has concerned Park Service officials over the past 40 years has been, "How can we provide interpretive opportunities to the visiting public without jeopardizing the remarkable wildlife resources that brought about the establishment of the national park in the first place?" A short answer to that question has been the establishment of a road management philosophy and incorporates a three-part, telescoping degree of access and use. Briefly stated, park officials allow unlimited use of the park road from the Parks Highway junction 15 miles west to the Savage River Bridge; restricted use, and some private camping vehicles, for the next 16 miles west to the Teklanika River Bridge; and restricted use, with almost no private vehicles allowed, for the remaining 59 miles of the park road (Figure 2). The condition of the park road, moreover, reflects the usage allowances: its first 15 miles of the park is paved, 24 feet wide, and in full conformity to federal primary road standards; the next 16 miles is graded dirt, still 24 feet wide, and less conforming to federal standards; and the last 59 miles is graded dirt, just 20 feet wide and even less conforming to federal highway standards. Today, both Park Service officials and visitors recognize the necessity for this telescoping road system, because biologists, through repeated studies, have long known that rationalizing private vehicle traffic is a key to maintaining healthy wildlife populations. Creating this three-part road system hearkens back to a series of events from the 1950s and 1960s that pitted conservationists against road builders, with Park Service officials caught in the middle.

To understand why today's road looks the way it does, we need to go all the way back to 1916, when various bills were being proposed for a Mount McKinley National Park. Charles Sheldon, a gentleman hunter who had made two extended trips to the high valleys

Figure 2. The status of the park road—90 miles long between the McKinley Park railroad depot to Kantishna—was the subject of lively debate during the 1950s and 1960s. National Park Service, Denali National Park and Preserve Collection.



just north of the Alaska Range, recognized that the area held some of the best mountain sheep habitat in North America; that habitat, however, was under attack because of the government railroad that was then under construction between Anchorage and Fairbanks. Sheldon did everything he could to protect the area, and the bill that finally passed Congress called for the “preservation of animals, birds, and fish.”¹ Sheldon, however, was just as interested in attracting visitors, and in his mind, a key to the park was “a comfortable lodge at the foot of Peters Glacier.” This site was very close to Mount McKinley, but to reach it by road, it was more than 90 miles from the Alaska Railroad.²

As soon as Congress began providing operating funds for the park, National Park Service officials recognized the need for a park road and began working with Alaska Road Commission (ARC) officials on the best route. The park’s first superintendent, Harry Karstens, agreed with Sheldon’s ideas and pushed for a road that would connect the park headquarters with the foot of Peters Glacier. But ARC officials were far more interested in building the road farther north, with the final destination being the Kantishna mining camp, 90 miles away from park headquarters and just north of the park boundary. The Park Service, which was paying for the road, knew that it needed the ARC’s cooperation in the matter—road commission employees, after all, would actually be building the road—so NPS officials agreed on Kantishna as a destination *if* they could design the road according to NPS standards.³

So in 1923, the ARC began constructing the road. The commission built it in stages—3 miles one year, 8 miles the next—and the road didn’t reach Kantishna until 1938.⁴ I hasten to add that throughout the 1920s and 1930s virtually everyone—Alaska officials, the NPS bureaucracy, and Kantishna miners—supported the construction of the road. The road was broadly supported because the NPS knew that a road was necessary to make the park accessible to visitors, and also because *no one* saw the road as a real or potential ecological threat. Alaska Territory, attracted fewer than 30,000 outside tourists each summer.⁵ And Mount McKinley National Park, located 250 miles away from the nearest steamship port and accessible only by train, saw only a few hundred visitors each year. This scarcity of tourists was due, in part, to the fact that the only available park accommodation was a small, rustic concessioner’s camp at Savage River. To raise the level of amenities, federal authorities in 1939 opened the 98-room McKinley Park Hotel near the railroad station. But even in the first few years after it opened, park visitation did not exceed 2,500 people per year.⁶

In the 1940s, however, the park’s popularity began to multiply, and by the early 1950s the park was attracting up to 8,000 visitors per year. And key to future growth was the Alaska Road Commission’s decision to construct a 150-mile-long-highway that would tie the park road to the Territory’s road network. That road, called the Denali Highway, was completed in August 1957—and by 1959, more than 25,000 visitors per year were coming to Mount McKinley National Park, many of whom arrived in their station wagons and stayed over at one of the park’s seven campgrounds. The era of “rubber-tired tourism” was in full swing (Figure 3).

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the 90-mile-long park road continued to be the same, 20-foot-wide gravel road that the Alaska Road Commission had completed in 1938. But the park’s Mission 66 program, proposed in 1956 and approved in 1957, called for the



Figure 3. During the “rubber-tired tourism” era (1957 to 1971), thousands of tourists drove out the park road and overnighted in one of the park’s seven campgrounds. Bob and Ira Spring photo, courtesy of Wallace A. Cole Collection, Camp Denali.

road to be widened and paved, and for guard rails and striping to be added. So the NPS authorized the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), which was the successor to the Alaska Road Commission, to start a program to widen and reconstruct the park road. Construction began in 1958 near the park hotel, and by August of 1962 the agency had worked its way to Mile 26 of the park road, about 5 miles shy of the Teklanika River.⁷

Not everyone who witnessed the road construction was pleased by its progress. In 1956, for example, park biologist Adolph Murie railed against any developments that might downgrade the prevailing “purity of wilderness atmosphere” in the park.⁸ Two years later, Murie and other conservationists loudly protested against Eielson Visitor Center at Mile 66, which was then under construction, because it did not blend into the tundra landscape; they derided it as a “monstrosity” and a “Dairy Queen.” In the fall of 1959, Adolph’s brother Olaus Murie, who was a National Parks Association board member, spoke out against the road; he warned that “the national park will not serve its purpose if we encourage the visitor to hurry as fast as possible for a mere glimpse of scenery from a car, and a few snapshots.” But the Park Service’s regional director concluded that “the road must be widened to minimum safety standards” as far as Eielson Visitor Center. And in Washington, Assistant Director A. Clark Stratton agreed with the regional director; he stated that “we have been forced . . . by increased use to improve the substandard existing Park road to make it safe for today’s travel needs.”⁹

Murie and his fellow conservationists were not pleased by the Park Service's response, so in the spring of 1963 *National Parks Magazine* published an entire issue devoted to Mount McKinley. In several short articles, they criticized the new "speedway" that encouraged visitors to "get in and get out fast," and they further stated that they were violating the park's Mission 66 planning guidelines, which called on visitors to "savor their park and get full enjoyment and inspiration." These criticisms apparently made an impression because Stratton, in June 1963, wrote to Director Conrad Wirth and suggested that the agency adopt "telescoping standards" for the road: 26 miles of a 20-foot roadway with 3-foot shoulders, 40 additional miles of a 20-foot roadway with "minimum shoulders" that would be anywhere from nothing to three feet wide; and the final 18 miles with no new improvements. That letter, however, never got beyond the concept stage, because in August 1965 the NPS contracted with a Fairbanks firm to widen five more miles of road, from Mile 26 to the Teklanika River Bridge. This work was to be carried out in the spring and summer of 1966. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Public Roads was pressuring the NPS to take on even more construction; it stated that the next 12 miles of road was currently "unsafe for general public use," and it recommended a \$1.2 million construction job. NPS officials agreed, stating that the job was a Priority 1 request.¹⁰

Conservationists, however, refused to give up. In the July 1965 issue of *National Parks Magazine*, Adolph Murie, who had just retired from federal service, wrote a pointed article about the controversy. Given his 20-plus years of experience at the park, he stated that most visitors liked the "charm" of the old road and that many observers—including even a few BPR officials—felt that overzealous engineering standards were being applied. He urged readers to register their protests with NPS officials; otherwise, road widening would continue almost all the way to Kantishna.¹¹

Murie's article hit home. Conservationists *did* send in protest letters, and in response, NPS officials at both the regional and Washington levels engaged in a flurry of intra-agency correspondence. By the end of September 1965, a new policy had emerged. Assistant Director Johannes Jensen, speaking for the agency, defended the NPS's past actions; he stated that it had long been the agency's goal to provide road access "with as little impact on the natural scene as possible," and that "conditions of permafrost" had demanded improvements to portions of the old right-of-way. For the future, however, he stated that "it is our intention to use progressively lower standards the farther the road penetrates into the wilderness. Beyond [the Teklanika River Bridge], the remainder of the road is to receive only minor repairs."¹²

Conservationists had clearly won a victory. It remained to be seen, however, if it would last, because by late 1965, another threat had emerged on the horizon. A new, direct highway was being built between Anchorage and Fairbanks, and given its easier access to the park, conservationists were worried that a new wave of park visitation would completely upset the status quo. Knowing that the new highway would be completed in 1970 or 1971, conservationists were not pleased by the NPS's public statements on the subject, because all that the agency could promise was that it would hold back on new park road construction projects only until the Anchorage–Fairbanks highway had been completed.¹³

The NPS, in fact, issued no further statements on the issue until the road was completed in October 1971. Then, just three months later, Park Service Director George Hartzog

(Figure 4) clearly made the agency's position known in an interview for the magazine *U.S. News and World Report*. The road, he stated, would not be improved; instead, he planned to manage the new waves of visitors by limiting private vehicle traffic west of the Savage River Campground and by instituting a free shuttle bus system—similar to the one recently begun at Yosemite—that would take visitors down the park road. The new system proved controversial, particularly to Alaska residents. The system, however, was implemented as scheduled on June 1, 1972, and the various shuttle buses, along with the concessioner's tour buses, became the primary ways in which visitors saw the wonders of Mount McKinley National Park.¹⁴

Eight years later, the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) brought forth Denali National Park and Preserve, which was three times the size of the “old park.” Visitation patterns, however, didn't change much after the law was passed, and even today, most visitors arrive at the park's eastern entrance and take a bus down the park road. Park Service officials now recognize that providing public access via the road corridor will always be a management challenge. But today's management system provides a healthy balance between visitor access and ecological integrity, a balance that surely would have been threatened if conservationists during the 1960s, and George Hartzog in 1972, had not stepped forward and drawn a line in the tundra.



Figure 4. NPS Director George Hartzog played a major role in the implementation of the park's shuttle system. National Park Service photo.

Endnotes

1. Section 5 of park act, signed by President Woodrow Wilson February 26, 1917, in *U.S. Statutes at Large* 39, 938.
2. Charles Sheldon, *The Wilderness of Denali: Explorations of a Hunter-Naturalist in Northern Alaska* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 272.
3. Frank Norris, *Crown Jewel of the North: An Administrative History of Denali National Park and Preserve*, Volume 1 (Anchorage: NPS, 2006), 33–35.
4. *Ibid.*, 293 (Appendix F).
5. Norris, “Touring Alaska,” *Alaska History* 2 (Fall 1987), 276; Alaska Department of Labor, *Alaska Population Overview, 1990 Census and Estimates*, Table 1.3, 19.
6. Norris, *Crown Jewel of the North*, 283 (Appendix B).
7. *Ibid.*, 169–170.
8. Adolph Murie, “Comments on Mission 66 Plans, and on Policies Pertaining to Mount

McKinley National Park” (November 8, 1956), 7, from “H14 Historical Notes, 1964–70” folder, Box 7, ARCC-00183, NPS Alaska Regional Office, Anchorage.

9. Norris, *Crown Jewel of the North*, 170.
10. *Ibid.*, 170–171.
11. *Ibid.*, 171.
12. *Ibid.*, 172–173.
13. *Ibid.*, 173.
14. *Ibid.*, 219–221.