Mountaineering Management on Mount McKinley: Unraveling a Crisis at the 17,000-foot Level

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National Park Service ranger Bob Gerhard transferred from Mount Rainier to Mount McKinley in early 1976, and when he looked into how climbers were being managed on Mount McKinley, he saw a desperate situation (Gerhard 2005). Garbage was building up in the main camping areas, search and rescue capabilities were sorely lacking, nothing was being done to dispose of human waste, and guides were bringing scores of climbers—some with little climbing experience—to one of the world's most difficult climbing areas. And with the bicentennial climbing season quickly approaching, conditions promised to get worse before they improved. A crisis was clearly at hand. Conditions weren't always like this, however, and a quick overview of Mount McKinley's climbing history clearly illustrates both how the problem arose, and how it was resolved.

In the earliest days, of course, climbers were completely on their own. Before Congress established Mount McKinley National Park in 1917, seven parties, totaling 39 climbers, had attempted the climb and the last group, in the spring of 1913, resulted in four Alaskans standing on the roof of the continent, 20,320 feet high (Walker 2005). Given that success, no one tried to climb the mountain again until 1932. For the next 15 years, there was a heavy reliance on equipment testing and science as rationale for climbing, so perhaps as a result, the Park Service assisted many of these efforts by allowing air drops, and by hauling goods with dogsleds to the mountain's base.

It wasn't until 1947 that park ranger Grant Pearson put together the first, mimeographed packet of mountaineering regulations. Climbing parties in those days all approached the mountain from its north side, and they all left the Alaska Railroad at the McKinley Park railroad station. So climbers and rangers typically met at the park headquarters, just a few miles from the railroad station, where rangers would quiz the climbers about their tents and clothing, their proposed route, and food supplies. Climbers typically corresponded with park personnel months before they arrived, and in most cases, they were so experienced that rangers served as advisers rather than gatekeepers. This state of affairs remained throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Climbing was a rare activity in those days; the 1959 season, for example, witnessed only the 76th successful summiting of Mount McKinley, of 182 attempts (Pearson 1962).

In 1960, however, mountaineering management at the park hit its first rough patch when two parties high on the mountain came to grief within hours of each other. One party suffered a 400-foot fall resulting in a broken leg and a concussion, and an Anchorage woman in a nearby party developed high altitude pulmonary edema, or altitude sickness as it was known at that time. The Park Service had neither the staff expertise nor the technical capability to rescue anyone, and the U.S. Army also tried and failed to rescue the climbers. The heroes of the day turned out to be Link Luckett, who was able to land a helicopter on a narrow shelf at the 17,000-foot level, and a locally famous pilot named Don Sheldon, who some-

how landed his fixed-wing plane on a snow shelf at the 14,000-foot level and hauled the injured climbers to safety (Greiner 1974).

The Park Service reacted to this event by coordinating with other agencies on rescue protocols. However, the Park Service still found it increasingly difficult to manage mountaineering on Mount McKinley. One reason was logistics. Most people were now starting their climbs on a glacier just southwest of the mountain, and the bush pilots who carried these climbers were based in the village of Talkeetna, more than a hundred miles south of park headquarters. Despite the intervening distance, NPS rangers continued to meet all climbing parties, usually by taking repeated train trips to Talkeetna and talking with climbers near the airstrip or the railroad station. An additional problem was numbers: during the early-to-mid 1960s, three to four times the number of climbers tried to climb the mountain than during the 1950s. The growing number of foreign climbers, many of them with an imperfect knowledge of English, was an additional challenge (Sheldon 1995).

The year 1967 brought new problems, however, because tourism authorities widely advertised the forty-ninth state because of the Alaska Purchase centennial. The response was huge; the number of garden-variety tourists to Alaska broke all previous records, and the year also brought a total of 83 people to the slopes of Mount McKinley—far more than ever before. The largest climbing group that year was a 12-man outfit called the Wilcox-McKinley Expedition (Figure 1). And for reasons that are still being debated, seven of the climbers from that party died on the mountain's upper slopes. The Park Service, at the time, still had no trained mountaineers on its staff and no technical mountaineering equipment, so all the agency could do was to monitor the worsening situation on the park's primitive radio system (Waterman 1998).

That tragedy, which resulted in weeks of headlines in the Alaska press, caused virtually everyone to criticize the Park Service, fairly or not. But the most vehement opposition came from the climbing community, who demanded that the NPS stop regulating climbers altogether. In response, the Park Service gave in, so instead of the inspection and informal interview of prospective climbers that had previously been the norm, future climbers were asked only to register, get a doctor's certificate, carry a radio, and report to park headquarters after returning from the mountain. Even those requirements, however, were not rigidly enforced; as a 1974 editorial noted, "the philosophy is that Mt. McKinley is the people's mountain, and it's up to the climber to arm himself with gear and judgment before climbing it" (*Anchorage Daily News,* July 10).

Despite that hands-off attitude, a host of factors were conspiring to make the NPS a more active partner in the mountaineering business. This was primarily because Mount McKinley was skyrocketing in popularity. In 1970, for example, a record 124 people attempted the climb, a number that increased to 203 in 1973 and to 362 in 1975. Mount McKinley, among some climbers, began to gain a reputation as a "technically easy mountain," and as a result, relatively unprepared climbers arrived at McKinley and rescue costs soared dramatically (Doherty 1976, 8).

In reaction to this growing popularity, climbers as early as 1970 began to complain about the "excessive" number of people on the popular West Buttress route, and a 1973 news article (*Anchorage Daily Times*, June 26, 23) was headlined "McKinley Like Grand

Figure 1. The twelve-man Wilcox-McKinley Expedition attempted to climb Mt. McKinley in July 1967. Severe weather and other factors resulted in the deaths of seven climbers from this expedition. Mountaineering Collection #13611, DENA, National Park Service.

Central." Along with the crowds came an increasing garbage problem, which became so onerous that University of Oregon volunteers, beginning in 1971, offered to haul away refuse from the most popular high-elevation camps. Though virtually all climbers were guilty of littering to some extent, some of the worst offenders were the climbing guides—and perhaps the best-known guide was a self-styled "pirate" named Ray Genet, who reveled in the freedom from regulation that the mountain provided for him (Shuler 1977; Waterman 1998).

This was the situation that Bob Gerhard, an experienced mountaineering ranger, found when he began working at the park in January of 1976. Gerhard knew that a record number of people would sign up for a bicentennial climb that year—and many of them would hope to celebrate July 4th on top of Mount McKinley. So to find out more, Gerhard and five other park employees spent most of June on the mountain. It was the Park Service's first presence on Mount McKinley since 1947 (Gerhard interview by Frank Norris, April 28, 2005).

The bicentennial climbing season resulted in ten deaths and a staggering $82,000 government rescue bill. These events were widely covered in the press, and many reporters wondered whether the mountain should be more intensely regulated. But Gerhard, at least initially, was reluctant to impose a strong governmental presence; instead, he deferred to the interests of the American Alpine Club and other climbing groups, and suggested that the agency should "regulate mountaineering activity as little as possible" (1977, 99).

The following year, however, the agency began to slowly re-institute some of the old policies that had worked so well prior to the 1967 disaster. Two rangers spent most of the climbing season in Talkeetna and talked to climbers about routes, medical problems, and expected hazards. The men also had two ten-day climbing patrols on the West Buttress route. Perhaps as a result of these efforts, no one died on the mountain in 1977, and rescue costs dropped dramatically. The park also instituted a "climb clean" policy, asking all climbers to pack out all of their garbage, gear, and fixed line, and they also installed the first pit toilet on the mountain (Gerhard 1978; Sherwonit 2002).

Beginning in 1977, the NPS let it be known that it had four major goals on the mountain: to emphasize safety, reduce rescue costs, cut down on the litter problem, and deal with the problem of human waste. All of those goals were jeopardized, however, by Mount McKinley's ever-increasing popularity. Throughout the 1980s, the annual number of climbers continued to rise until, in 1989, it exceeded 1,000 for the first time. Ever since that time, the Mount McKinley has remained a climbing mecca, and during the past decade the mountain has annually attracted between 1,100 and 1,400 people (Figures 2 and 3; NPS 1979–2008).

In order to emphasize safety, the NPS began limiting the number of guides on the mountain, and in order to obtain and keep their licenses, the guides had to prove that safety was an important part of their operations. And beginning in the early 1980s, volunteer medical personnel began to be stationed on the mountain. But given the mountain's notoriously bad

Figure 2. The increase in numbers of climbers attempting to climb Mt. McKinley each year, from 1970 through 2007, is illustrated by this graph. National Park Service.

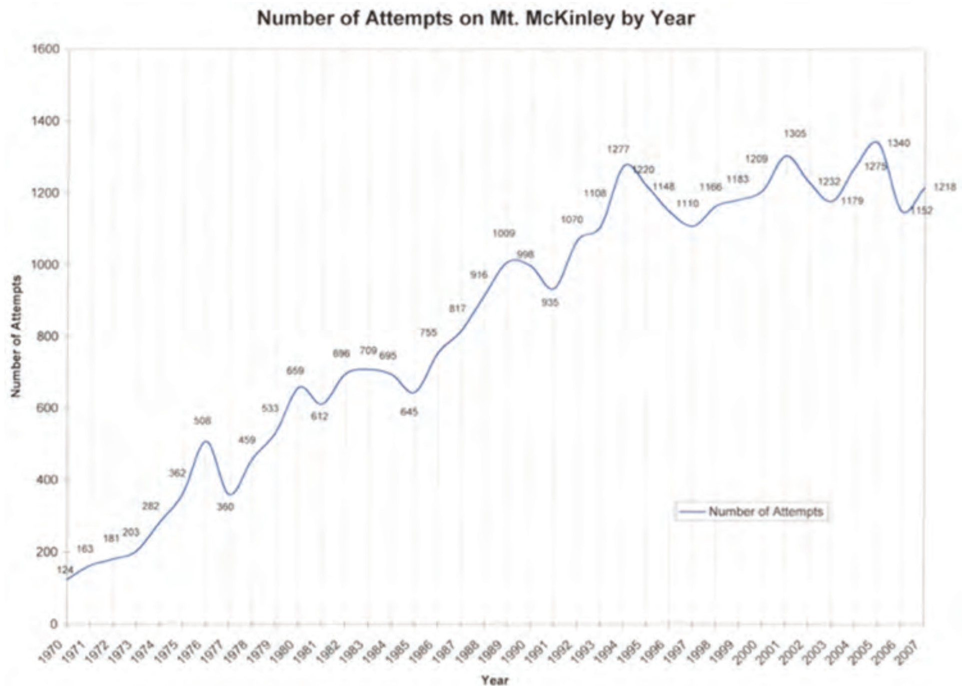

Figure 3. Crowding has been a problem on Mount McKinley since the 1970s. This photo was taken in May 2001 along the well-traveled West Buttress route. The NPS has recently set an annual limit of 1,500 climbers on Mt. McKinley. National Park Service, Roger Robinson Collection.

weather, climbing remained a high risk activity, and during the 1980s, 34 people died on the mountain, many of them foreign residents. In order to stem further losses, the Park Service in 1988 established a camp at the 14,000 foot level, and in 1991 it first stationed, at Talkeetna, a high-altitude Lama helicopter to use during the climbing season (NPS 1988, 1991). And in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it conducted a major foreign outreach effort (Figure 4; *The Economist* 1992; *Anchorage Daily News,* August 3, 1993, E-3).

Early results of the Park Service's efforts were mixed. But since the mid-1990s, the emphasis on safety has paid off, and during the last ten climbing seasons, only nine people have died on the slopes of Mount McKinley. That emphasis on safety, however, has resulted in rescue costs which in recent years have consistently topped $100,000 per year (NPS 2007b). These costs have brought forth calls from some legislators to share the government's financial burden with the climbers themselves. And to help defray those expenses, each climber now pays $200 for the chance to climb Mount McKinley (U.S. Congress 1999).

Progress was also made in cleaning up litter on the mountain. In 1983, for instance, a ranger stated that everyone involved had "waged an intensive campaign to reduce the amount of litter" and that "the mountaineers of today are climbing … with a much more sensitive ethic regarding litter and abandoned gear" (NPS 1983). Trash problems, however, tenaciously hung on, and they were not really solved until the year 2000, when rangers distributed blue plastic bags to climbers, with their food weighed at the beginning and end of each trip (Bol 2002, 26).

Figure 4. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the NPS undertook a major outreach effort to foreign climbers. Here, in a 1982 photo, ranger Roger Robinson speaks to a group of Japanese climbers. National Park Service, Roger Robinson Collection.

Confronting the problem of human waste, however, proved more difficult than with litter. By 1983, a ranger noted that at several places on the mountain, it became "harder and harder to find clean snow for cooking and drinking" (NPS 1983). So to confront the situation, rangers urged climbers to bag their wastes and toss them into the nearest crevasse, and they also built additional pit toilets. That policy remained until the year 2000, when ranger Roger Robinson tested the idea of a small, rectangular container that could serve as a portable toilet. That system had its flaws, so he worked with a manufacturer on the design of a light, cylindrical "Clean Mountain Can." These cans were passed out to about fifty climbers in 2001, and they proved so successful that rangers soon required them for the highest-elevation camps. In recent years, all climbers have been issued Clean Mountain Cans and have been expected to use them; a $100 fine awaits those who don't, and are caught (NPS 2000, 2004; Robinson interviewed by Frank Norris, May 1, 2007).

Because of the Park Service's leadership in confronting the problems of trash and human waste, longtime climbers can now testify that the mountain is far cleaner than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. And it's a far safer experience, too, with a death rate that is far lower than 20 to 30 years ago. By the end of last year's climbing season, more than 33,000 men and women had tried to reach the top of North America's highest peak (Figure 3). Just over half of those climbers—including more than 1,500 women—have successfully stood at the summit.

During the years that the Park Service has been dealing with climbers on Mount McKinley, management policies have often changed in response to the experiences, demands, and interests of the climbing community. Always, however, the Park Service has tried to steer a delicate course between adventure and freedom, on the one hand, and the need for safety and ecological integrity on the other. By most accounts, the present arrangement provides a balance that is broadly supported by both the climbing community and the public at large.

[Ed. note: The author recently released a two-volume administrative history of Denali National Park and Preserve, entitled *Crown Jewel of the North*. This article is a condensation of the mountaineering chapter from that history.]

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