

On the Outside Looking In

Fly-in Recreation Day Use Visitor Experiences in the South District of Denali National Park and Preserve

BY ALAN WATSON, KATIE KNOTEK, and NEAL CHRISTENSEN

Abstract: Denali National Park and Preserve is an American icon for wilderness. Not everyone accesses wilderness in the same way, however, or has the same experiences. Wilderness recreation experiences at Denali vary tremendously. Interviews with flightseers at the park have created a better understanding of the recreation experiences for these day users and helped us recognize glacier landings in the backcountry as unique aspects of that experience. In self-reports about their visits, day users focused heavily on the unique scale of the wilderness of the Alaska Range, seeing climbers in the park, and landing on glaciers. Many of the flightseers recognize this place as a national park, and many recognize it as wilderness, though the recreation experience they are engaging in is more likely to be described as one of “on the outside looking in,” rather than as a wilderness experience.



Alan Watson. Photo courtesy of the ALWRI.



Katie Knotek studied flightseer experiences at Denali National Park and Preserve. Photo courtesy of the ALWRI.



Neal Christensen in Denali National Park and Preserve. Photo courtesy of the ALWRI.

Introduction

In Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska, planning for backcountry management is being revisited for the first time since shortly after passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. Whereas the North District of the park and preserve has received a great deal of attention from research and planning staff in order to protect experiences and the resources in this, the more heavily used portion of the park, the South District, has received very little attention. The 1986 Denali National Park and Preserve

General Management Plan, however, called for improved visitor services and access to the South Denali region to take advantage of the area's dramatically sculptured landscapes and mountain-oriented recreational opportunities (National Park Service 2006a). Authorities have long recognized opportunities to serve more visitor needs through some development of access and facilities in this area of low visitor use levels. Also contained within the South District, however, are many remote glaciers, often visited by fly-in visitors who sometimes congregate at frequently landed places, as well as interface

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with mountain climbers and backcountry skiers.

Glaciers at Denali have exceptional scenic value, provide access to world-renowned climbing opportunities, and are destinations for scenic airplane tours. In 2003, there were 2,009 scenic landings (9,792 visitors) on these glaciers, with approximately 90% originating out of nearby Talkeetna. The National Park Service (NPS) is charged with protection of a wide range of values, including those attached to tangible resources such as natural and historic objects, and intangible resources such as inspiration and opportunities for challenge and self-reliance (Lindholm and Tranel 2005). Section 202 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (P.L. 96-487) of 1980 described the purpose of Denali National Park additions and the Preserve to include "reasonable access for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreation activities," which includes glacier landings.

Through ANILCA, the size of Denali National Park was nearly tripled. Of the new 6-million-acre (2.4-million-ha) Denali unit, nearly 2 million acres (0.8 million ha) (most of the old park) was designated wilderness. Although ANILCA allows for motorized access to wilderness environments, aircraft landings are not currently permitted within the wilderness boundary of Denali National Park and Preserve (i.e. the old park). The Final Backcountry Management Plan (National Park Service 2006b) declared that scenic flights and glacier landings are a necessary and appropriate use of park resources.

Park staff and visitors to these backcountry areas have expressed concerns in the past about safety, the quality of visitor experiences, and aircraft impacts on natural sounds and

wilderness character (Denali National Park 2003). Managers have voiced interest in management tools to enhance visitor experiences as alternatives that focus entirely on imposing visitor use limitations based on physical visitor capacity estimates.

In 2006, the park issued a Final Backcountry Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement that will guide management decisions for the next 20 years, although it did not include decisions about backcountry day use areas, such as the glacier-landing areas (National Park Service 2006b). The South Denali Implementation Plan was also released in 2006 with a vision of focusing on quality visitor experiences while protecting resource values, enhancing recreational and access opportunities throughout the South Denali region, and preserve quality of life values for residents in nearby communities (NPS 2006a). The current study is pertinent to both of these plans and was intended to inform the future decision-making process.

The purpose of this project was to collect information from flightseers in order to better understand the experiences of these fly-in backcountry day visitors to the Ruth Amphitheater, Kahiltna Base Camp, Pika Glacier, Buckskin Glacier, and Eldridge Glacier. Although a larger research project by these authors was conducted to support this planning process, aimed broadly at day and overnight visitors, and including a study of how air taxi service providers describe influences on recreation visitor experiences (Christensen et al. 2005), this article will only address fly-in recreation day use visitors and illustrate some of the experience elements identified. Air taxi operators provided excellent cooperation in the larger study and have an interest in these findings as they relate very closely with their own interest in

understanding how to serve customers and meet NPS objectives.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with a sample of fly-in day users to these backcountry locations within Denali National Park and Preserve in 2004, to understand their received experiences in meaningful detail. Sampling was purposeful rather than random, and the sample was relatively small with emphasis placed on depth of understanding rather than statistical generalizability. At the time of this study, there were seven commercial air service providers permitted to land on glaciers in the study area, with five of those based in Talkeetna. Many of the scenic flights originating from Talkeetna do not land on the glaciers, although no comprehensive record or estimate of the number of these flights is available. Customers of all of the air service companies in Talkeetna were included in this study, representing small groups and larger ones (within the limits of the aircraft used).

Information from 44 flightseers was obtained in 34 interviews, with 16 of the 34 interviews being with flightseers who did not land on a glacier. Our results describe the flightseeing experience, using the nonlanding visitors to help us differentiate the glacier landing visits from visits that did not include glacier landings. The effort here is to define the whole experience flightseers received, expecting only those landing on glaciers to report aspects of the experience dependent upon actual landing.

There were very similar objectives for the interviews with both types of flightseers for extracting their descriptions of the experiences they received. From both types of flightseers we asked for a description of their previous experience at Denali National Park and Preserve, whether they were Alaska residents, and if not where they were from.

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All flightseers were asked about the more physical aspects of their trip, in terms of where they went, how many people were in the group, and whether they landed on a glacier during the flight. All flightseers were asked to also describe the trip (from the time they got into the aircraft until they got back) with probing questions about what they saw, things that affected enjoyment of the flight, which parts of the trip were most memorable, and how this visit compared to other flightseeing excursions they had taken. All flightseers were asked to describe what they value about the area, whether they would describe it to a friend (who is thinking about visiting) as a national park, whether they would describe it as a wilderness and why they would describe it this way, and how it is different from other parks or wilderness areas they have visited. They were also asked whether they believe there are other places they could receive a similar experience, and if so how it would be similar. Glacier-landing visitors were asked which glacier they landed on.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Analysis of interviews was guided by an interpretive perspective. Rather than using a “content analysis” approach where occurrences of words or phrases are counted, a hermeneutics approach, which attempts to understand the meaning and significance of words from the speaker’s point of view, was utilized in the analysis process (Patterson et al. 1998).

The NVivo software program (QSR International Pty Ltd 2002) was

used to facilitate interpretive analysis of the interviews. Segments of the text were assigned categorical codes representing the researchers’ interpretations of the segments’ meaning or significance. Multiple, iterative stages of coding resulted in a final coding scheme that was used as a framework to summarize and represent the data in this report.

Results

Analysis of visitor interviews revealed interesting descriptions of flightseeing experiences that included vivid descriptions of size and scale, seeing climbers, landing on the glacier, the flight as a national park experience, and the flight as a wilderness experience. Representative examples of interview segments are presented by these themes within the results section below. The full report (Christensen et al. 2005) contains appendices that present the additional text segments that informed the findings and conclusions about each of these themes as well as others identified: focus on the flight itself, viewing scenery, a rare and unusual experience, creating memories and taking photographs, seeing Denali (also known as Mount McKinley), and as a multiple sensory experience.

Size and scale. Flightseers often talked about unique aspects of scale and how they gained appreciation for size and scale during their flights. For instance,

You don’t [realize] the size of the mountain, you really realize when you see a tiny plane next to it and

you think, wow, it’s so huge. It does give some degree of scale to it. I guess, I mean, I’ve been to Colorado, which is somewhat comparable, and just the magnitude of the mountains here is just so much larger and you can’t even imagine how big some of those mountains are.

Seeing climbers. Seeing climbers was a positive aspect of the experience for many flightseers. Respondents typically indicated that their pilot had pointed out climbers to them during their flight. It contributed somewhat to perceptions of size and scale. For example:

He was really good. I mean, he made sure that, you know, we saw climbers which were like itsy-bitsy, tiny, little specks and stuff. Yeah, it was great.

It’s educational. I mean, the different base camps and then the different routes that they take, and it’s a pretty interesting sport to admire, too.

They’re going through a lot up there.

Landing on the glacier. The experience of landing on the glacier itself is unique to these backcountry day visitors, but feeling isolation and experiencing the snow and ice up close all depend upon getting your sneakers planted in the snow. The landing helps bring the place to life. For example:

But, I mean, for me I guess the whole glacier landing gave me the experience because then you’re actually touching, feeling, you know, smelling if you will.

The best part was the landing because we could get out and really experience, you know, that being on top of the world. It was like very, very nice.

The Flight as a National Park Visit. Flightseers were mixed on whether

they reported the flight as a national park experience. For example:

I think one thinks of the national parks as being unspoiled, beautiful nature and something that will be there, that's been there for a long time and will be there afterwards, and so I guess what we saw today I would classify in all those areas.

[The] national park experience to me is something where you go out and stay for a few days or go hiking and really, you know, get involved in the whole surroundings. But this is just a day trip from Anchorage, so a little bit different than that.

The Flight as a Wilderness Experience.

Although many visitors struggled with whether or not they had a wilderness experience, most recognized the place generally as wilderness.

We were seeing people in a wilderness experience ... we were like on the outside looking in. We saw wilderness ... to me a wilderness experience is when you're kind of living off the land ... it's more physical activity, more going with just a few supplies and being more dependent on nature, and so I don't think it was that.

I mean it wouldn't be something I would want to be walking around in. Flying over? Yes, yes. It's definitely wilderness up there.

Discussion and Conclusions

In spite of long-term interest in increased access and facilities to meet

visitor needs in the South District of Denali National Park and Preserve, decisions have not been made about how to manage fly-in day users in the backcountry there. Some of the day users thought of their flightseeing visit to Denali as a national park visit, and some did not. Many of the day users also thought of the park as wilderness, but they were more likely to describe it as getting close to wilderness than a wilderness trip. The glacier landing was the highlight of the experience for most day users who landed there, contributing to perceptions of scale and appreciation for the wilderness character of the place and the skills of those who ventured there on foot or ski.

Insight into how people perceived their relationship with this part of the park is depicted in the quote "on the outside looking in." This might be a good way of thinking about the "wilderness recreation experiences" of day use flightseers rather than assuming application of any other wilderness research to define management objectives. Flightseers are eager to understand the unique qualities of this South District, to see people engaged in more direct interaction with wilderness qualities, and to even land at very remote locations in order to actually witness this extreme environment. But, while they commonly described it as wilderness, they described their own experiences more as tasting this place, learning about it and the other ways people visit.

Management Implications

The wilderness recreation experiences described by these day users do not

require high levels of planning on their part, self-reliance, or the challenges of way-finding common to most wilderness visits, but they are dependent upon the wilderness character of the land. These flightseeing visitors tend not to be seeking solitude from other people (a commonly believed basic element of wilderness experiences in the United States) so much as they are seeking a unique experience, learning how this place is different from places with which they are more familiar, and seeing others isolated in nature. A glacier landing changes the trip, helping them grasp scale better and allowing them near climbers for a closer look on the inside.

Whereas most wilderness experiences in the United States, with either a backpack or a raft/canoe, involve gaining a sense of humility from hiking or paddling under self-power, the humility here comes from realizing the scale of this place. Planning decisions that influence these visitors to this part of the park in the future can potentially focus more specifically on evaluating how this very unique experience is influenced by changes in access, changes in services and information provided, and changes in how the glaciers and visitors are managed below. **IJW**

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protected support development of natural resources on other lands, a view that provides important common ground for negotiations. Wilderness advocates might be less apprehensive of locally negotiated proposals for places such as the Rocky Mountain Front with the knowledge that half of local residents support protection of roadless lands.

Even with improved understandings of local views, policy makers still face the difficult question of how to balance local, regional, and national perspectives when considering future policy options. Locally negotiated legislative proposals may offer a mechanism to meet a variety of local needs while providing certainty about the future management of roadless lands. However, local collaboration does not eliminate polarization; different views on roadless lands and wilderness will continue to exist at the local, regional, and national levels. Conflict over how to best manage roadless lands, and about who should decide their future, will undoubtedly continue to be a fixture of western and national politics. **IJW**

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