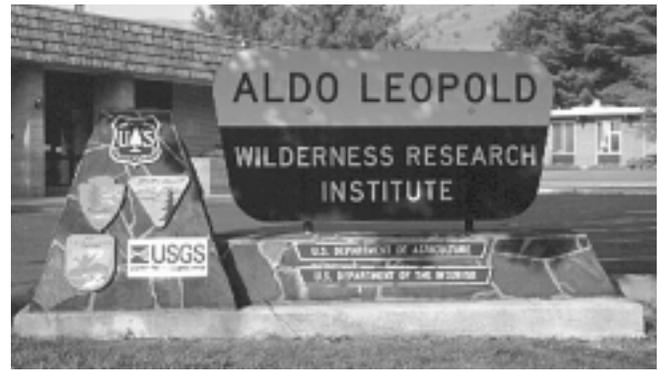


Research on the Relationship between Humans and Wilderness in Alaska

BY ALAN E. WATSON

At the 2005 Biennial George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites in Philadelphia, March 14 to 18, there were many sessions relevant to wilderness. One session provided focus on a priority research area of the Leopold Institute: understanding the effects of management actions on relationships between people and wilderness. A great majority of wilderness social science has historically focused on understanding recreation visitors' responses to on-site conditions encountered during wilderness visits. These responses are often at the core of Limits of Acceptable Change and other indicator-based planning models used to select indicators, establish standards, and monitor conditions in wilderness. A new line of research at the Leopold Institute, strongly illustrated by several examples in Alaska, demonstrates the need to understand how these on-site management actions influence the range of relationships people have with wilderness.

Brian Glaspell (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and Katie Knotek (Leopold Institute) presented findings from research at Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and Wrangell St.-Elias National Park and Preserve. Their principle message was that wilderness visits enable lifelong relationships with wild places in Alaska, and those relationships in turn influence use and stewardship of Alaska's wilderness. Historical examples include John Muir, Bob Marshall, and Mardy Murie, all with significant influences on wilderness protection in Alaska today. Following their trips, many current visitors also describe new and potentially lasting relationships with Alaska wilderness places based on experiencing challenging travel conditions, vast wildlife habitats, and traditional rural lifestyles and related use-values—much as those historic visitors once described.



Ralph Tingey, of the National Park Service's regional office in Anchorage, responded to findings from research conducted by Alex Whiting in the Native village of Kotzebue in the western Arctic of Alaska. Ralph pointed out the importance of understanding local, rural connections with federal protected lands. Although some of the values the native Inupiaq of Kotzebue attach to the wilderness of the Western Arctic Parklands—such as identity, humility and survival—are not clearly specified among the purposes of the Wilderness Act, these values are at the root of much of the interaction between managers and local people. Ralph acknowledged that local, rural people can be threatened by the perception that outsiders desire locals to evolve a relationship with wilderness more like the one described in the Wilderness Act: “a place where man is a visitor who does not remain.”

Joan Kluwe of URS Corporation, a consulting firm in Anchorage, spoke of the importance of understanding relationships

Continued on page 36



Figure 2—Murie Science and Learning Center, Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska. Photo courtesy of Fred Bayler and the National Park Service.

dents will explore the wilds of the park and record their impressions on DVD.

Through partner Denali Institute, the center offers a series of short daily programs and multiday educational seminars and teacher trainings throughout the summer months. These popular pro-

grams based out of the center's remote field camp explore a variety of topics from bear research to wildflowers.

To get kids up to their elbows in wilderness, the park has teamed with the Denali Foundation to offer a new Denali Backcountry Adventures program aimed

at high-school students. Piloted in 2005, participants will spend a week in Denali's backcountry collecting impact-monitoring data for park managers.

The Murie Science and Learning Center is one of a growing network of research learning centers in development as one facet of the National Park Service's Natural Resource Challenge initiative. The goal of the Challenge is to promote more and better science in our national parks, to use scientific findings to make sound management decisions, and to share what is learned about these natural areas more effectively with the public. **IJW**

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From ALDO LEOPOLD on page 30

with the wilderness resource in order to identify the agency's role in resolving conflict between sport anglers and local village residents in the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Alaska.

Mike Tranel of Denali National Park and Preserve described the relationship air-taxi operators have with the park and the visitors they shuttle in to climb Mt. McKinley or visit glaciers within the park. As a group, these commercial service providers have a long-standing relationship with portions of the Denali area that predates their addition to the park in 1980. This relationship is key to understanding how current air-taxi operators view their own role as well as that of the Park Service.

Alan Watson and Neal Christensen of the Leopold Institute closed the session by describing research on the Tongass Na-

tional Forest in southeast Alaska. An initial study there concentrated on understanding conditions encountered by sport anglers and how their visits may be changed due to potential changes in management to protect on-site conditions along the Situk River. Local interest by Yakutat village residents, however, led to a second study to understand how they describe their relationships with this river that runs from the Russel Fiord Wilderness to the Gulf of Alaska, and how some of the proposed changes in management of on-site conditions may change those relationships.

These presentations on recent research in Alaska suggest the following:

- Visitor experiences enable individual and societal relationships with an area, and human relationships de-

veloped through these experiences can greatly influence the area.

- Federal agencies need to understand local meanings attached to wild places and how management actions interact with those meanings.
- Conflicts between recreation and subsistence users of public lands in Alaska are complex and deeply related to differences in relationships people have with those places.
- Commercial service providers have relationships with federal lands and are intermediate influences on relationships developed by the public with these places.
- We need holistic research and management approaches that consider how on-site management actions affect relationships between various publics and public lands. **IJW**