

# Diverse Recreation Experiences at Denali National Park and Preserve

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## Abstract

Qualitative interviews were conducted at Denali National Park and Preserve in the 2004 summer use season to improve understanding of re-

creation visitor experiences in the remote southern portion of the park, including Mount McKinley and the surrounding mountains and glaciers. Descriptions of the experiences of visitors to the mountains and glaciers included elements of isolation, self-reliance, and personal risk, whereas experiences of visitors flying over the area were more focused on scenic grandeur, creating memories, taking photographs, and glacier landings. Devising appropriate management direction and monitoring protocol to sustain this diversity of experiences at the same place is a challenge.

**Figure 1. (Top)** When day use flightseers land on glaciers, they report that the actual sounds, smells and feel of the environment become the defining element of the trip.

## Introduction

Denali National Park and Preserve (Denali) is managed as a Conservation System Unit in Alaska under the responsibility of the National Park Service, as outlined by the National Park Service Organic Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and other relevant federal guidelines (*Lindholm and Tranel 2005*). According to ANILCA, one of the stated purposes of this park unit and others in Alaska is to provide for the “protection of opportunities for wilderness solitude, outdoor recreation and environmental education” (*Smith et al. 2001*). Denali is home to North America’s highest mountain peak, 20,320-foot (6,193 m) tall Mount McKinley. Mount McKinley and the surrounding mountains and glaciers of the Alaska Range, located in the southern portion of the park, have become a world-renowned destination for mountaineering and scenic air tours. As a result, recreation use in this area of the park has grown dramatically in recent years (*DENA 2005*) making it more of a challenge to protect, as outlined by ANILCA, opportunities for both wilderness solitude and outdoor recreation in an area where diverse visitor experiences occur.

In an effort to assist park planners and managers in better understanding recreation visitor experiences in this portion of the park, a cooperative study between Denali National Park and Preserve, the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, and the American Alpine Club was conducted in the summer of 2004. This research, combined with a quantitative visitor survey (*Christensen et al. 2005*), was intended to provide input to establishing appropriate management direction and monitoring protocol in the park’s backcountry management plan.

## Methods

Qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of both day users and multi-day recreation visitors to the study area, selecting candidates randomly from groups during multi-day sampling periods across the use season (*Christensen et al. 2005*). Day users were visitors on scenic flights and multi-day users were mountaineering climbers and backcountry skiers. There were a total of 34 interviews with day use visitors and 36 interviews with multi-day visitors. Most interviews were conducted in Talkeetna, Alaska, at the air taxi operators’ places of business soon after completion of visits. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, aimed at collecting, in meaningful detail, visitors’ own unique descriptions of their experiences, as well as their perceptions of influences on those experiences. Through qualitative interpretive analysis, multiple reviewers agreed on several recreation



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**Figure 2. A sense of isolation is felt immediately by multi-day visitors upon watching their air taxi leave.**

experience dimensions and factors of influence for each type of visitor. For this brief overview of the results, some excerpts are presented only as examples of the evidence for a primary set of experience dimensions and factors of influence.

## Results

Among the primary elements of the experiences of visitors flying over the park were experiencing the scenic grandeur of Mt. McKinley, creating memories, taking photographs, and landing on a glacier.

The scenic grandeur of Mt. McKinley and the surrounding mountains and glaciers can be overwhelming for day use visitors. As a result, the experience of some day use visitors is largely defined by the opportunity to view outstanding scenery characteristic of an overflight. For example:

*But the whole thing was phenomenal... The scenery, everything about it, just looking over the mountains. I'd never seen anything like that before pretty up close... (Day User)*

For other day use visitors, the scenic flight is dominated by the experience of creating memories while flying over the unique environment, memories that will transcend time. Many day use visitors are acutely aware of photographic opportunities during the scenic flight, to the point where taking pictures becomes a primary element of the experience for some visitors. For example:

*What did you value about the tour? Oh, just everything we saw. There are memories that, I saw things that were just unbelievable. That's all. I mean, there's memories that I'll never forget. (Day User)*

*Well, we went all the way around the mountain, went up to the summit, over the summit and came down to the base camps. I got some great pictures. (Day User)*

Many day use visitors incorporate a glacier landing into their scenic flight. When they do, this glacier landing becomes the defining element of their experience, because it helps bring the experience to life by providing sensory stimuli – the actual sound, smell and feel of the environment outside the airplane. For example:

*But, I mean,... for me I guess the whole glacier landing gave me the experience because then you're actually touching, feeling, smelling if you will, being on a national park. So if you didn't do the landing I would say I wouldn't have experienced it as much. (Day User)*

In contrast to the experiences of these day use visitors, some of the primary elements of multi-day experiences included experiences of isolation, self-reliance, and personal risk.

Many multi-day visitors experience a sense of isolation, or remoteness, due to the glacial environment and lack of development in the area. This sense of isolation is felt immediately upon landing on the glacier and watching the air taxi fly away. For example:

*It's a different experience than most anywhere else in the world, the mountaineering there ... we've been mountaineering in Peru and Nepal and all over and there if the weather's crappy you can just go for a hike. But here you're on a glacier. You're camped out so you have to probe out your little square area as big as this room and mark it out ... You're just really isolated and you can't just go, oh, it's a bad weather day, let's*

*go for a hike down to the village... You're not going anywhere. (Multi-day User)*

Closely related to the isolation in the Mt. McKinley area is the feeling of self-reliance experienced by several multi-day visitors. Feelings of self-reliance can result from things like the uncertainty of rescues or inadequate weather forecasts. For example:

*... you have to be self-reliant out there. I mean I know that rescue is becoming more and more an option, but you're still on your own out there. You make your own decisions and you're just dealing with the mountains all the time. That's what's calling the shots... when you try and go against the grain there you just get smacked. (Multi-day User)*

Also, in relation to the isolation of the mountain area and the need to be self-reliant, multi-day visitors' experiences included an element of personal risk, which can be described in terms of the harsh conditions characteristic of the environment. For example:

*The cold, the wind, the vast nothingness, you know, just, sort of isolation from everything and then the physical effect of only getting about half as much air with a breath that you normally do down here at sea level make it, make you wonder whether you're going to actually be able to get out of there or not ... it's an interesting experience, which is actually one of the reasons we did it... we needed to have that experience, see what that was like. (Multi-day User)*

## Discussion and Conclusions

From analysis of the full text of the interviews, it is easy to realize how different the experiences are of the recreation visitors interviewed who were actively engaged in the mountain environment versus those flying over it or landing on a glacier. While most day use visitors interviewed were often captivated by the scenic grandeur of Mount McKinley and the surrounding area, multi-day visitors were overwhelmed more likely by the sense of

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### **What did you value about the tour?**

**Oh, just everything we saw. There are memories that, I saw things that were just unbelievable. That's all. I mean, there's memories that I'll never forget. (Day User)**

isolation that the environment instills in them. Relying on pilots to facilitate their experiences, many of the day use visitors have the ability to focus on creating memories and taking pictures. Multi-day visitors interviewed were more responsible for their own experiences and therefore commonly focused their energy on being self-reliant while in the mountain environment. Day use visitors were often overjoyed with the experience of landing on a backcountry glacier, knowing it is only for a short time, while multi-day visitors commonly faced the realization of the personal risk imposed by living for many days in such an extreme environment.

Just as the experiences of these recreation visitors interviewed differed, so do the factors that influence them. In describing their experiences, these day use visitors often mentioned the positive influence of encountering other planes and interacting with other people, the various aspects of flying and the plane they rode in, the pilots acting as park interpreters or guides, opportunities



National Park Service photo

**Figure 3. Mount McKinley with Wonder Lake in the foreground.**

to take photographs and the chance to view active climbers on the mountain. In contrast, multi-day visitors more commonly talked about the positive and negative influence of the number of people in the area, inexperienced climbers, mountaineering guides, overflights and the cleanliness of the area.

### Management Implications

This kind of information is important and necessary for establishing management direction, setting standards and implementing relevant monitoring for such diverse recreation experiences in one unique place. Managers often establish indicators that represent threats to experiences across different types of user groups. For instance, Limits of Acceptable Change social indicators in the Bob Marshall Wilderness and their standards apply equally for horseback riders and hikers (*USFS 1987*), and in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness they apply to both rafters and kayakers along the primary rivers and streams (*USFS 2003*). In Denali, however, the two main user groups in the study area have very different recreation experiences, making selection of common indicators more complex. It actually raises the question of whether a strategy for establishing common indicators is even possible.

More likely, in making decisions about how best to protect and sustain these contrasting experiences, managers at Denali may develop indicators unique to each set of experiences (day use and multi-day use) based upon the factors that influence them. If this is the case, then park staff must grapple with how this management approach corresponds to the park mission and guiding legislation, and how tradeoffs among the selection of indicators will ultimately affect conditions in this portion of the park.

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