



FIELDREPORT

Alaska Region | Winter 2016-2017



Protecting Alaska Parks' Rivers & Lakes

Can the Park Service Protect Rivers and Lakes?

In October 2016, the Federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments in *Sturgeon v. Frost* over whether the National Park Service has the authority to ban hovercraft on rivers inside national parks in Alaska. The stakes are high. The lawsuit may determine whether the Park Service and other federal agencies can continue to prohibit harmful practices such as placer mining or hovercraft travel on rivers and lakes, as well as provide fishing priorities for rural residents in Alaska. National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) is participating in the lawsuit as a “friend of the court,” supporting the Park Service in its role as steward of the national parks’ natural resources.

How Did We Get to the 9th Circuit?

In 1996, the Park Service issued a nationwide regulation banning hovercraft in national parks and preserves. In 2011, John Sturgeon, a hunter who wanted to use his hovercraft in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, sued the Park Service, arguing that a provision of the Alaska Lands National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) eliminated

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Denali Wolves Need Greater Protection

Denali National Park used to be one of the best places in North America to see wolves in the wild. That has changed. In 2010, the Alaska Board of Game eliminated a ban on wolf hunting and trapping in a small area on nearby state land. Six years later, wolf populations inside Denali are among the lowest in recent times, and the population of many wolf packs familiar to visitors and scientists, such as the famed East Fork family group, are severely reduced. Not surprisingly, visitors’ opportunities to see wolves have fallen dramatically. In 2010, 45 percent of visitors to Denali National Park saw a wolf in the wild. In 2015, 5 percent did.

In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) expanded Denali National Park. A small sliver of state land (often called the “wolf townships”) in the northeast corner of the park was left out due to land ownership complications, but Congress recommended a land trade to bring this area into the park at a later date because it contains habitat critical for park wildlife. That land trade never took place.

In 2000, the Alaska Board of Game, which controls hunting on state lands, eliminated hunting and trapping of wolves on a small portion of the wolf townships to protect

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Denali packs. While not perfect, it helped tremendously. Unfortunately, the Board revoked this no-wolf-take area in 2010. One consequence is that the iconic East Fork pack—one of the most-studied and most-viewed wolf packs in the world—went from 14 members in 2015 to just one pregnant female in spring 2016. At this time, it is unknown whether she or her pups have survived.

In February 2017, the Board will reconsider limiting trapping and hunting of wolves in the wolf townships. NPCA strongly supports a ban on all wolf trapping and hunting in that area. A ban makes sense for the local community and the state of Alaska. Wildlife viewing, particularly of wolves and bears, is one of the top reasons people visit Alaska

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Top: Hunting and trapping near the Denali border has played a role in the severe reduction in the number of park wolves. ©Cathy Hart Photography

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Alaska Corner by AK Regional Director Jim Adams



In 2014, my wife and I took our young daughter camping in Denali. It was fantastic. As part of the trip, we took the bus in to the Eielson Visitor Center, where we were treated to a bluebird day and a stunning view of Denali, as well as sightings of bears, moose, sheep and caribou.

The Denali Park Road provided the primary experience of the park for almost all of the 570,000 people who visited Denali last year. Unfortunately, like much of our national parks' infrastructure across the country, the Denali Park Road faces a backlog of maintenance that the Park Service can't afford. So does the Eielson Visitor Center, where a leaky roof causes yearly water damage to flooring and exhibits.

In Glacier Bay, the Glacier Bay Lodge is an essential part of Gustavus, and the primary reason Alaska Airlines provides summer air service to the community. Without the lodge, many of the town's businesses might not survive. But the lodge needs over \$2 million in overdue repairs. In McCarthy in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, the old Kennicott Mine buildings need repairs, and the Park Service struggles to find funding to repair trails that provide park access for Alaskans and out-of-state visitors.

This infrastructure maintenance backlog isn't the National Park Service's fault. In

2015, the parks welcomed a record 307 million visitors nationally, but from 2006 to 2015, federal funding for construction and maintenance declined by 33 percent. After decades of chronic underfunding for maintaining aging infrastructure, the Park Service estimates its deferred maintenance backlog at about \$12 billion nationally. The Park Service critically needs adequate resources to properly maintain and repair high-priority park projects and preserve our nation's history for future generations.

As Alaska struggles in the face of low oil prices, national parks support many communities. Denali's 560,000 visitors, for instance, pump \$500 million into the gateway communities nearby. Statewide, in 2015, national park visitors spent over \$1.19 billion and supported over 17,000 jobs. And that massive number does not include the money paid to local Alaska contractors who work on the roads, fix roofs, replace aging water pipes and install new wiring in park buildings.

In response to the backlog need, NPCA is teaming up with other groups and communities to campaign for greater federal investment to pay down the park infrastructure maintenance backlog. It is good for the parks, for the many people in and out of state who use and treasure our parks, and for Alaska's economy.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK! What do you like about this newsletter? What other topics or features would you like to see? Would you prefer to receive this newsletter electronically? Please contact our office with your feedback at akro@npca.org

To learn more about exciting volunteer opportunities with NPCA, go to npca.org/events or email akro@npca.org

Alaska Updates

■ Road Through Gates of the Arctic to

Ambler: The Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA) application for a permit for a private, single-lane, \$430 million road through Gates of the Arctic National Preserve to the mining district of Ambler was accepted by the National Park Service and other federal permitting agencies (like the BLM and Corps of Engineers) in August. The timing for the environmental reviews of this costly, ill-advised project has not yet been announced.

■ **UnBearable:** Alaska's Congressional delegation supports measures that would overturn the National Park Service's decision to limit state hunting rules aimed primarily at reducing bear and wolf populations on national preserves. NPCA is working hard to remind Congress of the importance of the Park Service's mission to protect the natural balance of wildlife in national preserves.

■ Pebble Mine/Lake Clark National Park:

An ongoing lawsuit by Pebble Mine developers challenging the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to protect clean water and wild salmon in the Bristol Bay region near Lake Clark National Park means this project remains in limbo.

Above: Grizzly bears at Katmai National Park
©Glebtarro | Dreamstime.com



■ **Denali Zero Landfill Initiative:** The Park Service, local stakeholders, Subaru representatives and NPCA continue to meet and move forward a plan to reduce landfill waste at Denali National Park.

■ **Caribou Creek Trail:** Finished! The Caribou Creek trail in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park was finished this summer thanks to a partnership between NPCA, the Student Conservation Association and the Park Service.

Gift Giving

NPCA works hard every day to protect and enhance our national parks in Alaska—and across the country. Please consider making a year-end gift to ensure our programs remain successful. You can give online at www.npca.org/give.

Lowell Thomas Jr.: Parks Champion

The national parks and Alaska lost a friend and role model when Lowell Thomas, Jr., passed away on October 1 of this year. Born in 1923, Lowell served in World War II and was a renowned glacier pilot, best-selling author, lieutenant governor under Alaska Governor Jay Hammond and a staunch conservationist who was a champion for Denali National Park, Alaska wildlife and the establishment of Chugach State Park. Lowell was a member of NPCA's National Council and Alaska Regional Council, as was his wife Tay, and he was awarded the William Penn Mott, Jr., Leadership Award by NPCA in 1995. In March 2012, the Alaska Legislature passed a Legislative Citation honoring Lowell and Tay for their lifetime of work for the state of Alaska. Lowell was well-known to many and will be greatly missed. For more information on Lowell's remarkable life, see: <http://bit.ly/2fmURO9>.

2016 BOARD OF GAME PROPOSAL

Area Closed to the Take of Wolves



Denali Wolves Need Greater Protection

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in general and Denali in particular. In 2015 alone, Denali visitors contributed over \$500 million dollars to the local gateway economy.

A ban also makes sense for the park's wildlife and the over 560,000 people who visit Denali every year in hopes of seeing wildlife. Let's make sure Alaska remains the place where people—from in and out of state—can have the transformative experience of seeing wolves in the wild.

Left: The Board of Game will consider reinstating a wolf protection area at their February 2017 meeting. NPCA supports the pictured proposal, submitted by Denali Citizens Council and the Alaska Wildlife Alliance. ©Denali Citizens Council



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Ken Burns Helps Alaska Celebrate the NPS Centennial



On August 4, Ken Burns showed clips from his Emmy award-winning documentary, “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea,” and spoke to a sold-out audience at the Bear Tooth Theatrepub in Anchorage. Burns’ core inspirational message was that the National Park System is democracy at its best. Our national parks are the first special places in the history of the world that were set aside not just for kings and nobles, but for all people. At a time of division in this country, national parks are something we can hold in common.

Burns’ appearance, which was co-sponsored by NPCA, Alaska Geographic and the National Park Service, was a celebration of the National Park Service’s centennial. It was also a reminder for people to find their park and their voice in protecting the parks. During the centennial year, NPCA held over 100 events nationwide to celebrate and restore our national parks, provided over \$1 million in volunteer hours to the parks, and inspired thousands of new park advocates.

Above: Ken Burns ©Tim Llewellyn Photography

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the historic ability of the Park Service to manage activities on waters within Alaska. The state of Alaska joined the lawsuit, siding with Sturgeon.

No one disputes Sturgeon’s right to hunt in the preserve and to use a motorboat, airplane or snow machine to do so. This case is solely about the Park Service’s authority to regulate other activities. Sturgeon lost in the Federal Alaska District Court and Ninth Circuit, but the Supreme Court rejected the Ninth Circuit’s reasoning in favor of the Park Service and sent the case back to the Ninth Circuit for a do-over. The recent October hearing was a part of that do-over.

Many of Alaska’s national parks and preserves, including Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, were explicitly created to protect the rivers and lakes they encompass. Eliminating the National Park Service’s power to regulate activities in these areas impairs its ability to limit activities that are not compatible with the protection of park resources. For instance, under the state of Alaska’s interpretation of the law, large placer mining operations could take place in rivers within the boundaries of parks, and it is even possible that predator control could take place on rivers and lakes within the parks. NPCA believes it’s common sense that rivers inside national parks and preserves be managed to protect the land, water, fish and wildlife of the parks for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.

Below: The Kandik River, a tributary that flows into the Yukon River in Yukon—Charley Rivers National Preserve. ©NPS

