

A History of Alaska Wilderness

Frank Norris

Abstract—Today there are approximately 222 million acres (90 million ha) of federal land in Alaska – that’s about 60 percent of the state. And of that vast acreage, there are about 57.5 million acres (23.3 million ha) of designated wilderness, along with some 16.5 million acres (6.7 million ha) of proposed wilderness areas. Alaska’s designated wilderness acreage makes up approximately 54 percent of the entire nation’s wilderness, but it’s only about 26 percent of Alaska’s public lands. So depending on your point of view, the amount of Alaska’s wilderness acreage is either a triumph or an opportunity not yet fulfilled. And Alaska has one more singular distinction: more than 99 percent of the state’s existing and proposed wilderness areas were established by the stroke of one man’s pen.

How those wilderness areas came to be, and why so much wilderness acreage was preserved all at one time, has as much to do with Alaska’s geography and politics as with any other factor. In the popular book, *The Nine Nations of North America*, Joel Garreau (1981) characterized a huge expanse that included Yukon Territory and Alaska, where climate dictated that people and their improvements would be scattered more thinly than elsewhere, as the “Empty Quarter.” Not surprisingly, quite a few of our country’s wilderness areas are found in the Empty Quarter, but the scattered few that live there have usually been pragmatic thinkers who are far more concerned about utilization and commercial development on the land than the esthetic joy of preservation.

A consistent theme of conservation history during the past century has been the growth of public interest in wilderness and the environment, and the tension and resistance of that interest from those in the development community. Nowhere has this tension been more dramatic than here in Alaska, where there is one additional factor to consider. Maybe it’s our geographical separation from the Lower 48, maybe it’s the late date at which we emerged from territorial status, or maybe it’s our image as the “Last Frontier,” but for 50 years or more, many outsiders feel that Alaska is an environmental icon that has to be saved and preserved in response to mistakes made elsewhere. The history of how wilderness has come to Alaska cannot be told without constant reference to these two related themes.

The public’s high regard of Alaska’s wilderness character goes back a long way. When the United States bought Alaska from Russia back in 1867, the Senate debates over the purchase suggested that Alaska was inhabited by Eskimos, polar bears, igloos, and glaciers. Most of those images were pretty fearful, and for more than a decade virtually no one

came north. But in 1879, the ever curious John Muir gave it a try, and by 1884, public interest had increased to the point that the first excursion boats began to ply the waters of southeast Alaska (Norris 1985).

Between 1895 and 1915, Alaska and nearby Yukon Territory became famous to just about everyone because of various gold discoveries: first the Klondike stampede, and later frenzies that put Nome and Fairbanks on the map. Gold fever scattered prospectors all over Alaska. These were men—and a few women—who appreciated the wilderness but also had a strong utilitarian streak (Borneman 2003). So they had little sympathy for people—most of them from the East Coast—who wanted to establish parks and other federal withdrawals. They didn’t mind the bill that established Mount McKinley National Park, primarily because it had provisions that allowed both mining and hunting. But they were less charitable about Katmai National Monument and Glacier Bay National Monument; both, after all, were over a million acres in size, both mining and hunting were prohibited, and both were signed into law by the President without a chance for Alaskans to weigh in on the matter (Williss 1985). An angry Governor Thomas Riggs, for example, told NPS Director Stephen Mather in late 1918, “Katmai National Monument serves no purpose and should be abolished,” and he further remarked, “the Territory has been at the mercy of any faddist who could go to Washington and get the proper endorsements.” Six years later, when the idea of a monument at Glacier Bay first surfaced, the *Juneau Empire* stated that “the suggestion that a reserve be established to protect a glacier that none could disturb if he wanted ... is the quintessence of silliness. ... When it is proposed to put millions of acres [into a withdrawal] that are capable of supporting people and adding to the population of Alaska, it becomes a monstrous crime against development. It leads one to wonder if Washington has gone crazy through catering to conservation faddists” (Norris 1996:38; Williss 1985:6). Alaskans had much the same reaction when Washington officials created other reservations, because they were imposed from the outside and prevented Alaskans from gaining access to local resources (Borneman 2003; Cook and Norris 1998).

From the mid-1920s through the mid-1950s, the tug-of-war between the Federal Government and Alaska continued. Wildlife advocates and scientists continued to advocate the preservation of new reservations: at Admiralty Island, Aniakchak Caldera, and on Kodiak Island. Park Service and Biological Survey officials, who had virtually no money to manage their properties, responded to these pressures by either expanding existing reservations or creating new ones. But these actions aggravated Alaskan officials because most of the early parks and other reservations were de facto wildernesses that the Federal Government either could not or would not develop (Norris 1996; Williss 1985). In 1946, for example, the Territorial House of Representatives asked

Frank Norris, Alaska Regional Office, National Park Service, U.S.A.

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“that steps be taken to have the Katmai National Monument abolished ... so that fishing and mining may be carried on legally in that area,” and a year later, Delegate Bob Bartlett introduced a statehood bill that would have transferred to the state most of Alaska’s public lands, including those within Katmai National Monument. Over at Glacier Bay, development pressures came mainly from residents in the Gustavus area, and their letter writing proved so effective that they succeeded in eliminating about 19,000 acres (7,690 ha) from the monument (Catton 1995; Norris 1996).

Throughout this period, even the most casual Alaska visitors continued to think of the territory as the icon of wilderness, as the journals and guidebooks from that era consistently show (Norris 1985). But few visitors, primarily hunters, ventured away from the road system, and rarer still were advocates such as Bob Marshall who wrote books extolling Alaska’s wilderness. Federal agencies like the National Park Service, which had long been tied to railroads, automobile clubs, and other development groups, showed little interest at the national level in promoting wilderness as a resource. Within Alaska, moreover, NPS reports prior to the mid-1950s ignored the subject of wilderness almost completely. (The only known instance in which Alaska NPS officials mentioned wilderness prior to the mid-1950s was in March 1949 [Mount McKinley NP, Superintendent’s Monthly Report, p. 3], when Acting Superintendent Grant Pearson objected to the naming of an Alaska Range peak because “this is one of the few NPS areas that are really wilderness areas.”)

Between 1956 and 1964, the period in which Congress was considering the Wilderness Act, the NPS in general—and Director Conrad Wirth in particular—was less than enthusiastic about legislated wilderness areas. The Service, instead, was firmly wedded to the park zoning concept, in which intensive use areas and road corridors were separated from administratively-designated backcountry areas. But over time, the Service’s attitude (according to one agency employee) eventually moved from “very cold” during the 1950s to “somewhat neutral” when the Wilderness Act was signed into law in September 1964. The Wilderness Act established eight instant wildernesses in Alaska; all were administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (which had been an enthusiastic wilderness supporter), and all eight were fairly small, with a combined area of just 76,000 acres (30,756 ha) (JFSLUPC 1977).

The Wilderness Act mandated that the various Federal land management agencies conduct their wilderness inventories within a 10-year timeframe, so within a year, the NPS dispatched a master planning team to Mount McKinley. The team recommended that virtually all of the park should be included in either the Toklat Wilderness, which was north of the road, or the Denali Wilderness to the south. Planners carried on much the same process at Katmai, and by September 1965, they had recommended that slightly over two million acres (809,000 ha)—which was most of the monument—should be part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NPS 1965). A similar study was contemplated at Glacier Bay but was never conducted.

Beginning in 1970, the NPS conducted a new round of wilderness studies. Glacier Bay and Katmai were inventoried as part of a multi-park effort, and public hearings were conducted on the two plans in November 1971. The Katmai

plan was eventually approved at the agency level, and in June 1974, President Nixon forwarded to Congress a 2.6 million acre (1 million ha) wilderness plan. But at Glacier Bay, a 2.2 million acre (890,308 ha) wilderness recommendation stalled because of proposed mineral development, and in July 1974, Nixon asked Congress to defer action on a wilderness proposal until a mineral survey could be completed. At Mount McKinley, wilderness studies were delayed for an entirely different reason: since 1964, various master plans had recommended park boundary expansions, and beginning in 1969, various congressional bills were submitted to enlarge the park. So given the state of flux, Congress agreed to defer all wilderness decisions until the boundary issue was settled.

Other agencies also produced wilderness plans during this period. The Fish and Wildlife Service, which had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Wilderness Act, was able to forward to Congress four Alaskan wilderness proposals, which totaled 6.1 million acres (2.5 million ha). The Forest Service did not have to work within a 10-year deadline, but even so, it developed several wilderness study areas in the Chugach and Tongass forests that encompassed 2.6 million acres (1 million ha). But agencies deferred proposals for five other areas that comprised more than 10 million acres (4 million ha), primarily because of unsettled land patterns and pending land selections (JFSLUPC 1977).

These studies of existing areas, however, paled by comparison to what was going on all over Alaska regarding proposed conservation areas. In December 1971, Congress had passed the landmark Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and Section 17(d)(2) of that act stated that the Interior Secretary could withdraw up to 80 million acres (32.4 million ha) of land to be used for national parks, wildlife refuges, forests, and wild and scenic rivers (Williss 1985). This action, predictably, set off a mad effort among federal agencies to select and justify appropriate lands for inclusion in new conservation areas. At first, all efforts were concentrated on the acquisition of acreage, but before long, questions of management also came to the fore, and one of those questions concerned wilderness.

By December 1973, when agencies were required to submit their master plans and draft EISs for the various conservation area proposals, it was broadly recognized that passing a final lands bill would precede any actions regarding wilderness. Specifically, agencies would usually have three years after the passage of a lands bill to study each area for its wilderness characteristics, and Congress would then decide whether to enact wilderness legislation.¹ It should be noted, however, that descriptions of certain proposed areas were far more conscious of a wilderness resource than others. And the National Park Service went so far as to propose

¹ See, for example, Alaska Planning Group, *Harding Icefield-Kenai Fjords National Monument, Alaska Master Plan*, December 1973, p. 29, and Alaska Planning Group, *Harding Icefield-Kenai Fjords National Monument, Final Environmental Statement*, December 1974, p. 1. Exceptions to the three-year wilderness study rule included the Noatak National Arctic Range proposal (to be co-managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife) which mandated a 20-year study deadline, and new Forest Service areas, which were expected to “propose and identify wilderness study areas within three years.” Rogers Morton (Interior Secretary) to Speaker Gerald R. Ford (President of the Senate), December 17, 1973, p. 23, in “ANILCA-Various Proposals, Volume I” binder, AKRO Ranger Library.

Gates of the Arctic as a National Wilderness Park, which called for “instant wilderness” designation. But the Office of Management and Budget struck down that idea, and with just one day remaining before a Congressionally-imposed deadline, that proposal was renamed Gates of the Arctic National Park with a standard three-year wilderness study period (Alaska Planning Group 1973).

By early 1975, final environmental statements had been submitted for each of the proposed conservation areas. While waiting for Congress to act on an Alaska lands bill, conservationists met repeatedly, exchanged information, and tried to put forth the best possible legislative language. Throughout 1975 and 1976, members of the Washington-based Alaska Coalition, along with Alaska-based conservationists, remained committed to the concept of a wilderness study provision, except at the proposed Gates of the Arctic National Park.²

But the election of President Jimmy Carter in November 1976 changed everything. Carter, as a candidate, had campaigned for a strong Alaska lands bill, and he had told Cecil Andrus, his choice for Interior Secretary, that the passage of a strong Alaska lands bill would be a top priority. Within weeks of the election, another key event took place in the House of Representatives when Morris Udall (D-AZ) became the chairman of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee (Carson and Johnson 2001). Udall, a strong conservationist, soon met with leaders of the Alaska Coalition, and when the 95th Congress opened in January 1977, Udall introduced H.R. 39, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

The bill, which was admittedly a work in progress, was a conservationist’s “wish list,” and among its other provisions, it called for 64 million acres (25.9 million ha) in new or expanded national parks, 46 million acres (18.6 million ha) in national wildlife refuges, and an astounding 145 million acres (58.7 million ha) of wilderness—not wilderness study, as had been advocated all along, but “instant wilderness” that would become law as soon as the bill was passed. This acreage included most of the acreage in the existing parks and refuges, virtually all of the land proposed for new parks and refuges, and 5.4 million acres (2,185,302 ha) of existing Forest Service land (Williss 1985). The move to include a huge acreage of “instant wilderness” was a radical departure from previous Alaska land planning efforts, it was inconsistent with the language in previous park and refuge bills, and it brought howls of protest from the Alaska Congressional delegation and from various development-oriented groups. But given the fact that H.R. 39 had the personal support of Morris Udall, who as Interior Committee head was the prime mover of Alaska lands legislation, it was widely recognized that a large amount of “instant wilderness” would be included in the final lands package.

Udall subjected his bill to more than 25 public hearings during the spring and summer of 1977, and as the bill became a more accurate reflection of Alaska’s land use patterns and economic potential, the number of acres in the various conservation areas and in wilderness changed as a result.

² See, for example, Al Henson to Keymen, etc., “Alaska Coalition d-2 Proposal Memo,” August 5, 1976, pp. 17-18 and 26, in “ANILCA-Variou Proposals, Volume I” binder, AKRO Ranger Library.

By the time H.R. 39 finally passed the House in May 1978, its wilderness acreage had shrunk to just 65 million acres (26.3 million ha). Even that level, however, was too much for the Senate, which in October 1978, reported a committee bill with just 36 million acres (14.6 million ha) of instant wilderness. The 95th Congress, however, adjourned before a compromise could be reached, so in January 1979, the process began all over again, and that May the House passed a bill calling for 67 million acres (27.1 million ha) of wilderness. But the more conservative Senate bill, a year later, included only about 57.5 million acres (23.3 million ha). House leaders then pushed for a conference that would increase the overall wilderness acreage, but the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan forced House leaders to drop their demands and agree to the Senate bill. President Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) into law on December 2, 1980, with wilderness access and wilderness transportation provisions that realistically reflected the realities of Alaska’s rural residents (Williss 1985).

The push to establish more wilderness areas, however, was by no means through. Included within the lands act was a general wilderness review provision that asked both the Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service to inventory their non-wilderness lands and to report to the President on the suitability of those lands to the National Wilderness Preservation System (ANILCA 1980). Given that mandate, the NPS conducted numerous wilderness suitability reviews during the mid-1980s as part of the General Management Plan process, and in 1988 the agency produced a series of environmental impact statements specifically tailored toward wilderness recommendations. That process resulted in a recommendation of 7.8 million acres (3.2 million ha) of additional Park Service wilderness, and during the same period, the Fish and Wildlife Service produced a series of conservation plans and directorial recommendations for an additional 8.7 million wilderness acres (3.5 million ha). These recommendations were approved by the agencies involved. Congress, however, has not yet acted on them (NPS 1988).

Although a broad spectrum of critics stated back in 1980 that the imposition of millions of acres of Alaska wilderness would “lock up” resources and prevent further development, such has not proven to be the case. The strong growth of ecotourism in recent years, and the emergence of tourism as Alaska’s healthiest industry, has proved that Alaska’s wilderness resources, if anything, have been “locked open” and are now permanently available to a wide variety of recreational and traditional pursuits. And the continuing benefit of these areas has also been shown by the fact that never, in the past 25 years, has any serious legislative attempt been made to diminish the state’s wilderness acreage.

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