

## Denali National Park and Preserve

The Draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve incorporates human encounters as one of several factors in a management zoning system that establishes a spectrum from more remote to less remote areas. As the Park Service notes in the Draft BMP on page 25, “Experiential values related to wilderness character—typically defined by opportunities for solitude, to hear natural sounds, to explore with minimal guidance, and to encounter wildlife undisturbed in its native habitat—are at one end of the spectrum. Values related to recreational opportunity in a wilderness context including diversity of opportunities, more options for access, and more supportive services and infrastructure are at the other end.”

Human encounters are one of several factors involved in the Draft BMP’s zoning effort to provide differing levels of solitude throughout the park. However, unlike the Mount Hood scenario, the Denali approach assumes “solitude” is multi-faceted, not just the number of other humans one sees. The Draft BMP remarks, “Providing opportunities for solitude would include managing for visitor experiences with the following characteristics: freedom from the reminders of society; privacy and isolation; absence of distractions such as large groups, mechanization, unnatural noise, signs, and other modern artifacts (Federal Register, Vol. 66, No. 10, p. 3713, 1/16/01).” Thus, while human encounters play a role, it is one of several factors that help quantify solitude in the designated wilderness and undesignated backcountry areas of the Park and Preserve.

In addition to using a broader approach to solitude, the Denali BMP provides management designations that help accommodate climbing—especially in the high-use areas. The “West Buttress” route on Mount McKinley, the route that sees four out of five climbers on the mountain, is placed in a seasonal “Mountaineering Special Use Area” designation in all action alternatives. This allows climbers to encounter up to 200 other climbers per day, a sufficiently high number to ensure that the encounters don’t limit access to the peak given that climbers are generally spread out among six camps. Further, since some of the other areas in the Park and Preserve where climbers historically have congregated—the Ruth Gorge, Little Switzerland, the Kitchatna Mountains, the Kahiltna Glacier, the Eldridge Glacier and the Buckskin Glacier—may see visitor numbers in excess of what that zoning normally would allow, “Mountaineering Study Areas” and access “Portals” are proposed that would provide greater management flexibility.

As the Draft BMP notes on page 391, “The National Park Service is working with climbing and mountaineering organizations and the general public to determine more appropriate indicators than encounter rate for visitor capacity at popular climbing destinations.” There is awareness by the Park Service that the mountain topography, natural hazards and unique expectations of climbers may cause different expectations of solitude from lowland hikers and backpackers. The AAC has advocated for many years that climbing-specific studies are needed to develop new expectations for alpine zones, and we are working closely with Denali National Park and Preserve to ensure that studies are conducted in this area. We hope the findings will allow for better management of mountain areas throughout the country, not just at Denali.