

# STRIKING A BALANCE

Park managers, local residents, and conservationists must work to ensure that Wrangell-St. Elias, the nation's largest park, maintains its wilderness character despite growing visitation.

By Bill Sherwonit

**O**N A SUNNY AND WARM Fourth of July morning, hundreds of people line McCarthy's Main Street for the town's holiday parade. Afterward, celebrants will enjoy foot-races, barbecues, and late-night fireworks.

The celebration shocks a visitor who spent July Fourth in McCarthy ten years earlier. In 1983, this Wrangell Mountains community was a virtual ghost town. No crowds gathered to watch parades or participate in barbecues. Only a handful of Alaskans called McCarthy home, and its only businesses were a lodge and mountain guide operation.

Today, this town of 30 or so residents boasts a lodge, hotel, bed-and-breakfast, pizza parlor, espresso bar, two air-taxi operators, shuttle-bus services, and guide company. And it is visited, from May through September, by thousands of tourists who have come to discover one of America's most spectacular wilderness parks.

Located deep within Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, McCarthy and neighboring Kennicott—site of a long-abandoned but still famous copper mine—have, for better and for worse, been tagged as the park's principal gateway. For decades the quintessential haven for reclusive Alaskans, McCarthy-Kennicott (the two are



Above: McCarthy trams offer the only summertime access, other than aircraft, over the fast-moving Kennicott River.

Left: More than 8 million of Wrangell-St. Elias' 13 million acres have been designated wilderness.

inextricably linked) has been transformed into a tourist destination, with all the blessings and curses such change brings. The same tourism boom that so quickly transformed McCarthy-Kennicott has also pushed the surrounding 14-year-old park to a crucial management crossroads, complicating many of its other growing pains.

Tourism, and associated development, is only one of the myriad challenges to be addressed at Wrangell-St. Elias. Others include subsistence hunting rights, private inholdings (more than 1.2 million acres are privately owned), off-road-vehicle use, public and private rights-of-way, backcountry use, and relationships with local residents.

Many of the park's management dilemmas are interwoven in complex and perhaps unimaginable ways, requiring new and imaginative solutions. "At Wrangell-St. Elias, we have to craft a new formula for success, invent a management philosophy that is rooted in both the enduring principles of the National Park System and the unique challenges of the Alaska parks. The formula must involve partnerships," says Chip Dennerlein, Alaska regional director for the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA).

Not so many years ago, Wrangell-St. Elias was an overlooked and undervalued mountain wilderness. Created in 1980, our nation's largest park—at 13.2 million acres, it is the size of six Yellowstone—was overshadowed in its early years by several other of Alaska's national parks: Glacier Bay, Katmai, and, above all, Denali. But word of its natural wonders inevitably began to spread, and sometime in the late 1980s,



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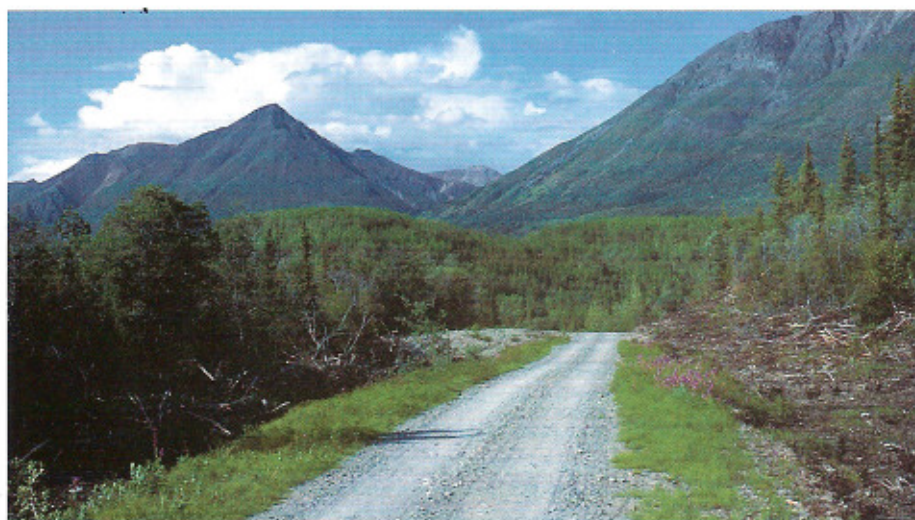
Top left: Semipalmated plovers are among the creatures to be seen in Wrangell-St. Elias, which in recent years has begun to draw more birders.

Top right: With the influx of tourists have come services such as this espresso bar as well as a pizza parlor and air taxis.

Right: Built in 1962 along a former railroad route, the road to McCarthy-Kennicott is a 60-mile drive. Most of the park's management challenges are focused along this route.



BILL SIEKOWITZ



KENT AND DONNA DANNEN

the public "discovered" Wrangell-St. Elias.

What they have found is a wild and magnificent alpine world that wilderness guide Bob Jacobs calls "North America's mountain kingdom." It is a kingdom that includes four major mountain ranges and six of the continent's ten highest peaks. Here, too, is North America's largest subpolar icefield, the Bagley, which feeds a system of gigantic glaciers; one of those, the Malaspina, is larger than Rhode Island. The glaciers have carved dozens of canyons; some, like the Chitstone and Nizina, are bordered by rock walls thousands of feet high. And rugged, remote coastline is bounded by tidewater glaciers and jagged peaks.

The park's superlatives, along with those of neighboring Kluane National Park in Canada, have prompted their

designation as a World Heritage Site. And 8.7 million acres within its borders have been designated wilderness, more than all of the parks in the other 49 states combined.

The irony—and a major management dilemma—at Wrangell-St. Elias, as at many other parks, is that few visitors actually touch the wilderness. Most experience the park from cars, buses, boats, or planes. Despite the vastness, or perhaps because of it, most park users are channeled into small, easily accessible corridors.

Wrangell-St. Elias is one of only three national parks in Alaska accessible from the state's highway system. Two gravel roads enter the park, and though neither is presently suitable for heavy bus or recreational vehicle traffic, the potential exists for large-scale, packaged tourism.

Consultants to the Alaska Visitors Association (AVA) have recommended Wrangell-St. Elias as a logical site for resort development, and association executive director Karen Cowart says the group will likely promote the park because of its high potential for the visitor industry. "We don't necessarily see it as a mass-tourism destination," she says, "Not every place should become a Denali." Yet, the specter of Denali looms over Wrangell-St. Elias like a dark cloud.

"Wrangell presents an incredible paradox," says Dennerlein. "Here you have this vast wilderness park, whose essence is one of enormous scale and ruggedness. And yet, it's along the highway system. So the question is: how do you balance the park's wilderness essence with the sort of tourism that highways engender?"



Of the park's two roads, the one to McCarthy-Kennicott is by far the more heavily traveled. Not coincidentally, this is where many of the park's management challenges are focused. Built in 1962 along a former railroad route, McCarthy Road received minimal maintenance through the early 1980s and was, at best, narrow, potholed, and washboarded. In rainy weather, sections often washed out; even in decent conditions, the 60-mile drive took four to five hours.

At road's end, another hurdle loomed: the notorious McCarthy trams, which offer the only summertime access (other than aircraft) across the large, icy, and fast-moving Kennicott River. Built in the 1940s, the original hand-pulled cable trams required lots of arm strength and more than a little courage. They, more than anything, kept McCarthy's residents insulated from unwanted company.

The obstacles separating McCarthy from the outside world diminished dramatically during the 1980s. State crews improved the gravel road—most drivers can now do its 60 miles in two to three hours—and rebuilt an old, rickety bridge over the Kuskulana River. Local residents, meanwhile, replaced the aging trams with easier-to-use models. As word of the improvements spread, the number of park visitors funneled down McCarthy Road increased sharply, from about 5,000 in 1988 to more than 20,000 in 1994.

Increased traffic has prompted new demands for additional work to make

the road safer. Exactly how much and what kind of work is open to debate. The state, which owns the right-of-way, has at times pushed for major reconstruction. But park managers and most locals would prefer a "low upgrade" that removes hazards but does not make it a high-speed road suitable for tour buses or recreational vehicle caravans.

"We don't want it black-topped. We don't want it widened or straightened more than it needs to be," says Eric Yould, a civil engineer and McCarthy-area property owner. "We'd like the road to be part of the experience." Unfortunately, most of McCarthy Road offers little to catch visitors' attention. The roadway has few scenic pullouts, no interpretive displays, no road-side wildlife viewing, and no bathrooms or campgrounds until road's end.

The park's managers hope to satisfy some of these needs with wayside exhibits and perhaps trailheads, but acting superintendent Russ Lesko says "we're limited in what we can do. The state owns the right-of-way and the majority of adjacent land is privately owned. ...There's got to be a joint solution that involves us, the state, and local interests."

At road's end is another development project that will shape both McCarthy-Kennicott's future and the nature of park tourism: McCarthy's notorious trams are being replaced by a bridge. Exactly what sort of bridge has been the source of considerable debate. McCarthy residents and park officials have pushed for a footbridge; a vehicu-

**Wrangell-St. Elias includes four major mountain ranges and six of North America's ten highest peaks.**

lar bridge, residents argue, would open the town to unwanted traffic and destroy its character. As recently as last spring, the state planned a bridge suitable for vehicle traffic, but it also now supports the footbridge concept. To the Park Service, a footbridge is in keeping with a "light touch" approach to McCarthy corridor projects. "We would like to keep McCarthy-Kennicott as rustic and quaint as we can," says Lesko.

One of the keys to any future Wrangell-St. Elias development is the Kennicott Mine. Located 4 1/2 miles from McCarthy, the mining camp was established in 1906, following the discovery of a rich copper deposit. At its peak, Kennicott employed about 600 people, and its main settlement included more than 40 buildings. Abandoned in 1938, the mine is now part of a 3,000-acre inholding within Wrangell-St. Elias. Subsurface rights still belong to the Kennicott Corp., while surface rights are owned by a group of Alaskan investors. Kennicott's owners have proved willing to deal with the Park Service, but the agency so far has not had the money, or means, to obtain the mine and surrounding property.

While negotiations have remained in limbo, property owners have cleaned up Kennicott's hazardous wastes, and a nonprofit group called Friends of Kennicott has stabilized several of the mine buildings, with nearly \$600,000 from the state and federal governments. With stabilization nearly complete, McCarthy resident and Friends of Kennicott board member Ben Shaine believes that Park Service ownership of the mine and surrounding private property is a critical next step: "Here you have a place that's already the most-visited destination in the nation's largest park. It's a National Historic Landmark, with some of the best, most easily accessible trails in the whole state nearby; a place where you can come and experience the Wrangell Mountains, all within walking distance of the road."

If the Park Service does eventually

acquire Kennicott, NPCA, Friends of Kennicott, and Lesko share a similar vision of management style. "This is a place where less is more," says Sally Gibbert of Friends of Kennicott. "Take a low-key approach; make sure the buildings are stabilized, but don't do a total reconstruction. And don't turn it into a major tourist destination, with theme park and ski resort."

Some McCarthy residents oppose a Park Service purchase because they fear that it will lure mass tourism into their backyard and increase the government's presence. But Shaine argues that a management partnership between the Park Service and a private nonprofit group such as the friends group would, in fact, restrict development and limit—or perhaps even eliminate—the need for onsite park personnel.

Sixty miles north of McCarthy-Kennicott is Wrangell-St. Elias' other gravel road, the 45-mile-long Nabesna Road. Though in relatively good shape, the park's northern entryway is also scheduled for improvements. The biggest need, says Department of Transportation project manager Bill Townsend, is bridges. "There's a couple places where you have to ford rivers," he says, "and it's possible to get trapped if you have some flooding." Exactly how the streams will be spanned remains a question, and work will not begin until after park managers complete an updated management plan.

Nabesna Road is mainly bordered by parkland, not private property, and it offers scenic vistas along nearly its entire length. Its traffic is only one-tenth that of McCarthy Road, and most of its users have traditionally been anglers, hunters, and trappers. But that is changing. In 1994, the number of nonconsumptive travelers—birders, canoeists, hikers, backpackers—equaled or surpassed consumptive users.

District Ranger Sean McGuinness expects Nabesna Road to be inundated with park explorers when construction work on the Tok Cutoff Highway is finished in 1995—a scary prospect, considering the lack of facilities along the corridor. Visitors will find no bathrooms, campgrounds, or other services



along the roadway. Already, he says, "there's toilet paper everywhere, and people drive off the road, across the tundra, camping wherever they want. In places they are trashing out stream banks and lake banks, cutting down trees, leaving garbage."

Off-road vehicles present another dilemma. ORV use is allowed in Wrangell-St. Elias' nonwilderness areas for subsistence purposes, as well as for recreational use along designated trails. Access to several of the most popular routes is possible from Nabesna Road.

With increased traffic, some stretches of traditional, pre-park ORV trails have degenerated into large, deep mudholes, up to a quarter-mile wide. And ORV use by subsistence hunters is spreading to new areas. Park staff is conducting a three-year study to determine ORV impacts, and possible restrictions. Chief Ranger Jay Wells expects it will be a highly contentious issue, with ORV users and state government on one side, conservationists on the other, and the

Park Service being fired on from both sides. "Legally, ORVs can be allowed only if they don't adversely affect park values," he says. "It's something we have to address, because their increased use poses some long-term threats."

Though increased human impacts are most keenly felt along Wrangell-St. Elias' road corridors, its backcountry is also experiencing a visitor boom. And even with their low-impact ethic, increased numbers of hikers, backpackers, and river floaters are having a cumulative effect. In places, vegetation has been trampled, littering and crowding have occurred, and air traffic has increased. Especially popular is the Skolai-Chitstone area, considered by many to be the park's premier wilderness site. To keep such popular spots from being degraded, guide Bob Jacobs says, "It's up to all of us to go to other areas, to spread the use around."

Exactly how, or where, wilderness seekers should be re-directed is uncertain. Improved access to the back-

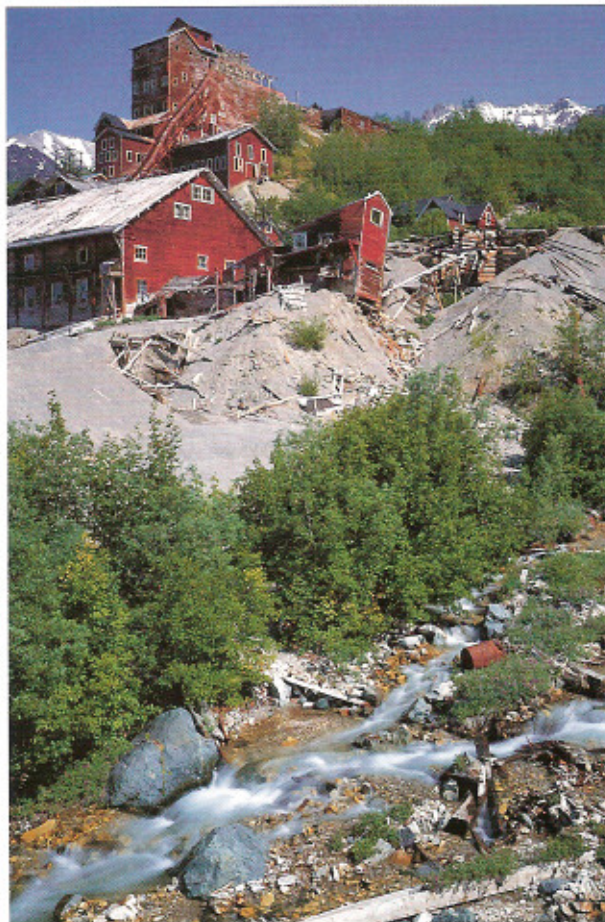
country is one possibility; more day-use destinations is another. "Maybe," says Wells, "we'll eventually need to impose certain restrictions, go to a permit system or limit group sizes."

In some areas—Chitistone Canyon for example—and at certain times, Jacobs might support user restrictions. But no more trails, he pleads: "We have enough trails in other parks. Why not make this a fly-in park? Improve a few of the existing airstrips, build shelters of some kind, and have people fly in to do their day trips or overnights." The backcountry needs creative thinking: "This place," Jacobs says, "deserves something different."

Also critical to the park's long-term well-being is its relationship with neighboring Alaskans. "At Wrangell-St. Elias we have to face some of the thorniest, most controversial Alaskan issues," says Molly Ross, special assistant to George Frampton, Jr., the Interior Department's assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks. "That's why it's so critical to work together, to formulate a common vision."

Among park managers' chief concerns is subsistence, which, says Wells, "involves a whole morass of issues. Right now, the most controversial thing is defining eligibility. Who's a local resident? There are 18 communities within [the Wrangell-St. Elias] residency zone, but trying to define the communities has been a challenge." Already defined once, community boundaries are being re-examined because of heated local protests.

Hunting and wildlife management are also issues. Despite conflicting values and priorities, Russ Gallepeau, chief of resource management, says park staff has a good relationship with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and local hunters. He points to a regional caribou management plan as a prime example of building partnerships. Yet Roy Ewan, president of Ahtna, Inc., a regional Native corporation, complains



CARY GIVEN

**Abandoned in 1938, Kennicott Mine is part of a 3,000-acre inholding within Wrangell-St. Elias. Established in 1906 following the discovery of a rich copper deposit, the mine is now listed as a National Historic Landmark.**

the Park Service "hasn't done enough to protect our subsistence hunting rights."

An equally, if not more, divisive issue between Ahtna and Wrangell-St. Elias park is resource development. A major landowner both within the park and along the boundaries, its projects will have a large impact on park values and visitor experiences. Just last summer, timber harvesting began on Ahtna land along the park's western border—a harvest easily visible from the McCarthy Road entrance. "We've made some recommendations," Lesko says, "asked Ahtna to be sensitive to visitor perceptions. Time will tell, I guess."

Ahtna's commercial interests extend to its park inholdings; the corporation

already owns more than 620,000 acres within Wrangell-St. Elias, and may receive up to 83,000 acres more. Much of that land holds timber, mineral, or tourism potential, though Ahtna officials say they have no immediate development plans.

Beyond Ahtna, hundreds of other inholdings exist, which Lesko sees as "both a blessing and curse." Inholders, even those in wilderness areas, are guaranteed "reasonable access" to their properties. To date, park management has been able to work out satisfactory arrangements with landowners, but Wells predicts, "It's only a matter of time before someone's going to want to build a road deep into the park, through wilderness."

A final critical challenge involves gaining the trust and support of local residents. Bob Jacobs, whose McCarthy ties reach back to the late 1970s, says widespread distrust of both state government and the Park Service exists. "The idea of coop-

eration and partnerships is a nice one, but with cooperation there are no hidden agendas. The Park Service alienated a lot of people early on, and there is no history around here of the Park Service working with the community. It is almost like we're a couple of trains on opposing tracks," says Jacobs.

Lesko, who has been at Wrangell-St. Elias since November 1991, is optimistic that his agency can improve relations with its neighbors. NPCA's Dennerlein agrees and suggests that partnerships are the key to success. "It's an enormous challenge: to preserve the park's essence while meeting the needs of those who live in and around the park, and at the same time, manage the park on behalf of millions of Americans. If we do it right here, just think what it will mean for Wrangell-St. Elias and Alaska's other parks. There's so much at stake."

*Bill Sherwonit is a freelance writer living in Anchorage, Alaska.*