



# Use of Recreation Fees in the Alaska Region



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Prepared by  
Forest Service  
Alaska Region

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## Background

In recent years, visitors to Alaska's national forests found visitor centers open longer hours, new interpretive programs, more maintenance at recreation sites, and other improvements and services—many enhancements supported by the recreation fee program. The pilot fee program started in 1996 after Congress passed temporary authority for the Forest Service, as part of a national fee demonstration program to establish and collect fees at national forest recreation sites. The pilot program gave the Forest

Service broad discretion with its authority to charge fees through 2001 and that authority was extended through the end of 2004.

Congress passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act as part of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Public Law 108-447). Now called the Recreation Fee Program, the legislation authorized the Forest Service and four Department of the Interior agencies—Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park

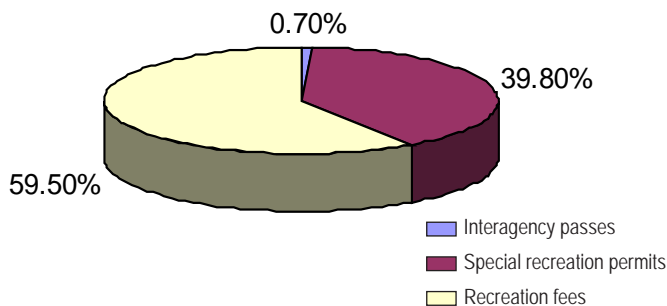
Service—to retain recreation fee revenues to supplement appropriations and other funding sources to repair, improve, operate, and maintain recreation sites and areas and to enhance the delivery of recreation services to quality standards. It is important to remember, while the revenue derived from fees is helpful, it is only part of a more comprehensive funding strategy. The sustainable funding approach embraces a broad revenue stream that includes:

- Appropriated funding
- Volunteer assistance
- Inter-agency cooperation
- Partnerships with the private sector
- Commercial operations
- Leveraged funding
- User fees

Over 83% of visitors who responded to the Forest Service's 2006 National Visitor Use Survey said they were somewhat or very satisfied with the value for the fee paid; but, there has been some controversy about the recreation fee program nationally. Analysis of 2007 survey results in the Alaska Region show that 93% of visitors who were charged fees were satisfied with the value received for fees paid (Donahue, 2008). The acceptance of fees is generally positive, especially when the public can see direct benefits and improvements at the sites where the fees are paid.

The Alaska Region collected about \$2.5 million in fees from 11 sites or programs in 2007. On average, 87% of the revenue is used for site improvements and 13% pays for collection costs.

2007 Forest Service REA Collections in Alaska  
(Total: \$2.5 million)



## Alaska Visitor Volume

In 2006, the State of Alaska's Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development commissioned a study to look at the essential information on one of Alaska's major economic engines, out-of-state visitors. The research was conducted by the McDowell Group (Alaska Visitor State-wide Program, 2006), which explored two main components:

visitor volume and visitor survey. The following analysis is based on Summer 2006 data.

An estimated 1.63 million out-of-state visitors came to Alaska between May and September 2006. Of this number, 958,900 were cruise ship passengers, 587,800 were air visitors (entered and exited the state by air), and 84,800 were highway/ferry visitors (entered or exited the

state by highway or ferry). Of the total market, 1.34 million were vacation/pleasure visitors, in addition to 146,000 travelers whose main purpose was to visit friends or relatives, and 148,000 business-related visitors.

Southeast Alaska attracted the highest number of Alaska visitors at 1.2 million. Southcentral was visited by 907,000 visitors, and the

Interior region by 534,000 (including 450,000 to Denali alone). The two regions with the smallest number of visitors were Southwest (54,000) and Far North (49,000). Based on this analysis, it is evident the importance of the U.S. Forest Service to the continued success of state-wide tourism, given the volume of visitation to Southeast and Southcentral Alaska.

# U.S. Forest Service Works with the State of Alaska

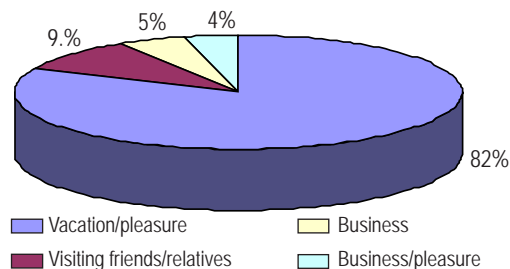
The Recreation Enhancement Act gives the federal land management agencies long-term authority to enhance customer service by reinvesting collected fees in the recreation fee program. It also grants flexibility in the establishment of recreation resource advisory councils. Alaska's governor made a recommendation in August 2006 to the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior

to not establish a RRAC for Alaska because of the small number of recreation fee sites in the state and the high costs of establishing and managing RRACs compared to the limited revenue. In addition, the governor stated the need for extensive public involvement relative to the establishment of new recreation fee sites, and that federal agencies will continue to work with the State on issues

related to the implementation of the Recreation Enhancement Act.

To execute this request, the Regional Forester's Recreation Fee Advisory Board that provides the desired oversight, coordination and cooperation between all recreation fee/recreation special uses projects in the

Reasons to Visit Alaska in 2006



Source: Alaska Visitor Statistics Program V, Summer 2006

Alaska Region, partnered with the State Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development by having their tourism planner integrated into this Board.

## Access and Revenue

The vast majority of federal lands remain free to the public, which includes 98% of national forest lands and 65% of Forest Service developed sites. No fees are charged for:

- General access
- Traveling in areas when no facilities or services are used
- Access to overlooks or scenic pullouts
- Parking in areas without fee-specified facilities
- Picnicking along roads or trails
- People under 16

The national forests within Alaska are a popular destination for residents and visitors. Some of the most visited sites in the state are on national forests. For example, the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area receives more than 325,000 visitors each year and the number is increasing.

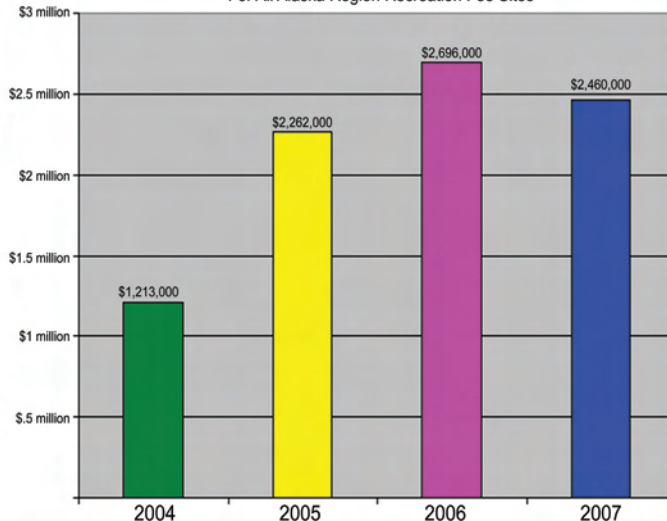
The rapid growth of the recreation and tourism industry in Alaska has resulted in unmet demand for recreational access with some localized conflicts between recreating residents and visitors. As a result, available Forest Service

resources are challenged to accommodate increased visitation at visitor facilities.

Outstanding scenery and the undeveloped natural landscape character of Alaska are primary draws for Alaska's visitors. They are featured in virtually every Alaska tourism promotion. The need to actively manage these world-class scenic resources is a balancing act. The Alaska Region recreation fee program is part of a comprehensive funding strategy to meet the needs of present and future users by providing quality recreation sites and areas.



Alaska Region Fee Revenue For All Alaska Region Recreation Fee Sites



2005: Recreation fee authority was expanded to include recreation special use permits.  
Dec. 2007: Revenue is low due to late commercial O/G payments at fiscal close-out.

# Special Use Permits

Recreation Special Use Permits provide the majority of fee revenues.

Outfitters and guides offer a variety of adventures such as sea kayaking, flyfishing,

hunting, wilderness boat tours, camping, hiking, bear viewing, wildlife tours, and

the popular helicopter flight-seeing on the Juneau Icefield complete with dog sled rides.

# Visitor Centers

## Juneau Ranger District Recreation Complex

The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center and surrounding area have long been a scenic attraction for residents and visitors of Alaska's capital city. Its location affords visitors a unique opportunity to view a glacier at close range and to study the effects of glaciation on the landscape. The Center was built in 1962, the first visitor center in the National Forest System.



Toilet at Auke Bay

The majority of fees collected from the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area are returned to operate the program. Alaska Geographic is a partner in interpretive sales and services, offering



Mendenhall Glacier

a range of products that includes publications and videos on glaciation and natural resources.

## Southeast Alaska Discovery Center in Ketchikan

Located in the bustling waterfront of downtown Ketchikan, the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center serves as a gateway to the natural and cultural wonders of the Alaska Panhandle. Each year, more than 958,900 visitors on cruise ships ply the calm waters of Alaska's Inside Passage and experience the Tongass National Forest.

The Center opened in 1995 as one of four Alaska Public Lands Information Centers mandated by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. These centers, managed by

eight state and federal agencies, provide information about recreation opportunities on all of Alaska's public lands. The Forest Service is the lead agency for the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center.

As visitors enter the spacious lobby, they are surrounded by totem poles, natural wood, and scenes of Alaska. The Center contains an information desk, an auditorium, a store, a trip planning room and exhibits. A life-sized walk-through diorama of the temperate rainforest ecosystem is a highlight



Lifezone displays

of the center. Fascinating displays on the cultural history of Southeast Alaska and its dependence on resources

round out the center. Visitors enjoy an award-winning, 12-projector slide program in the Center's auditorium.

## Begich, Boggs Visitor Center near Anchorage

At Southcentral Alaska's busiest recreation area, millions of visitors come to see the small, "hanging" glaciers that grace the encircling mountains of Portage Valley. They flock to Begich, Boggs Visitor Center located on a terminal moraine of Portage Glacier. They enjoy state-of-the-art exhibits that depict the climate, geography, people and wildlife of the Chugach National Forest and Prince William Sound. They take a one-hour boat tour operated by a commercial company that has a special use permit to see Portage Glacier up close.

Currently, the Center only charges a modest \$1 fee for viewing a movie, *Voices from the Ice*. With shrinking budgets, the center has been closed to the general

public in winter. The center is proposing a new standard amenity fee of \$3 to \$5 per adult during the key visitor season.

The Center's recently amended business plan examines possible options to help the center continue offering relevant, meaningful interpretive and educational opportunities about the forest, while becoming fiscally more self-sufficient. These options include the potential to charge fees for appropriate special events, film festivals or concerts. In addition, the plan considers charging an appropriate fee to make facilities and staff available to the private sector for meetings, small conferences or workshops, trainings, and receptions during the off-season, or when the center is closed to the public.

*Outdoors at Begich, Boggs Visitor Center*



## Wildlife Viewing Areas



*Pack Creek bear viewing tower*

### Pack Creek Bear Observation Site on Admiralty Island

Admiralty Island, located southwest of Juneau, is internationally known for its brown bears and bald eagles. Admiralty is one of two national monuments managed by the Forest Service in Alaska. It consists of about one million acres and encompasses nearly the entire island except the northernmost tip. The Kootznoowoo Wilderness, within the monument, is the most visited of any Tongass wilderness. Its use has increased dramatically in recent years.

Each year, visitors go to Pack Creek to watch bears in their natural habitat. The

site is co-managed with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Permits regulate the number and timing of visits in summer. Forest Service wilderness rangers work at the site to insure the safety of visitors.

Public recreation facilities on Admiralty Island include 15 public cabins, 10 recreation shelters and the Pack Creek Bear Observation Tower. The Forest Service maintains 16 trails for a total of about 28 miles of trail.

While much of the Monument is designated wilderness, there is a very active land use program, with about 40 private land uses and 23 outfitter guides under permit.



# Fish Creek Wildlife Observation Site near Hyder

The Fish Creek Wildlife Viewing Site at the southern tip of Alaska is staffed 16 hours a day, seven days a week during the salmon spawning run. Visitors can see brown and black bears, wolves, river otters, beaver, eagles, and record-sized chum salmon. In 2003, the Forest Service constructed a series of platforms and decks, with a capacity for

200 people that would allow visitors to safely view the wildlife at close range. This is the only viewing site located on a road system in Alaska, and is quite popular with travelers. As use of the site increased, it became a recreation fee site. Public comments reflect that a majority of users are in support of paying a reasonable recreation fee.

Fee permits are \$5/day, \$10/three days, \$20/week, and \$75/season. The attractive permit cards are often kept by visitors as souvenirs. Interagency *America the Beautiful* passes are also accepted.



A Fish Creek bear enjoys dinner.



Wildlife viewing platform at Fish Creek

The Forest Service has an office in the Hyder Community Association Building which is open April to September. The first year of fee collection was a success. In 11 weeks, \$54,000 was collected. These fees will enable the Forest Service to offset the increasing costs of operating and maintaining the site and allow for additional improvements to better serve the visiting public. While there will be a few changes for next year, the ranger district is confident they can handle whatever new challenges might be ahead.

# Anan Wildlife Observatory near Wrangell

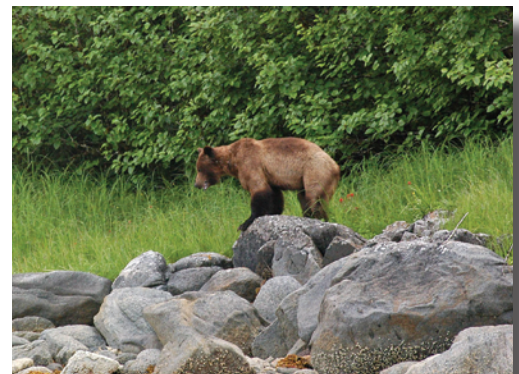
Anan Creek Wildlife Observatory, southeast of Wrangell, offers a premier opportunity to view bears in their native habitat. Black bears use the entire Anan drainage, but are most commonly seen where they congregate due to the large number of salmon. During the salmon run, from late June to late August, visitors may also see brown bears, bald eagles, several species of gulls, and harbor seals in the area. As the salmon return each year, Anan's estuary becomes a stunning setting for eagles, seals and brown bears.



Wildlife observatory platform.

The Forest Service built an observatory at the falls so that people may view feeding bears in relative safety and comfort. The observatory is accessed by a scenic boardwalk trail that begins at the mouth of Anan Lagoon. It is a moderately easy half mile hike along the shores of the lagoon and creek to the observatory. This hike does require climbing over rocks near the beach.

From July 5 through August 25, an individual pass is required to visit the wildlife observatory.



# Campgrounds and Cabins

The growing demand by residents and non-residents for campgrounds, cabins, and other recreational needs on the Chugach and Tongass national forests increases the need for improvements to existing facilities and the

development of new recreational infrastructure. At the same time, undersized, obsolete, and overused forest facilities create reduced user capacity and experience. The Alaska Region faces these challenges while balancing increased

operational and maintenance costs with the public expectation of significant capital investment in the recreation area.

Currently, the Chugach National Forest has 14 fee campgrounds on the Kenai Peninsula managed

in partnership by Alaska Recreational Management, Inc.. There are also 42 public recreation cabin rentals throughout the forest.

The Tongass National Forest directly manages eight campgrounds and 148 recreation cabins.

## Childs Glacier Campground near Cordova

The Cordova Ranger District commemorated the Chugach National Forest Centennial in 2007 by completing significant renovations at the Childs Glacier Recreation Site. The site was redesigned to include a new 11-unit campground; drive-up glacier viewing; a covered pavilion with picnic tables and a grill; water wells; viewing areas along the river with fire rings and benches; covered picnic sites; a new access road and parking area; interpretive sites; toilets; and connecting trails.

*New interpretive signs at Childs Glacier.*



*Wrangell District Ranger Mark Hummel presents pass awards to Marlene and Dan Hoeschen.*

## Volunteers

Volunteers are invaluable assets to the Alaska Region. They help us accomplish our mission effectively and efficiently.

Dan and Marlene Hoeschen have been campground hosts at Wrangell Island for over a decade, donating a combined ten thousand hours to the Tongass National Forest. They service 15 day and overnight-use recreation sites, clean and maintain campsites and outhouses, cut and distribute firewood, and repair facilities. They spend countless hours greeting passers-by and answering questions at the Nemo Information Site on Wrangell Island.

In recognition of their service in 2007, they were presented with Federal Volunteer Passes that grant them free access to recreation sites managed by five different federal agencies throughout the U.S.



The Tongass and Chugach national forests in Alaska offer a broad spectrum of outdoor experiences, from adventurous wilderness travel to peaceful scenery viewing. Visitors also enjoy a variety of interpreted historic and prehistoric cultural sites.

The Forest Service provides and maintains about 962 miles of road at passenger car standards. Another 1,220 miles are maintained for high clearance vehicles. These highways and roads lead visitors through some of the most scenic public land in the United States.

The Forest Service maintains a system of 192 remote cabins and 25 shelters for public and emergency use. Tucked in quiet saltwater bays, or along popular hiking trails, the cabins offer forest visitors a wide range of backcountry experiences. Reservations are handled through <http://www.recreation.gov>. Rental fees vary and begin at \$25 per night. The most popular cabins are available through drawings.

Nearly 900 miles of hiking trails wind through Alaska's national forests. Leading to alpine meadows, across muskegs, or through quiet rain forests, these trails provide a range of hiking opportunities for visitors of all abilities.

*RV campground at Portage Valley*

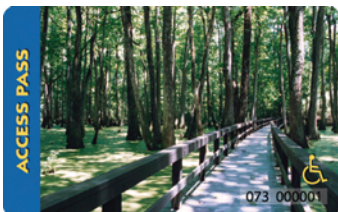


*Restrooms at Portage Valley*



*Restored historical cabin on Seward Ranger District*

*Photos on the front cover, left to right: Anan Creek, Portage Valley, Southeast Alaska Discovery Center, Anan Creek, Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center*



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