



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park
and Preserve
PO Box 439
Copper Center, AK 99573

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

The Nabesna Road Motorized Trail EIS Newsletter is a publication to support and encourage public participation in the NEPA process.

Editor
Bruce Rogers

Contributors
Bruce Rogers
Vicki Snitzler
Blain Anderson
Tamara Hamby

Comments? Write to:
Bruce Rogers
Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve
PO Box 439
Copper Center, AK 99573

We Need Your Help

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On June 29, 2006, the National Parks Conservation Association, Alaska Center for the Environment, and the Wilderness Society filed a lawsuit against the National Park Service regarding recreational ORV use on the nine trails. The plaintiffs challenged the NPS' ability to issue recreational ORV permits saying that the NPS failed to make the finding required by regulation that such ORV use is compatible with the purposes and values of the Park and Preserve. They also claimed that the NPS failed to prepare an environmental analysis evaluating the impacts of recreational use of ORVs.

In the May 15, 2007 settlement agreement, the NPS agreed to complete an EIS by December 31, 2010. The analysis presented in the EIS will determine if recreational ORV use is compatible with the purposes and values of the Park and Preserve. During the prepa-

ration time for the EIS, the NPS can issue permits authorizing recreational use of ORVs on the Suslota Lake Trail, Tanada Lake Trail, and a portion of the Copper Lake Trail only when the ground is frozen. These trails were singled out because they are in particularly poor condition, with lots of mudholes and swampy areas that lead to ORV operators driving around bad spots and creating trail braiding and widening. The NPS may continue to issue permits for recreational ORV use of the remaining six trails while the EIS is being completed. The litigation and settlement did not change the use of ORVs by local rural residents engaged in subsistence uses. The trails remain open to other uses such as hiking, skiing, riding snowmachines, or horseback riding.

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ORV Planning Newsletter

We Need Your Help - Planning Begins for Motorized Trails Along Nabesna Road

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park needs your help and participation. We are embarking on a major planning process for the motorized trails along the Nabesna Road. If these trails lead to your favorite hunting, fishing or hiking spot, we need your involvement. We need to know what role these trails play in your life

We need to know what role these trails play in your life and we need your suggestions of how best to manage these trails so that your access and recreation can continue.

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Specifically, the National Park Service (NPS) is asking for input on recreational use of off-road vehicles (ORVs) along nine trails in the Nabesna area of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. The comments and ideas received will be used to develop issues and management alternatives for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that is being prepared. The purpose of the EIS is to evaluate a range of alternatives for managing recreational off-road vehicle use on the following trails: Caribou Creek, Lost Creek, Trail Creek, Reeve Field, Boomerang Lake, Soda Lake, Suslota Lake, Copper Lake and Tanada Lake. Evaluating management alternatives includes analyzing and displaying potential environmental impacts to soils, vegetation, wetlands, wildlife, visitor experience, scenic quality, cultural resources, subsistence opportunities, other recreational activities



Damage on the Copper Lake Trail caused by ORV use. Fragile tundra and permafrost are not the ideal substrate to build a trail on. Mudholes cause an impassable trail during wet times of year. Users eventually just go around the mudholes creating a wider, more braided trail that impacts a larger area of the Park.

and access.

The 13.2 million acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve was established in 1980 at which time the nine trails under evaluation were already in existence and had some use. As part of the general management planning for the park in 1986, ORVs were determined to be a means of transportation traditionally used by local rural residents engaged in subsistence uses. In 1983, the park began issuing permits for recreational use of these trails under a legal authority that allows use of ORVs for recreation, on existing trails, under a permit system. The park annually issues approximately 200 recreational permits largely for sport hunters traveling to preserve areas. Subsistence users and inholders also use ORVs on these trails.

Park personnel have long recognized the impacts that can occur when ORVs are used in a sub-arctic environment. Consequently, several research projects have been done to assess the conditions of the trails and to

The analysis presented in the EIS will determine if recreational ORV use is compatible with the purposes and values of the Park and Preserve

experiment with a variety of trail hardening materials. This information will be used to analyze and evaluate environmental effects in the EIS, and to determine feasibility and cost effectiveness of different management alternative solutions. (continued on page 4)

Where we are Headed - The Planning Process

Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) take a long time to complete because there are several steps in the planning process. Following is a list of steps in this planning process where there will be opportunities for public participation, comment, or review.

Scoping

This is where we are now. Scoping is an early and open process to determine the purpose and need for the project, the environmental issues, and alternatives to be addressed in the EIS. Scoping occurs within the NPS and with the general public and other major stakeholders such as State or federal agencies or tribal governments. For this EIS, public meetings will be held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Tok, Slana, and Glennallen in late March of 2008, at specific times and locations listed below.

Management Alternative Development

Based on the feedback from public scoping, a management proposal will be developed that addresses the purpose and need and the issues that have been identified. Then, alternative management actions are developed that allow us to consider and display a varying degree of environmental effects. A draft set of alternatives will be available for public review and comment by mid-June, 2008.

Draft EIS

The management alternatives will be analyzed and environmental effects from each alternative displayed in a Draft EIS. There will be public meetings and a comment period of 60 days once the Draft EIS is printed and distributed. This is tentatively scheduled for the fall of 2009.

Final EIS and Record of Decision

Based on comments received, changes will be made to the Draft EIS and a Final EIS and Record of Decision will be printed. This is tentatively scheduled for the fall of 2010.

So What's the Issue?

The National Park Service has identified the following issues. These will be refined based on the public's input:

Access: The nine trails in question provide access to backcountry recreational opportunities, sport hunting and fishing, subsistence opportunities, and private inholdings. Management of trails will have an effect on access. How do we address the degradation to park resources and still continue to provide reasonable access?

Wetlands: Wetlands are particularly susceptible to damage by ORVs. A common dynamic in areas of even moderate ORV use is the formation of deep and impassable muck holes and braided trail networks.

Soils: ORV impacts on soils include abrasion, shearing, compaction, displacement, soil removal (e.g. erosion or splashing), and soil horizon mixing. Some degree of impact to soils has been documented along each of the nine trails where recreational ORV use is permitted.

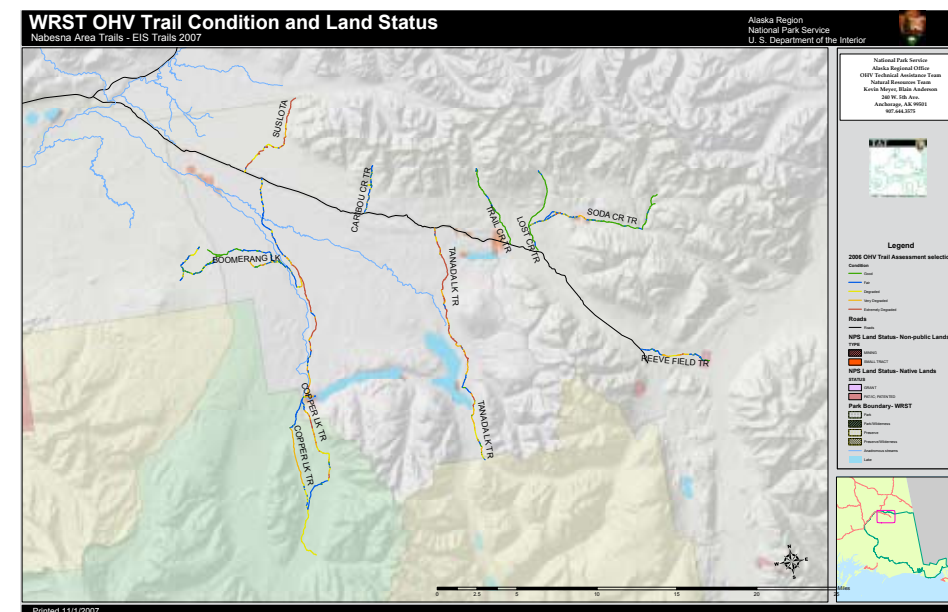
Vegetation: ORV impacts on vegetation include reduction in plant cover, simplification of the vegetation structure, and alteration

of the habitat for plant growth. ORVs abrade, compress, and shear vegetation. Any damage to the roots or the rooting mat kills plants and opens soils to erosion.

Water Quality and Fish Habitat: Where ORV trails approach, cross, or closely parallel streams and rivers, sediment may be produced. The amount and potential for sedimentation is dependent on the soil substrate present at the crossing. Sediment can adversely affect water quality and fish habitat, particularly in spawning areas.

Wilderness: ORV trails currently provide some access to the wilderness boundary and sport hunting opportunities in the preserve. Existing ORV routes in wilderness (authorized for subsistence use) have an impact on wilderness resource values.

Subsistence: The area is popular for local rural residents to engage in moose and sheep hunting, berry picking and some firewood gathering. The headwaters of the Copper River provide a vitally important subsistence salmon fisheries. ORV use, while providing reasonable and necessary access, can also have negative impacts on subsistence resources and opportunities.



Nabesna Area Trails, Condition and Land Status. Trail segments shown in red and orange are extremely degraded. Trail segments shown in blue and green in fairly good condition.

The Planning Process is a Public Process - When and How to Participate

What do you think we should do? How would you like to see these trails managed? What is your solution for the trail degradation occurring on the landscape? How do you protect the natural resources while still providing an opportunity for users to enjoy them? How would you address conflicts between user groups in the area? Which trails are most important to you and where would you like to see the National Park Service invest time and money for rehabilitation and maintenance?

The National Park Service is faced with the challenge of determining how to minimize resource degradation on the nine trails in question while providing reasonable access to wilderness recreation as well as subsistence resources and access to inholdings.

This is your chance to express your opinion on the topic. For this phase of the project,



Trail widening and braiding is often the only way users can get around deep mudholes.

you have plenty of time to submit comments—the comment period officially ends 60 days after the last public meeting: June 3, 2008 (see public meeting schedule below).

- Electronic comments may be submitted to the NPS Planning, Environmental, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/WRST>

- Written comments may be mailed to: Meg Jensen, Park Superintendent, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, P.O. Box 439, Copper Center, Alaska, 99573.
- To make a comment, get more information, or to be added to the mailing list, call Bruce Rogers, project manager, at 822-7276.

Many more opportunities to participate will be available throughout the planning process. You will also be asked to comment or provide feedback on draft management alternatives and the Draft EIS.

Attending a public meeting is the best way to get a fuller understanding of the issues, ask questions of Park planners and gather more information about the objectives of the planning process. Your participation is vital to the success of this effort.



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The history of off-road vehicle (ORV) use in the Nabesna District predates the establishment of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. It commenced after the World War II era when surplus military vehicles were used by hunters, miners, and others for personal use and access to remote areas. Several of the trails in question started out as winter trails, used under frozen conditions and never intended for summertime use.

Address
Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve
PO Box 439
Copper Center, AK 99573

Phone
907-822-7276
E-mail
Bruce_rogers@nps.gov

The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

Public Meeting Schedule

If you are not familiar with the trails in question or need more information, attend one of our public meetings scheduled for late March and learn more, then make comments. Following is a schedule for the five public meetings:

TOK: March 25, Tuesday, 7:00 p.m. at the Tok School cafeteria

SLANA: March 26, Wednesday, 7:00 p.m. at the Slana school

GLENNALLEN: March 31, Monday, 7:00 p.m. at the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve Visitor Center

FAIRBANKS: April 2, Wednesday, 7:00 p.m. at the National Park Service Administrative Center, 4175 Geist Road

ANCHORAGE: April 3, Thursday, 7:00 p.m. at the BLM Campbell Creek Science Center

These are not hearings. All meetings will be an open-house format, with informative displays and NPS personnel available to answer questions or take your comments.

