

The Denali Park Road

"This drastic rebuilding of the old road shows an obsessive regard for superhighway standards and a lack of appreciation for the spirit of this northern wilderness " Olaus Murie, 1965

"The character of the park road and its relationship with the landscape through which it passes are an integral part of the visitor experience at Denali...The character of the road is in keeping with the character of the land: a primitive, low-speed road located in a wild and pristine land." NPS, 1997 Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP



Traveling the park road is presently the primary experience for most visitors coming to Denali. For that reason, the park road trip needs to provide visitors the opportunity to appreciate all of the values of the park, particularly the wildlife and wilderness for which the original park was founded. Major park policies including the restriction of most access to park-authorized buses, vehicle capacity limits, and road character design guidelines have been important in protecting the road experience for visitors. However, they have not been sufficient. The quality of the experience has eroded over time, and recent decisions by the National Park Service threaten to erode the experience even further.

Protect Park Road Character

DCC supports the vision of Adolph and Olaus Murie for the character of the Denali park road, that it should be a primitive, low-speed road with a rustic character that matches that the surrounding wild and pristine landscape. NPS planning documents support this goal, however NPS actions do not always follow. Road construction activities have become so continuous that it is impossible for visitors in any year to have an experience that feels wild and remote. "Temporary" structures such as the Weatherport bookstore at Toklat River or "Dalle-Molleville" remain in place indefinitely, and are contrary to the expressed vision for the park road. DCC believes facilities along the park road should be as minimal as possible, and those that are necessary should be sited so as to hide them from travelers.

Keep the Lid on Park Road Capacity

DCC strongly supports daily and seasonal limits for vehicle traffic on the Denali park road to protect wildlife viewing opportunities and to provide travelers the opportunity to be immersed in the surrounding wilderness landscape. DCC supports the philosophy of the 1997 *General Management Plan* amendments that concluded visitation growth should be addressed by diverting visitors who are not necessarily interested in the park road

experience to opportunities in the park entrance area and on the south side of the park. DCC disagrees with the conclusion of the [2012 Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan](#), which abandons a firm regulatory seasonal limit for the park road in favor of adaptive management, backstopped by a daily vehicle limit that is unjustifiable given its lack of real-world testing. This is particularly concerning since NPS cannot make any definitive conclusions about whether existing traffic volumes have effected wildlife sightings. DCC is urging the National Park Service to reconsider its approach to road capacity limits, and opposes changing the existing regulation that establishes a seasonal limit on the number of vehicles traveling the park road.

Restore a True Public Transit System

While concession bus tours have existed since there was a road to drive on and merits continuation, it is the shuttle system, or “Visitor Transportation System,” which is fundamental to modern management of the park road. When the National Park Service started limiting private vehicle traffic in 1972, it took on the responsibility for providing transportation services along the road. The shuttle buses – originally provided free of charge – are now necessary for basic visitor access to the park as well as for achieving the ANILCA-mandated goal of providing “reasonable access” for “wilderness recreational activities.” As such, these buses should be provided at the lowest possible cost and these buses should have the highest priority among passenger vehicles competing for space on the park road. Unfortunately, since NPS turned the buses over to the park concessioner in 1994 the cost of the buses has risen to a level determined by commercial criteria. The specific daily allocation provided to the system in 1997 was eliminated in 2012, and despite NPS insistence that the shuttle buses would have priority among vehicles on the park road, the [2012 Vehicle Management Plan](#) contains no effective mechanism for insuring that this will occur in the face of strong commercial pressures to sell pricey tours.

DCC believes NPS should manage the shuttle system as a true public transit system, rather than as a commercial transportation service or a budget tour. DCC also believes NPS should monitor passenger wait times for getting on a shuttle bus into the park, and establish a standard for how long is too long.

Purchase Inholdings, Limit Commercial Development in Kantishna

The growth of tourism-related enterprises on private inholdings in the Kantishna area poses one of the greatest long-term threats to the management of the Denali park road. Some inholders may yet challenge the National Park Service’s ability to regulate their vehicle use under the special access provisions of ANILCA. The NPS decision that Kantishna-lodge day tours should be treated as concessions rather than inholder access was a good step, but the absence of a firm limit on the number of day tours means the new solution may be worse than the original problem. Undeveloped inholdings in Kantishna are a latent threat that could destabilize the road management system, as well as further harm the remote, small-scale, nature-centric character of Kantishna tourism enterprises and adding visible infrastructure to the park road viewshed. DCC believes the acquisition of these undeveloped inholdings should be a high priority for the National Park Service.

Winter Road Maintenance Should Favor Wilderness Recreation

In winter, DCC believes the park road past Headquarters should be managed to support outdoor recreation activities. DCC supports the decision in the 2006 *Backcountry Management Plan* to leave the road unplowed until the first of March. The snow-covered road surface is particularly important early in winter when the park road is often the only place suitable for mushing or skiing.