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Comments:

February 16, 2016

Re: Chugach Forest Land Management Plan

I am an avid, longtime user of Chugach National Forest - hiker, runner, biker, skier, sea-kayaker, firewood gatherer, pack-rafter, photographer, cabin visitor, berry-picker, backpacker, sport fisherman. In particular, I have kayaked in the WSA of western PWS more than 150 days over the past 12 summers, both with and without small children. I am usually doing something in the Chugach and Kenai mountains once or twice a week all year long.

I have no technical feedback on the plan specifics. I have comments on two general areas.

Johnson Trail-Boston Bar-Turnagain-Twentymile. A policy of increasing trail access, combined with bridge construction over certain gorges or rivers that can't be forded, should be implemented. The Winner Creek trail is a perfect example -- it gives an assist to backcountry travel without jeopardizing the wilderness character. In the same spirit, a policy of slowly enhancing access to the Alaska Railroad corridor, upper Placer and upper Trail river areas, should be implemented and encouraged. Trails are not unnatural features, and well-placed bridge alone can open up vast country to self-sufficient travelers on foot or skis, whose visitation does not threaten the environment. Use of new infrastructure should remain non-motorized in summer.

The College Fjord / Port Nellie Juan WSA. This should be treated and managed as though it were entirely under the Wilderness Act, with the highest and most restrictive standards applying to the uplands. "Primitive" is the word. Western Knight Island in particular is extraordinarily pristine and should not be tampered with. To the fullest extent possible, non-motorized, self-sufficient recreation should be encouraged and harvesting of resources kept to a minimum. Personal use timber harvest should be discouraged because of the potential to denude or diminish habitat and the few mature stands easily accessible from the shore. Recommend the WSA for full wilderness designation ASAP.

An exception to strict wilderness management should be considered in areas of extremely high recreational use, ie, Blackstone Bay, and to a lesser extent, Port Wells or Harriman. A policy that allows for minimal hardening of certain popular campsites should be considered, with the proviso that such hardening be strategic, aimed at reducing and channeling the footprint of human impact at inevitable camping beaches. In the event that boat wake and/or recreational activity can be shown to be degrading the habitat, a policy that limits commercial access and commercial touring/drop offs should be considered. I saw 40 kayakers in upper Blackstone one recent July day, and all but a half dozen were there as participants of commercial trips. The "tragedy of the commons" may apply to Blackstone use.

Sincerely,

Doug O'Harra  
Anchorage