



# THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB

C. JAMES FRUSH  
PRESIDENT

January 11, 2000

Steve Martin, Superintendent  
Denali National Park and Preserve  
Attn: Ken Kehrer, Jr.  
PO Box 9  
Denali National Park AK 99755-0009

Re: Denali National Park Snowmobile Ban

Dear Mr. Martin:

The American Alpine Club, founded in 1902, is the oldest national organization representing the interests and concerns of American mountaineers, rock climbers and explorers. Our current membership numbers almost 6,200 individual members throughout the US and abroad (including more than 106 Alaska residents), 55 corporate members and several thousand members of affiliated climbing clubs. AAC members are frequent winter visitors to our national parks for ice climbing, mountaineering, backcountry skiing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. Since its inception, the AAC has actively advocated for the preservation and conservation of our mountain regions through the formation of national parks, wilderness area and appropriate stewardship of existing public lands. With this in mind, I would like to respond to the issues contained in your recent Environmental Assessment for Permanent Closure of the Former Mount McKinley National Park to Snowmobile Use.

After reviewing your Environmental Assessment, The American Alpine Club would like to go on record as supporting Alternative 4, the complete ban on the use of snowmobiles in the former Mount McKinley National Park. The information presented clearly shows that the lower altitude areas of Mount McKinley National Park were set aside in 1917 with the primary goal of establishing a game preserve that would allow native animals to interact as much as possible in a manner untouched by humans. Hunting, fishing, trapping and other traditional subsistence activities were prohibited in the "Old Park" area, as was snowmobile use. Thus, while there may be reasons to continue mechanical access in some situations where this access has been historic, ANILCA protections on snowmobile use for traditional activities do not apply to these lands since the park never allowed snowmobiles or historic subsistence activities.

The Environmental Assessment clearly articulates the danger snowmobile use poses to the "Old Park" area of Denali National Park and Preserve. Snowmobile use will significantly degrade the park's pristine air and water quality, solitude and natural quiet, sensitive vegetation, and abundant wildlife. The AAC believes the Park Service has made a compelling argument that the unique wildlife habitat in the former Mount McKinley National Park area is unique in the world and would be irreparably harmed by allowing even limited snowmobile intrusion into this long-protected area.

Snowmobilers undoubtedly will be opposed to your recommended management action since the "Old Park" portion of Denali National Park and Preserve would be put off limits to them. It is important to recognize that our National Parks were set aside to protect natural areas as well as for the use and

enjoyment of the American public. Cross-country skiers, dog mushers, and other non-motorized recreational visitors currently must contend with the noise, pollution and loss of solitude caused by snowmobiles throughout two-thirds of the National Park and Preserve, as well as most of the rest of the state. Preserving this portion of the park for wildlife and non-motorized recreationalists is a small sacrifice for snowmobilers to make.

Over the past 25 years The American Alpine Club has adopted several policy statements regarding the management of public lands that affirm the direction you have taken with Alternative 4. In 1974 the AAC adopted a statement regarding mountaineering access and use of public lands. The relevant portion reads:

We believe that public lands should be always open for recreational uses compatible with preservation of the natural environment. Should preference be deemed necessary among recreational users, it should be given to those whose means of access have the least adverse effect on the land and are least inconveniencing of other recreational users.

In 1980 the Club adopted a more specific policy statement regarding the use of snowmobiles and off-road vehicles in our national parks, monuments and forests. The full text of this statement reads:

The American Alpine Club is opposed to the use of snowmobiles and off-road vehicles as a means of recreation in mountain areas. Off-road vehicles destroy terrain, disturb wildlife and damage delicate ecosystems. These are important values which our national parks, monuments and forests were established to preserve.

The noise of such vehicles is disturbing to wildlife and destructive of the quality of recreational experience which others have come to seek in a natural setting. It is the opinion of the Club that the terms under which our national parks and monuments were established limit recreational uses to those activities which are consonant with the preservation of these areas in their natural condition. The national forest values of range, water supply, wildlife, recreation, and even timber management are all adversely affected by unrestricted ORV activity.

The Club further believes that national well-being will be improved in all ways by encouraging more personal physical exertion on the one hand, and reducing the use of fossil fuels generally.

The AAC believes these policy statements are as valid today as they were when they were adopted.

On behalf of the entire American Alpine Club membership, I want to extend my thanks to you for addressing this issue and preventing significant damage to wildlife and the physical resource. If the AAC can be of further assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact Lloyd Athearn, the Club's deputy director and chair of our policy task force, at (303) 384-0110 x13.

Regards,

C. JAMES FRUSH  
PRESIDENT