

---

## **Chapter 5**

# **CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT**

Human History  
Land Ownership  
Recreational Demand

---

## Chapter 5

# CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

### Human History

Ethnographic accounts note considerable use of the Susitna River Basin by the Dena'ina people, including the lands within Denali State Park. The Dena'ina elder Shem Pete noted that people from Kroto Creek Village would spend late summer hunting caribou on *K'esugi* (the Ancient One), the large ridge north of Blair Lake between the Susitna and Chulitna rivers. Shem Pete also described hunting bear on Curry Ridge (*K'esugi Ken*), the low ridge south of *K'esugi*. The Susitna and Chulitna rivers were also well-used travel corridors for the Dena'ina and their neighbors to the north.

While several archaeological surveys of sections of Denali State Park discovered no evidence of prehistoric occupants, recent surveys just to the south of the park have discovered important new sites. One site 23 km south of park boundaries has been excavated over several seasons by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough in collaboration with the University of Nevada. Hundreds of artifacts have been recovered from the Trapper Creek Overlook Site (TAL-092), whose multiple occupational horizons span the last 8,000 years. This and other sites in the basin suggest that multiple groups have used the region throughout most of the Holocene.

The ethnographic and archaeological data suggest that parts of Denali State Park may hold substantial archaeological potential. Archaeological survey should be a part of resource investigation and planning efforts for the park. The surveys should take into account Dena'ina hunting and travel patterns in the region, as well as how earlier populations may have used the different environments found in the valley in the early and mid Holocene.

After the purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States, miners and prospectors journeyed into the park area. Some of the more significant exploratory contributions were made by prospector W.A. Dickey. Dickey, in 1896, traveled up the Susitna River to Susitna Station, where he constructed a boat and navigated the river upstream to Indian River. His name and the names of three others have been found etched in a rock near the mouth of Portage Creek. Mt. McKinley, the name for North America's highest mountain, was proposed by Dickey in his 1897 description of his travels, although many people knew of its existence and had been nearer the peak than his party.

Gold Creek, which was an active mining area with 200-300 residents, was supplied by sternwheeler and tunnel hull barges that traveled up the Susitna River. The area remained remote to most travelers until the construction of the Alaska Railroad. The route for the government-owned railroad, which links Seward to Fairbanks, was selected in 1915. Today, the western boundary of the railroad right-of-way forms the eastern boundary of Denali State Park. After the Curry Hotel was opened in 1923, rail passengers could stay overnight at the

hotel and climb Curry Ridge, 3 miles to the northwest, to view Denali from the Curry Lookout, which remains standing to this day. The hotel burned in 1957 and all that remains of the hotel is an open meadow. The 537-foot long suspension bridge over the Susitna River used to access Curry Ridge was torn down after the hotel burned. The trail from the bridge to the top of the ridge is completely overgrown.

## **Land Ownership**

Land ownership in this area occurs in five major categories: state, federal, borough, Alaska Railroad, and private. The private lands can be grouped into three categories: residential areas (remote parcel and subdivisions) sold by the state, and specific parcels that are typically inholdings or native allotments.

Within the park there is approximately 1,000 acres of private land. Most of this is concentrated near the southern boundary of the park. There are small inholdings scattered along the Parks Highway corridor. In general, the ownership pattern is fairly simple north of the park and is more complex south of the park.

Most of the land north of the park is state-owned. State and borough lands along the park boundaries were “designated” in 1985 by the Susitna Area Plan. The designations guide future management of the land. Most of the lands surrounding the park are classified Public Recreation and Wildlife Habitat; however, smaller areas of significance are designated for Forestry, Mining and Settlement.

There have been several state land disposals already in this area, including state recreational subdivisions and remote parcel sales. On the western boundary of the park is the Yentna Mining District where there are a number of state and federal mining claims. Also, directly north of the park, the Alaska Railroad owns approximately 4,000 acres at Hurricane. This block of land is important since it encompasses a strip about one-mile-wide and extends about six miles north from the park boundary. It is essentially the highway and railroad corridor.

The northwest boundary of Denali State Park abuts Denali National Park and Preserve. The land ownership pattern south of the park is very complex. Most notable are the Tokosha area subdivisions west of the Chulitna River, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough’s large holdings along the Parks Highway and between the Chulitna and Susitna Rivers, and the Chase community southeast of the park. Additionally, the Alaska Railroad owns another 4,000 acres (more or less) at Curry.

The three areas that are most likely to be developed are: 1) private lands located mostly along the Parks Highway between Trapper Creek and Byers Lake; 2) the Alaska Railroad’s 4,000 acres near Hurricane which extend about six miles north of the park along the highway/railroad corridor; and 3) the large holdings of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough which extend south from the park to Trapper Creek along the Parks Highway.

## Recreational Demand

Visitor demand at Denali National Park and Denali State Park has continued to grow and during the summer months, it is common for the number of visitors to exceed the capacity of the developed facilities on a daily basis. Alaska resident use during the summer will continue to grow at a slow but constant rate as the state population increases. Alaskan residents will likely continue to be the majority of visitors during the shoulder season, although out-of-state visitation is increasing as well. The number of out-of-state tourists will continue to grow at a significant rate, concentrated during the peak summer months. The potential for viewing Denali as part of extended tours of Alaska will likely continue to draw large numbers of visitors to the area in the foreseeable future. The growth in users for active trips into the wilderness such as raft, riverboat, flightseeing, etc. has been strong and should continue to show that growth. Detailed visitor projections are included in Appendix E in the Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (2006).

The key to meeting the demand for in-state and out-of-state visitors is to provide a diversity of potential experiences that have associated levels of comfort, and are available to people with a wide range of interests, as well as physical and economic capabilities.

Figure 8  
LAND OWNERSHIP