

Eagle River Nature Center

Master Development Plan - Interpretive Prospectus

Department of Natural Resources
Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation
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Purpose

For thirty years, the staff and volunteers at the Eagle River Nature Center have been sharing the cultural and natural history of the Eagle River Valley with visitors through dynamic programming. Interpretation and environmental education have always been vital to the visitor experience at the center: from the “close-up corner” to the salmon viewing deck, visitors benefit from hands-on learning and close encounters with the natural world.

As the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation and the Friends of Eagle River Nature Center plan for the future of the center and trails, it is also critical to plan for new interpretive programs and media that will complement and enhance the center’s environmental education and public programs.

The purpose of the *Interpretive Prospectus* is to establish a long-range vision for developing and maintaining an effective interpretive program at the new center. Interpretation at the center should not only tell visitors what is interesting about the site but also aim to convince them of its value, encourage conservation, and inspire them to further explore the area. The *Interpretive Prospectus*:

- supports the mission of the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation and Eagle River Nature Center
- outlines goals and objectives for interpretive programs and media
- provides an assessment of existing and potential visitor profiles
- provides an overview of existing interpretation and programming concerns
- provides guidelines for future planning

Mission Statements

The mission of the *Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation* is to provide outdoor recreation opportunities and conserve and interpret the natural, cultural, and historic resources for the use, enjoyment, and welfare of the people.

The mission of the *Eagle River Nature Center* is to provide connections to nature through interpretive education, resource protection and outdoor opportunities.

Goals

The goals outlined below are the desired outcomes for interpretation that will help the division and the Friends of Eagle River Nature Center achieve their missions. They describe how interpretation will make a difference in the management of the site.

Interpretation will:

- enhance the visitor experience and conserve natural resources through effective programming

- provide staff and volunteers with the necessary tools to assist visitors in making connections with the natural world
- encourage participation in the center’s environmental education programming
- provide visitors information about how to safely travel in bear and moose country

Interpretive Themes

Themes are the primary messages visitors should understand about an interpretive site or presentation. The central theme will bring a sense of continuity to the visitor experience and assist managers when developing the content for interpretive materials. Every interpretive product should support the central theme.

Central Theme

The Eagle River Nature Center is a natural gateway to Chugach State Park; sculpted by glaciers, this dynamic landscape supports a diverse plant and animal community and provides recreational opportunities for people of all ages and abilities.

Subthemes

1. The Eagle River Valley has a long history as a transportation corridor for people and animals.
2. Once referred to as “Little Yosemite,” the Eagle River Valley owes its dramatic mountain landscape to glacial sculpting and geologic processes, evidence of which is visible from the center and its trails.
3. Plant and animal communities in the Eagle River Valley enhance the visitor experience and influence the changing landscape.
4. The trails at the Eagle River Nature Center provide visitors access to a wide range of recreational activities.
5. Teaching visitors how to safely travel in moose and bear country is a critical component of education at the center.
6. The new Eagle River Nature Center incorporates green technology and was designed to complement the landscape and historical facade of the original building.

Target Audience

The Eagle River Nature Center welcomes over 40,000 visitors annually, mostly adults and families with children. Visitors are attracted by the natural beauty of the area, recreational opportunities, and the diversity of environmental education programming offered at the center.

Age of Visitor

Interpretation should be targeted to both adults and children by layering the message of each exhibit or presentation. For example, a trailside interpretive panel designed primarily for adults can have vivid graphics, tactile components, or a pull-out specially designed for children. Likewise, adults could still find pleasure from a “close-up” corner that thrills children with the textures and scents of natural objects.

Exhibits could also be designed for specific age groups, such as two exhibits with the same topic: one written and designed for adults and the other designed to appeal to children.

Type of Visitor

Interpretation should consider the needs of the independent traveler(s) versus those visiting as part of an organized program. Interpretation must be designed to complement both user groups, even if tailored more toward one. For example, large format panels designed for trail junctions will primarily be designed for the use of large groups (such as a 4th-grade class). However, the context of the panel must still be relevant for independent visitors who may not be receiving supplementary information from a guide.

The digital audience must also be considered. The number of people seeking information about parks and natural areas via the Internet, social networking sites, and mobile media (such as podcasts) is increasing at a dramatic pace. Careful consideration must be given toward integrating mobile media into interpretation at the nature center in order to reduce the possibility of potential user-group conflicts. Mobile media is, however, a great way to reach a broad audience and inspire people to visit the nature center, become a member, and conserve the natural environment.

Existing Conditions

Information and Orientation

The Eagle River Nature Center’s front desk, website, and social media page are the principle ways visitors receive information about the site. The nature center also distributes information via email, press releases, and local marketing. Members receive monthly newsletters.

The nature center prints a series of brochures and flyers, including the Rodak Nature Trail Guide, Birds of Eagle River Nature Center Checklist, and Eagle River Nature Center Trail Map.

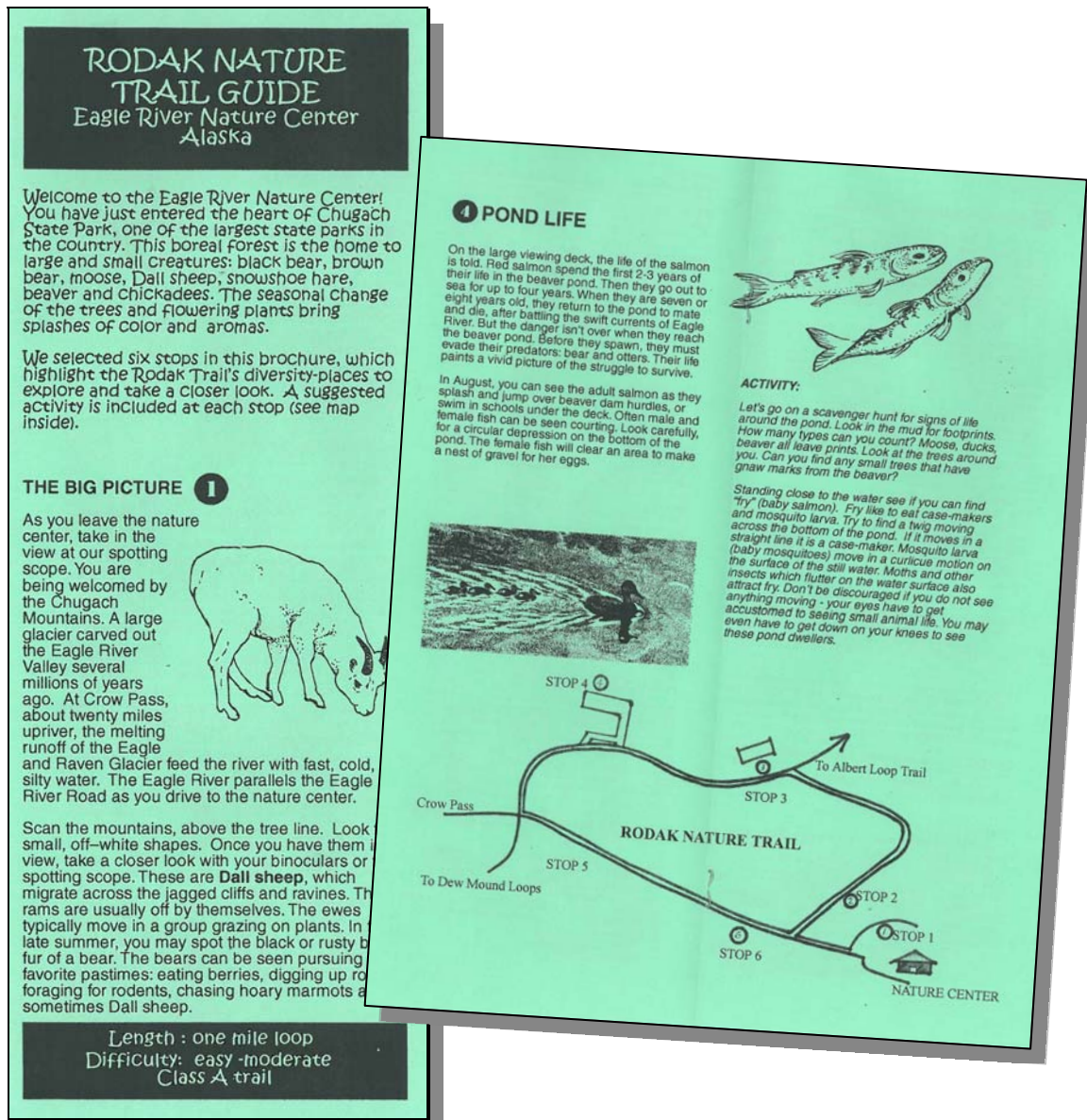
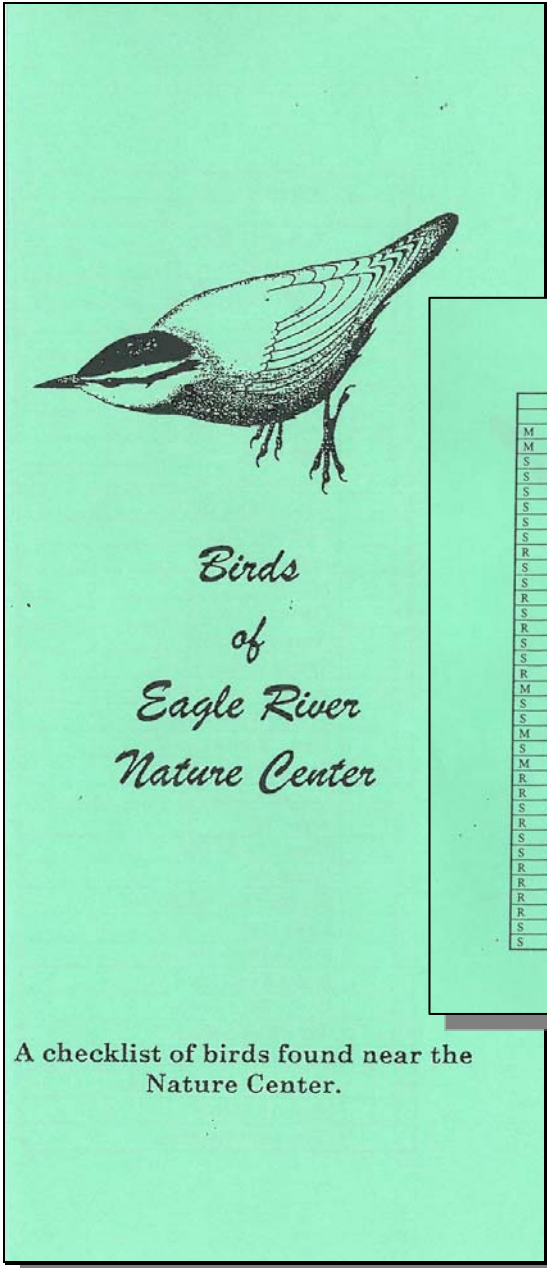


Figure 1. Rodak Nature Trail Guide



A checklist of birds found near the Nature Center.

Eagle River Nature Center
Bird Species List

Species	
M	Trumpeter Swan
M	Canada Goose
S	Green-Winged Teal
S	Mallard
S	Northern Pintail
S	American Wigeon
S	Barrow's Goldeneye
S	Common Merganser
R	Bald Eagle
S	Northern Harrier
S	Sharp-shinned Hawk
R	Northern Goshawk
S	Red-tailed Hawk
R	Merlin
S	Golden Eagle
S	American Kestrel
R	Spruce Grouse
M	Sandhill Crane
S	Greater Yellowlegs
S	Lesser Yellowlegs
M	Spotted Sandpiper
S	Common Snipe
M	Arctic Tern
R	Great Horned Owl
R	Boreal Owl
S	Northern Saw-whet Owl
R	Hawk Owl
S	Rufous Hummingbird
S	Belted Kingfisher
R	Downy Woodpecker
R	Hairy Woodpecker
R	Three-toed Woodpecker
R	Black-backed Woodpecker
S	Northern Flicker
S	Olive-sided Flycatcher
S	Western Wood Pewee
S	Alder Flycatcher
S	Tree Swallow
S	Violet-green Swallow
R	Gray Jay
R	Steller's Jay
R	Black-billed Magpie
R	Common Raven
R	Black-capped Chickadee
R	Boreal Chickadee
R	Red-breasted Nuthatch
R	Brown Creeper
R	American Dipper
S	Golden-crowned Kinglet
S	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
S	Gray-cheeked Thrush
S	Swainson's Thrush
S	Hermit Thrush
S	American Robin
S	Varied Thrush
R	Bohemian Waxwing
S	Northern Shrike
S	Orange-crowned Warbler
S	Yellow Warbler
S	Yellow-rumped Warbler
S	Townsend's Warbler
S	Blackpoll Warbler
S	Northern Waterthrush
S	Wilson's Warbler
S	Savannah Sparrow
S	Fox Sparrow
S	Lincoln's Sparrow
S	Golden-crowned Sparrow
S	White-crowned Sparrow
R	Dark-eyed Junco
S	Rusty Blackbird
S	Red-winged Blackbird
R	Pine Grosbeak
R	White-winged Crossbill
R	Common Redpoll
E	Hoary Redpoll
E	Pine Siskin

Key: S = Summer nester
M = Stops during migration
R = Year round resident
E = Eruptive



Figure 3. Eagle River Nature Center Trail Map

Environmental Education and Public Programs

Environmental Education

The Eagle River Nature Center offers a Nature Studies Program for school groups year-round. Groups choose from 15 naturalist-led science programs, which include an indoor orientation and science presentation followed by a guided walk. There is also time for lunch and exploration of exhibits. In addition to on-site programs, the nature center offers in-school programming whereby naturalists bring their presentations to the classroom.

Similar programming is offered for homeschoolers, scouts, youth groups, and adult groups. The center also offers a summer camp program and nature-themed birthday parties.

Public Programs

The Eagle River Nature Center's public programs include:

- Kneehigh Naturalist Program (designed for children ages 3-5 accompanied by a parent; program focuses on outdoor exploration)
- Junior Naturalist Program (designed for children in K-6th grade accompanied by a parent; program covers a variety of natural history topics and activities)
- General Audience Programs (primarily designed for adults and cover a wide variety of natural history topics)
- Astronomy Programs (local astronomers present a special topic inside before leading participants outdoors to view the night sky)
- Craft Programs (designed seasonally for both children and adults)
- Recreational Hikes (volunteers who are avid hikers lead hikes for a visitors of all ages and abilities)
- Daily Summer Walks (designed for newcomers and those uncomfortable hiking alone in bear country)

Interpretation

Interior – Non-personal

Displays

The majority of the interior exhibits are seasonal and cover a variety of natural history topics. The seasonal exhibits are displayed on two triangular units that are set on casters and can be moved from the central exhibit space for large events. There is also seasonal bird identification information displayed in the corner overlooking the bird feeders, accompanied by a viewing scope.

There are two permanent displays: an interactive, “guess the answer” board and an exhibit that labels mountains in the valley.

Children's Area

A children's area includes craft items and nature-themed toys specially designed for young children.

Animal Collections

The center has a nice collection of mounted animals: beaver, three bald eagles, three owls (Great Horned, Northern saw-whet, and Snowy), lynx, coyote, and two bear pelts. The center also has a butterfly collection.

Other

Latex animal tracks are displayed on the front counter. Visitors enjoy touching the items and figuring out the animal they belong to.

Close-up Corner

The “close-up corner” is a visitor favorite. Tucked in a quiet niche—designed to resemble a trapper’s cabin—this interactive exhibit allows children and adults to see and feel items from nature. Items in the close-up corner include animal bones, fossils, furs, beaver-chewed wood, antlers, and skulls. There is also an area with hidden items. Visitors hesitate as they insert their hand into the dark hole, not knowing what type of feeling to anticipate. The corner is loved by children and adults alike.

Exterior – Non-personal

Trailside Interpretation

There are 10 interpretive panels located along the Rodak Nature Trail and one located on the upper viewing deck. Seven of these panels were produced approximately 10 years ago and exhibit an older style of graphic presentation; the remaining four panels were produced approximately five years ago and exhibit a modern graphic style. The modern panels are the division’s standard horizontal size: 30.5”h x 36.5”w.

Modern Panels

There is one panel located on the upper viewing deck near the nature center. The panel identifies the visible mountains and is titled “Chugach Mountain Cliff Notes.” The panel is in excellent condition.

There are three panels located at the first river viewing deck along the Rodak Nature Trail. The topic of these panels is “beavers” and all are in excellent condition. They are titled:

- “With Sticks and Stones They Build Their Homes”
- “Tools of the Trade”
- “In the Beaver’s Wake”

Programming Concerns and Suggestions

These modern panels will need to be relocated when the new facility is constructed. The “Chugach Mountain Cliff Notes” panel should be placed where the view is similar to that of the panel’s background image. The beaver panels should be located near (if not at) their current location.



Figure 4. Modern Panels. Clockwise from top left: *Chugach Mountain Cliff Notes*, *With Sticks and Stones they Build Their Homes*, *In the Beaver's Wake*, and *Tools of the Trade*

Older Panels

The seven panels exhibiting an older style of graphic presentation are large format, approximately two times the division’s standard size. The panels are arranged along the circumference of the Rodak Nature Trail, with one panel located on the salmon viewing deck. The panels are titled as follows and are listed according to their location on the trail when traveled counterclockwise from the nature center:

- “Can a Snowflake Carve a Valley?”
- “Ice: An Artist of Grand Change”
- “Cosmic Reasons for the Seasons!”
- “Season Extremes in a Stream?”
- “The Forest—what fuels the food web”
- “Change of Values”
- “A Lifetime of Change”

These seven panels are in good condition. The colors have not faded recognizably and there is little to no physical damage to the panels. However, some of the topics and placement of the panels are no longer relevant and the graphics are outdated.



Figure 5. Older Panels. Top Row: *Can a Snowflake Carve a Valley?*, *Ice: An Artist of Grand Change*, *Cosmic Reasons for the Seasons!*; **Middle Row:** *Season Extremes in a Stream?*, *The Forest—What Fuels the Food Web*, *A Lifetime of Change*; **Bottom Left:** *Change of Values*

Programming Concerns and Suggestions

Concern: “Can a Snowflake Carve a Valley?” and “Ice: An Artist of Grand Change” are useful topics for environmental education programs but their placement is no longer relevant. “Can a Snowflake Carve a Valley?” describes Eagle River’s U-shaped valley, but the valley cannot be seen because of the thick tree cover. “Ice: An Artist of Grand Change” asks readers to study the mountains across the valley and look for glacially created features. It is difficult to view the mountains because of the thick tree cover. Additionally, some of the glacial features are no longer present.

Suggestion: Create one new panel to satisfy geology/glaciology of the valley

Concern: “Cosmic Reasons for the Seasons!” is too complicated. There are too many topics for one display and this panel is not often used for formal programming.

Suggestion: Focus instead on “winter adaptations” for the exterior panel and present “astronomy” inside the new center.

Concern: “Season Extremes in a Stream?” is not used often for formal programming. It is located adjacent to the three modern panels on beavers.

Suggestion: Develop a similarly themed panel to be displayed on the salmon viewing deck

Concern: “The Forest—What Fuels the Food Web” is used for formal programming but the content is confusing. Generally the naturalist will use the graphics as an aid to talk about photosynthesis and the food web.

Suggestion: Simplify the panel theme to complement formal programming.

Concern: ““Change of Values” is not often used for formal programming.

Suggestion: Reassess the relevancy of the theme and design a new display that complements formal programming.

Concern: “A Lifetime of Change” presents the salmon lifecycle and is appropriately located on the salmon viewing deck. The graphics, however, are dated and the panel is very text heavy.

Suggestion: Create smaller salmon ID panels that have a tactile element. Create one panel that presents the salmon lifecycle.

Recommendations

Information and Orientation

Brochures and Flyers

A series of brochures and flyers for the nature center could be created to complement the website's colors and design. A thematic approach to design would create continuity between products and assist in marketing for the center. The brochures and flyers would provide current and potential visitors information about the site, its amenities, and natural and recreational attractions. All brochures and flyers could be available for viewing on the website. Consideration should also be given for creating products in different languages. German, Spanish, and Japanese are commonly heard languages.

Suggested topics include:

- Albert Loop Trail Guide
- Dew Mound Trail Guide
- Iditarod National Historic Trail Guide
- Kneehigh Naturalist flyer
- Rental brochure (for cabins and yurts)
- Revised Birds of Eagle River Nature Center Checklist
- Revised Nature Studies Program flyer
- Revised Rodak Nature Trail Guide
- Revised trail map
- "Special Places" brochure

Building Entrance

Entryway

Incorporating the style of the existing building's entrance into the design of the new building would create a sense of place and nostalgia. New thematic elements, such as door handles made out of beaver-chewed branches, could add character and an interpretive element to an otherwise standard item.

Sustainability Information Sign

Outside the entrance to the new building, a visually appealing sign should be installed that explains how environmentally-friendly designs and products were used during construction and are part of ongoing operations. This sign would be more informational than interpretive.

Environmental Education and Public Programs

As mentioned in the prospectus’s “Purpose,” dynamic programming has always been vital to the visitor experience at the center. The personal connections between visitors and the staff, volunteers, and natural environment leave lasting impressions. It therefore makes sense that environmental education and public programming should be considered foremost when developing interpretive products. Future planning should ensure that interpretation complements the existing programming.

Staff members and volunteers should periodically review the effectiveness of environmental education and public programs to ensure management and interpretation goals and objectives are being met. Visitor numbers, surveys, and questionnaires can be valuable tools for evaluating programming.

Natural Play Area

A natural play area on the south side of the nature center should be designed to complement the landscape and interpretive themes. The play area would be located within sight of the nature center and the outdoor classroom and would allow children a fun, designated place to play.

Water features, log features, and unique steps and climbing equipment would be included. Elements could include a mix of natural products (such as boulders) and manufactured products meant to resemble natural features (such as a hollow log made of concrete).



Figure 6. Examples of thematic, manufactured “natural play” products

Interpretation

Interior – Non-Personal

The central interpretive theme should be evident after viewing interior exhibits. Each subtheme should be well represented so that visitors have a complete understanding of the opportunities available in and around the center and on its trails. This can be accomplished in a number of ways including unique architectural elements and art pieces, interpretive exhibits, animal mounts, and many other possibilities.

Seasonality

Interpretive exhibits should be designed so that components can be changed seasonally. This will assist staff and volunteers with programming and also keep information relevant for visitors. Four wall graphics or hanging banners could highlight the four seasons and be displayed year-round. Visitors would then get a sense for the area’s diversity of scenery during all seasons.

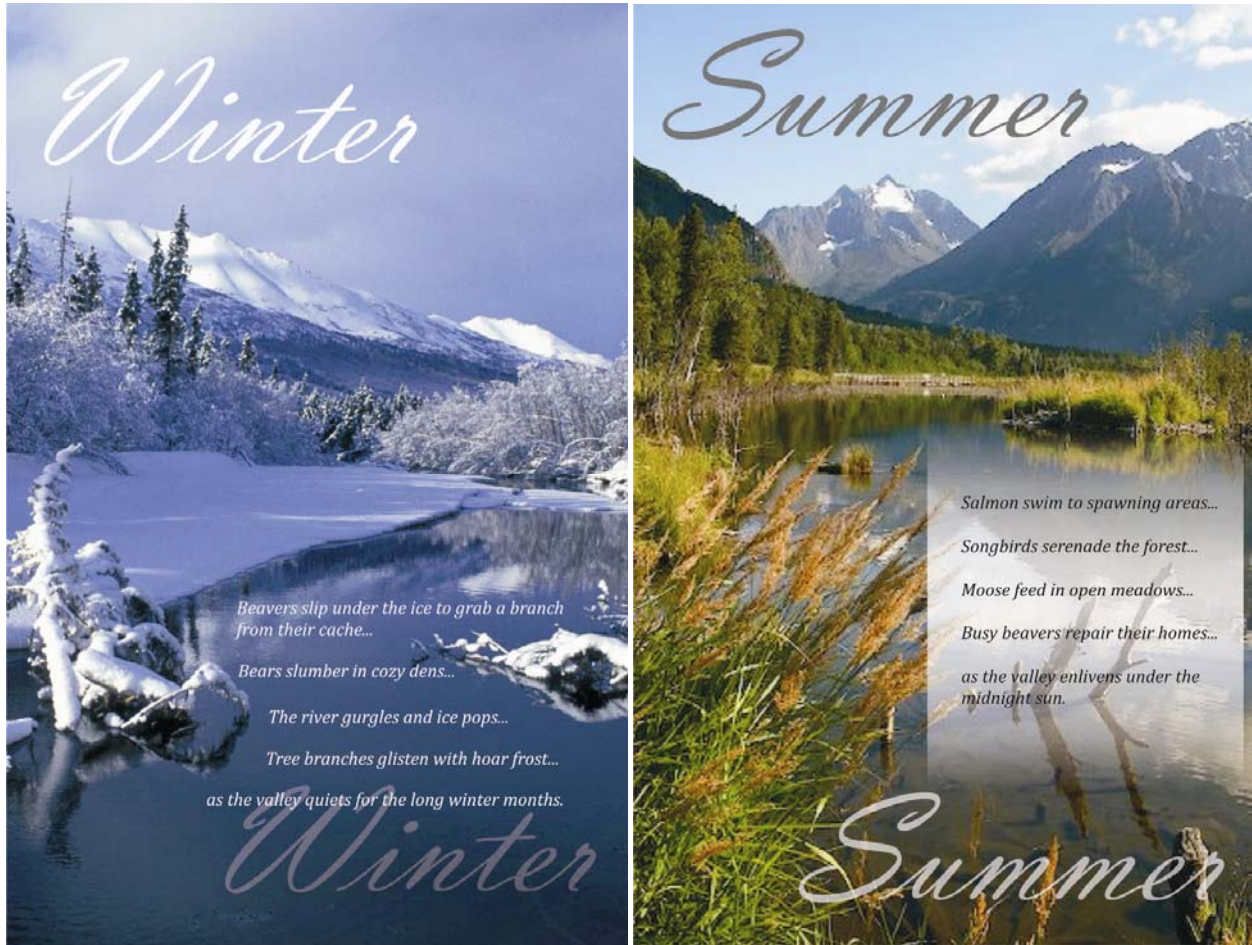


Figure 7. Sample concept for seasonal wall art or hanging banners. Images for concept only. Permissions not obtained.

Modular

Interpretive exhibits should, ideally, be movable. Potential for the central exhibit space to be used as a meeting area and for special events is high. If located along the edges of the room, the displays could be permanent or semi-permanent.

Close-up Corner

The close-up corner should be reconstructed and possibly expanded in the new building. Designing the space to resemble a “trapper’s cabin” is an excellent concept and could be replicated in the new center. A digital trapper (a hologram) could appear when visitors walk by and share stories about homesteading in Eagle River Valley. The Islands and Ocean Visitor Center in Homer, AK, has an excellent example of this type of application.

Kids Corner

A “Kids Corner,” with vivid graphics and interactive elements, could be included in the building’s design. A thematic name could be given to the area, such as “Cubs’ Corner” or “Kits Korner” and displayed at the corner’s entryway. Crafts, toys, and nature-themed games could be included.

Planetarium

The center’s astronomy program would greatly benefit from a dedicated indoor area where participants could gaze at the night sky. The area could be located on a second level or loft that included a significant skylight and telescope. Incorporating a planetarium into the building’s design is also a desired feature.

Salmon Tank

A tank integrated into an exhibit on the salmon lifecycle would be a valuable teaching tool for the center. Staff could rear young salmon in the tank, providing visitors a unique opportunity to watch the eggs develop into juvenile salmon. The tank would complement the live video feed from the salmon viewing deck nicely and help present the whole lifecycle story and concepts of natural resource management. (See the recommendations under “Salmon Viewing Deck” for more information on the live video.)

Exterior – Non-Personal

Pullouts for Organized Groups

The existing large-format panels work well for large groups. The pullouts provide space for groups (of up to thirty) to step off the main trail and gather to listen to the naturalist. The panels provide a visual element to enhance the messages the naturalist is sharing with the group. While the naturalist may not read the panel text verbatim, the graphics can reveal more of the story and enhance learning objectives.

Nine group pullouts have been identified based on the master development plan trail alignment. Each of the areas is located at a major trail junction. Design of the pullout could include a slope that enables participants standing in the back to see the guide and the panel. Panels should not be placed where they obstruct the viewshed.

Preliminary topics for the seven panels are: orientation, geology/glaciers, bears, beavers, stream life, birds/tree canopy, fish, Iditarod Trail, and plants/soils. The panels should be designed with eye-catching graphics and minimal text and be slightly smaller than the current size, but large enough so they can still be viewed by a group. If possible, a component just for

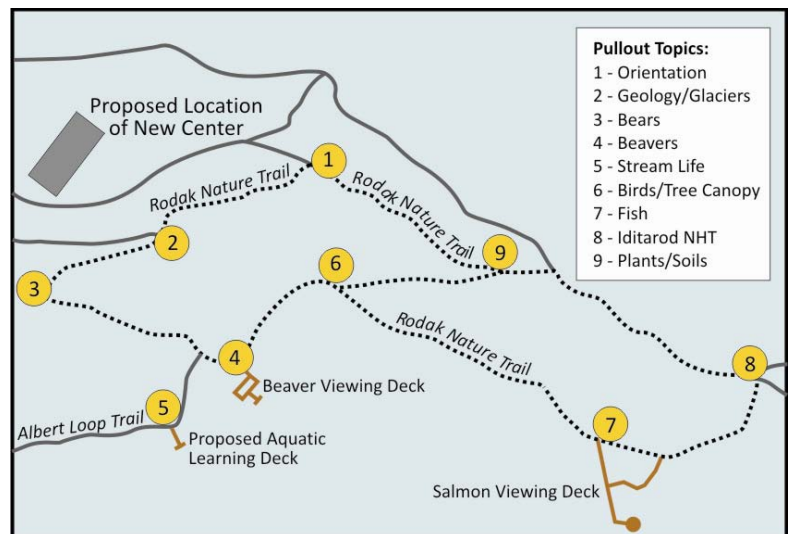


Figure 8. Proposed pullout locations and topics

children should be included. For example, the bottom corner of the “birds” display could have a picture of a chickadee and say “Can you find the chickadee in the picture?”

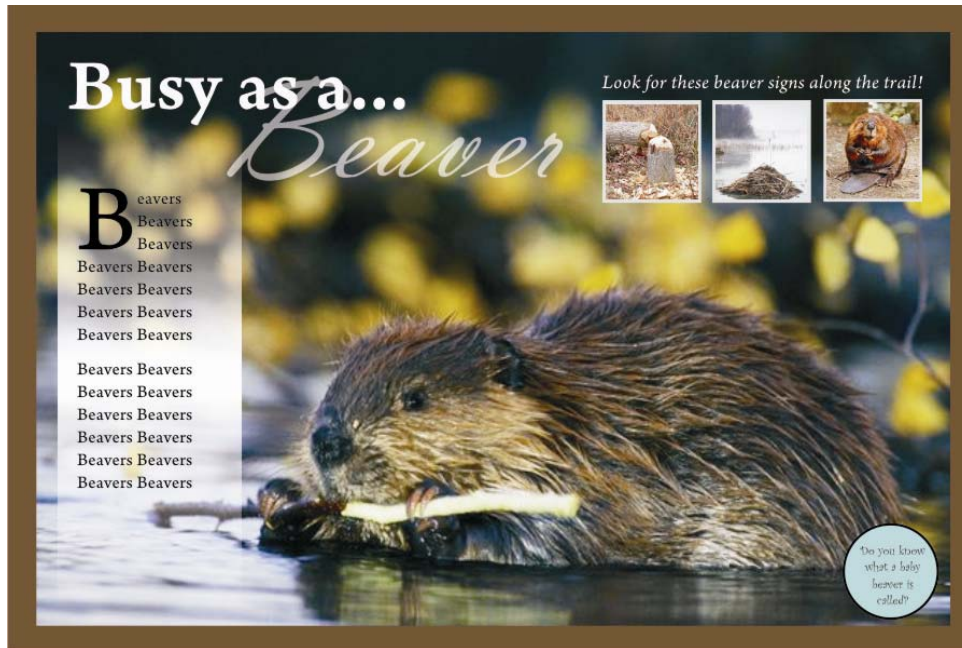


Figure 9. Sample concept for large-format panel. Images for concept only. Permissions not obtained.

Beaver Viewing Deck

The three modern interpretive panels located on the beaver viewing deck are appropriate for that site. If the deck is expanded, the panels should be reinstalled at an appropriate place on the deck.

Proposed Aquatic Learning Deck

If a new deck is built off of the Albert Loop Trail for the purpose of hands-on learning, consideration should be given toward the type of interpretive materials that would enhance the experience.

Small tactile panels could be installed on the deck that would introduce visitors to a selection of aquatic creatures that live in the wetlands. A damselfly, for example, could be displayed as a raised object and complemented by a fun interpretive message. The panels could be in the shape of a magnifying glass.

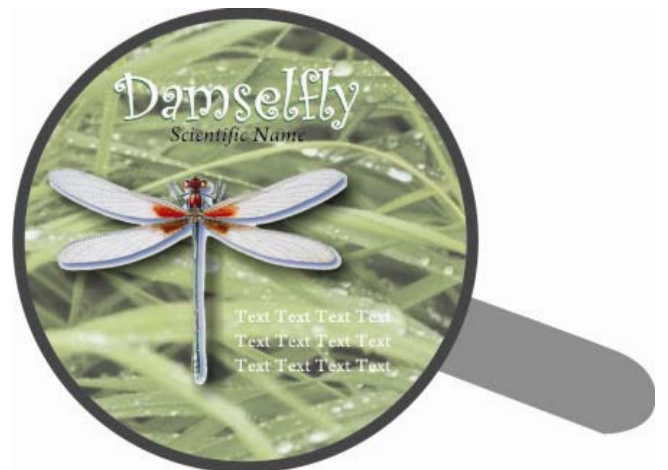


Figure 10. Sample concept for aquatic learning deck panel

pullout should begin to introduce visitors to the concept of geology, glaciology and the changing landscape.

Design

Trailside interpretive panels should be tailored toward independent visitors; those visiting as part of a formal program will not likely have time to explore each panel. However, vivid graphics, tactile components and catchy titles and theme statements would still benefit visitors who are traveling the trail more quickly. These same types of elements would be attractive to both adult and youth audiences. These panels can offer a more detailed story than those presented on the “large-format” panels located at the group pullouts.

Read from Your Car

Signs alongside the entrance road could reveal the central theme or the geologic history of the area. Visitors would be able to read the signs from their car and it would set the stage for the visitor experience. The main objective of the signs would be to establish a sense of place for visitors and put the setting into perspective. The signs would also elicit excitement for the visit.



Figure 12. Example “read from car” sign. Image for concept only. Permission not obtained.

Other Interpretive Media

Sound elements for exhibits

Staff members at the nature center do not want the exhibits to be highly technical, but are interested in incorporating some electronic media into the new nature center. In order to balance visitor's desires for the type of experience they would like have, elements that involve sound should be paired with headphones or located in an area that would not be disruptive to other visitors.

Potential sound elements:

- Outdoor microphone placed in the bird feeding sanctuary that pipes natural sounds into the building
- "Sounds of the season" display that plays natural and animal sounds from different seasons. This element could be combined with a type of visual matching game for children.
- Exterior trailside display on birds could include a sound element for different songs and calls. Trailside exhibits with sound elements should be located away from major visitor areas, like the salmon viewing deck.

Mobile Media

Podcasts are recommended to highlight the center's interpretive themes. Visitors could download the podcasts and listen to them at home or bring them to the nature center to enhance their experience outdoors. Similar to the content that would be offered in the Rodak Nature Trail brochure, the podcasts could provide more detail and include the voices of the center's naturalists.

Another podcast could combine an exercise route with information about the trail. For example, a 20-minute podcast that has catchy music, prompts listeners to do certain actions (like walk quickly, pump their arms, and breathe deeply), and shares natural history information could guide them along the Rodak Nature Trail. A great example of this type of media is the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area's "Healthy River, Healthy You" podcast. The podcast is marketed to help you *"take steps toward building a healthier lifestyle and river by offering health and environment tips and fun river facts and history while you walk alongside the Mississippi River"* (<http://www.nps.gov/miss/hrhy.htm>).