

Recreation and Tourism in South-Central Alaska: Patterns and Prospects

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Abstract

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Based on data from various sources, this report describes the extent and nature of recreation and tourism in south-central Alaska. Current activities, past trends, and prospective developments are presented. Particular attention is given to activities that occur on, or are directly affected by management of, the Chugach National Forest. Recreation and tourism in and around the forest are also placed in a larger context. The Chugach National Forest is heavily used as a scenic resource by motorists and waterborne passengers; road access to the forest supports recreation activities such as fishing, camping, hiking, and wildlife viewing. Although the annual rate of increase in visitors to south-central Alaska seems to have slowed in the late 1990s, evidence indicates that currently both visitors and Alaska residents are increasingly seeking active forms of recreation and “soft adventure.” These demands, combined with likely capacity constraints at well-known attractions in Alaska and entrepreneurial efforts to provide short-duration recreation and tourism experiences, may lead to increasing use of the Chugach National Forest.

Keywords: Tourism, recreation, south-central Alaska, Chugach National Forest, land management planning.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Methods

Introduction

This report describes the extent and nature of recreation and tourism activities within south-central Alaska. We consider current activity levels, past trends in participation in these activities, and future prospects for change. We focus particularly on recreation and tourism activities on the Chugach National Forest, while attempting to place these activities within a larger regional context.

Although difficult to measure, tourism and recreation is the only basic economic sector in Alaska that has grown steadily since statehood (Goldsmith 1997). Because it is fundamentally tied to worldwide population and income, the sector has the potential for significant growth. Future growth in the demand for recreation and tourism opportunities on the Chugach National Forest presents both challenges and opportunities to forest planners. Successful planning requires a solid empirical understanding of both current patterns and past trends in recreation and tourism activities throughout south-central Alaska. This report describes our attempts to collect, compile, and extract the available data to provide this empirical foundation.

Study Area and Time Period

The study area extends east and south from the Alaska Range, through the Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains and Prince William Sound, and into the Wrangell-St. Elias Mountains ending at the Canadian border (fig. 1). For statistical analysis purposes, it encompasses the following places: Kenai Peninsula Borough, Municipality of Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the Valdez-Cordova Census Area.

Kodiak Island is excluded from the study area. Although it contains significant wildland resources, it is a fundamentally different market as the island is not visited by large cruise ships and is largely inaccessible to the major population centers of Alaska.

We considered past trends over the 10-year period from 1989 to 1998. For many sources, a full 10

years of data are not available or feasible to collect. In these cases, we used 1989 (or 1988), 1993, and 1998 as benchmark years that capture the 10-year trend. When considering the future, we generally asked interview sources to speculate about the next 5 to 10 years.

Challenges in Measuring Recreation and Tourism

Recreation and tourism activities are not classified as distinct economic sectors by standard economic data systems such as the standard industrial classification system. This is mainly because recreation and tourism activities are defined by their purpose rather than by the nature of goods and services consumed. In economics jargon, we could say that the recreation and tourism industry is defined by the source of demand rather than the nature of the supply. For example, there is no simple way to know whether a given tank of gasoline is being sold to someone engaging in a recreation or nonrecreation activity; also, that same tank of gasoline may be used by the same person for recreational purposes one day and for nonrecreational purposes on another day.

In addition, the consumer of tourism and recreation experiences often purchases several goods and services and uses them as inputs to “produce” the experience. For example, an angler might fly to Anchorage; rent a car; purchase gasoline, food, and a fishing license; drive to the Kenai River; and go fishing with a licensed guide. Only in the rare case where all these inputs are first purchased by an entrepreneur and then resold as a complete package to a final consumer can we measure the level of recreation and tourism activity as the economic output of a conventional industry. In practice, such opportunities are rare in the standard economic data on sales, wages, employment, etc. As a result, the recreation and tourism sector of the economy is less visible, and its importance may be more difficult to measure than that of other industries.

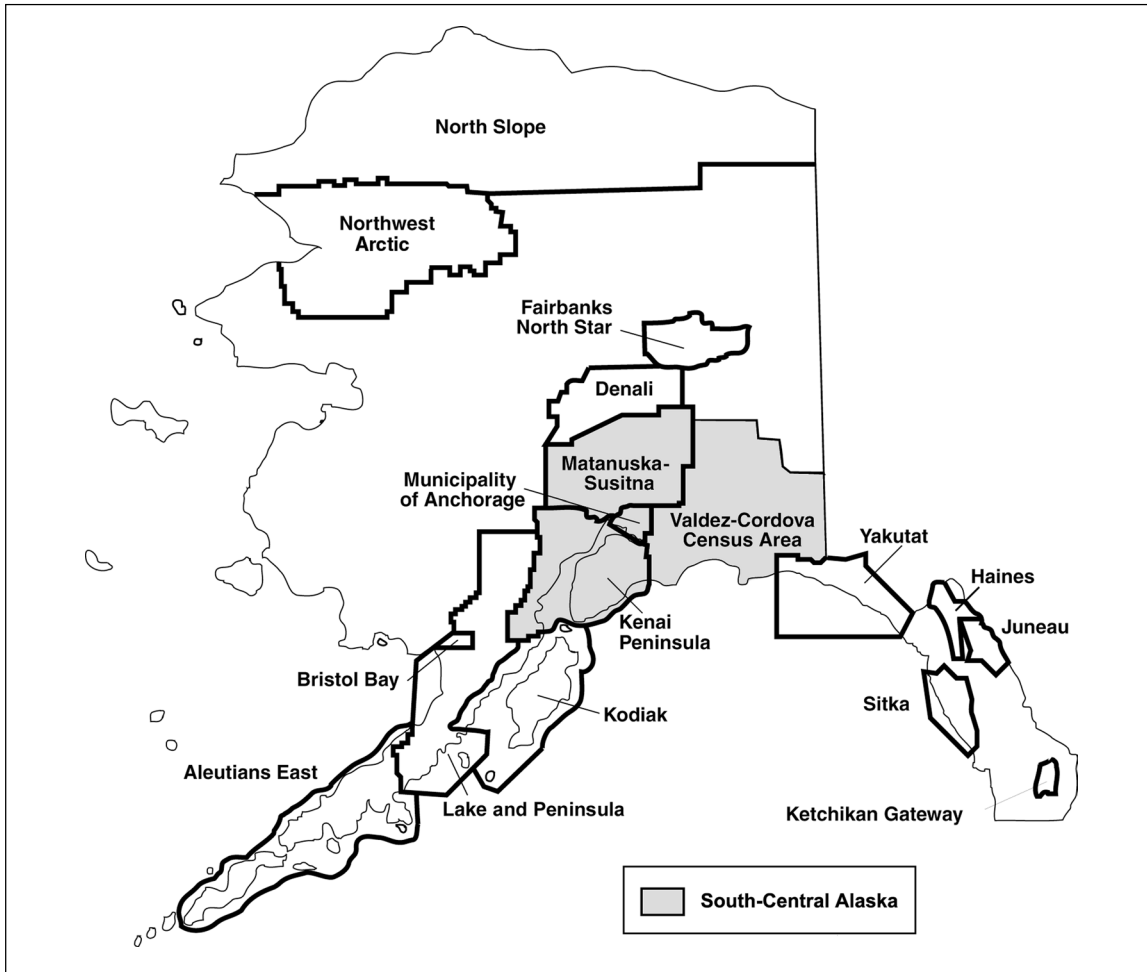


Figure 1—Alaska and the south-central region.

To overcome this problem, economic analysts usually resort to two complementary approaches. First, they try to use survey data to determine actual activity patterns and the associated economic expenditures, including the participant’s time. Second, they use either the survey data or other information to allocate parts of the output of the conventionally measured economic sectors to the recreation and tourism category.

Methods

Data Sources

Because of time and resource constraints, we did not use additional survey research. Instead, we relied on various existing quantitative data

sources and interviews to present an overview of recreation and tourism activities.

The quantitative data sources we used for this study include:

- Chugach National Forest recreation use data
- National Park Service use data
- Alaska State Parks use data
- Alaska Visitor Statistics Program reports
- Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau data and studies
- Alaska Department of Transportation traffic counts
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game angler surveys and license data

- Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development business license files
- Alaska Department of Safety vehicle registration records
- Alaska cities and boroughs with sales and bed taxes
- Previous surveys and special studies for specific purposes or clients
- Prince William Sound kayak use database (generated as a special study and updated for this report).

The interviews include more than 120 semistructured conversations with industry operators, long-time observers, community residents, and agency staff (see app. 2).

Analysis Methods

We used two principal approaches to analyze the collected data and information. First, we used simple statistical and graphical techniques to show the relation of our data to recreation and tourism in particular places. Second, we tried to combine and compare the information from different sources to draw internally consistent conclusions about the past, present, and future of the recreation and tourism industry in south-central Alaska.

Organization of This Report

In Chapter 2 we present and discuss data that describe recreation and tourism activities on the Chugach National Forest. We then present a data set on recreational back-country use in western Prince William Sound. This is a rapidly growing activity and serves as an indicator of larger patterns of change.

With a tentative, quantitative concept of recreation and tourism use patterns on the Chugach National Forest established, we review other quantitative data from throughout south-central Alaska in Chapter 3. This provides a regional perspective for the observed recreation and tourism patterns on the Chugach National Forest. After the quantitative review, we extract the qualitative data from our interviews in Chapter 4 and consider how these perspectives support or refute the hypotheses suggested by the quantitative data.

Finally, in Chapter 5 we draw some general conclusions from the evidence and speculate about the implications these conclusions may have for future recreation and tourism activities in south-central Alaska and on the Chugach National Forest.