

RECREATION RESOURCES

III. C. 4. Visual, Wilderness, & Recreation Resources

Visual Resources: The reader is referred to reports by the following agencies for more indepth descriptions of the area's scenic environment: the Joint Federal/State Land Use Planning Commission (1978), the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks (1978 and 1979), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (1978).

Kenai Peninsula: Much of the following description is taken from a 1978 report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, entitled, "Visual Resources Inventory of the Chugach National Forest," and an Alaska Department of Natural Resources report entitled, "Public Interest Land Report: Kenai Lowlands" (1979).

The sheltered saltwater shorelines and bays, freshwater streams and lakes, dense forests, narrow fjords, rugged mountains, expansive snow fields and glaciers of the Kenai Peninsula combine to create some of the best examples of scenic landscapes to be found in south-central Alaska.

Glaciation has greatly influenced the appearance and character of landforms with many well drained U-shaped valley troughs, such as the Kenai River Valley, Portage, and Seward valleys. The flat character of valley bottoms permit observer access (roads, trails) throughout a large portion of the area. The valley bottom combined with the elevation relief of background snow-icefield ridges of the Kenai and Chugach Mountain Ranges present the observer with a variety of interesting landforms ranging from rounded foothills to extremely rugged ice and snow covered mountain landforms.

Geological forms in upper elevations offer rocky crests, peaks, and boulder arrangements. River-cut banks and gravel bar configurations are complex. Some lakes at lower elevations, such as Kenai Lake, have significant gravel beaches.

A great variety of waterforms, including a large number of lakes in glacier carved basins, occur on the peninsula. There are at least 16 major lakes and numerous smaller or less accessible lakes. There are a minimum of 13 major streams or river drainages with numerous side drainages. Some of the streams or lakes carry glacial silt which reduces their visual attractiveness and productivity. Turnagain Arm exhibits some interesting saltwater tidal fluctuations and currents. Several dramatic examples of glaciers extending to salt or fresh water, such as Portage and Harding Glacier, are present.

The broad, relatively flat expanse of land between Cook Inlet and the mountains constitutes the Kenai lowlands. This area contains most of the peninsula's residential and industrial development. Areas of burned timber and old seismic lines detract from the scenic quality of the lowland landscape.

The Sterling Highway is an unusually scenic highway corridor. It is also one of the only highways in southcentral Alaska to parallel the coast. Driving the road from Clam Gulch south to Homer offers magnificent views west across Cook Inlet to Mount Iliamna and Mount Redoubt and a panorama of the Aleutian Range. Looking east across the rolling topography of the lowlands, one

has views of the Kenai Mountains. Scattered along the road are other notable views, for example, the overlook of Homer and Kachemak Bay from Bluff Point. Also, the view of Ninilchik Village and the historic Russian Orthodox Church is unique. The combination of periodic views of distant mountains, historic sites, picturesque communities, and rolling forests alternating with muskeg makes the Sterling Highway a special driving experience. The following points further emphasize the importance of scenic resources along the highway:

a. The reason for an excursion to the Kenai Peninsula may be fishing or some other recreational pursuit, but an important part of the trip is the experience of getting there.

b. Driving for pleasure is still one of the country's leading recreational pursuits.

c. As the one major highway on the Kenai lowlands, the Sterling is heavily travelled during all portions of the year, especially during the summer. Vehicle counts performed by the Department of Transportation indicate that average daily traffic on the road has more than doubled in the last 6 years. Traffic volumes during the summer season are approximately 50 percent higher than the average monthly traffic volume.

Kodiak Island: Much of Kodiak Island is mountainous. Many peaks rise more than 1,000 feet above sea level. Many are sharp-crested; some contain small glaciers. The only noted exception to the island's characteristic rugged, steep, indented coastline is at the southwestern side. There, the coastline is relatively smooth. Lakes on the island are drained by short, swift, clear streams. Several lakes more than a mile long are found in the southwestern part of the island, and small ponds and chains of lakes are scattered throughout the island.

Afognak Island: The western portion of Afognak Island is composed of rounded mountains with elevations of up to 2,300 feet. Grass-forb-shrub vegetation typifies this side of the island. Most of the eastern area of the island consists of gently rolling terrain. Pure stands of Sitka spruce occur here. Afognak Island has no glaciers. The shoreline of the island is generally steep, rocky, and irregular. Numerous clear lakes and tundra ponds dot the island, and several streams have interesting flow characteristics which have resulted in waterfalls and pools.

Alaska Peninsula: Practically all of the Alaska Peninsula is roadless. It is an area of superb and pristine beauty. Rugged mountains, including numerous active volcanoes, dominate the coastline. Several measure more than 7,000 feet high; bare rock is common above the 2,000-foot elevation. Rugged cliffs form much of the coastline. Earthquakes are frequent, especially in the southern half of the peninsula. Clear lakes, some exceptionally large, and streams are scattered throughout the peninsula. The area north of Cape Douglas is perhaps the most frequently viewed portion of the peninsula. It can be seen from the Kenai Peninsula where the highway offers easy viewing access. Mounts Redoubt, Augustine, and Iliamna, volcanoes with heights reaching 10,197, 4,025, and 10,016 feet respectively, are the most notable peaks. The McNeil River State Game Sanctuary is an important brown bear viewing area. Katmai National Monument makes up much of the Shelikof Strait side of the Alaska Peninsula. Its mountains, including several volcanoes, the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, its numerous pristine lakes and streams; and its steep, rugged, indented coastline make the area visually outstanding.

Wilderness Resources: The wilderness experience can be considered subjective given the diversity of wild land environments and the individual's perception of wild land characteristics. Much of the Kodiak Archipelago, the Kenai Peninsula, and the Alaska Peninsula can be considered de facto wilderness in the

context of Federal definitions (Wilderness Act of 1964, 16 USC 1131; USDI, Bureau of Land Management, 1978; USDA Forest Service, 1979).

Recreation Resources:

Kenai Peninsula: The Kenai Peninsula is one of the State's major playgrounds. With its diverse scenery, wildlife, fishery, and water resources, and its accessibility to Alaska's major population centers, the peninsula offers unusual opportunities for high quality recreation. Sightseeing, fishing, hunting, boating, camping, photography, berry picking, cross-country skiing, wildlife viewing, hiking, and snowmobiling are among the available opportunities. Sportfishing is the single leading recreational activity (Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1979). The Alaska Department of Fish and Game calculates that 54 percent of the State's sport fishing effort occurs in the Cook Inlet area and most of this takes place on rivers or streams in the Kenai lowlands. Sightseeing along the Sterling highway is another major recreational pastime.

Some of the most heavily used areas on the peninsula include Homer, Ninilchik, Clam Gulch, Kasilof, Deep Creek, the Russian River, and the Anchor River. The scenery, moderate climate, and recreational opportunities draw many visitors to Homer. The city's two campgrounds are not enough to handle the large crowds which flock to Alaska's "Little Switzerland" during summer months. At Clam Gulch, over 3,000 clamdiggers have been observed on the beach during one spring low tide. More than 500 parked cars have been counted in the immediate vicinity at one time (Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1979). This wayside contains only 20 picnic sites and no overnight facilities.

Late spring and summer salmon fishing draws many people to Deep Creek and the Ninilchik, Kasilof, Anchor, Kenai, and Russian Rivers. Use of existing facilities in each area exceeds present capacities (Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1979). Alaska Department of Fish and Game estimates indicate that sportfishing activity on the peninsula will increase dramatically in the next 5 years.

The peninsula contains a portion of the Chugach National Forest and the Kenai National Moose Range as well as three major State parks and recreation areas and eleven State waysides.

Chugach National Forest: The forest is divided administratively into three areas: the Cordova/Prince William Sound area, the Kenai area, and Afognak Island.

The Kenai section of the national forest is used heavily for recreation because of available opportunities and because of the forest's accessibility and proximity to the majority of the State's population. Eighty-eight percent of the forest's recorded recreation use in 1978 occurred on the Kenai (USDA Forest Service, 1979).

Available facilities include campgrounds, cabins, miles of trails, and an interpretive center. Several small lodges operate under special use permits. The Forest Service also administers permits for numerous vacation residences and a major ski resort. Most of the forest's 188 miles of road are on the Kenai Peninsula. Next to sightseeing, the most popular recreational activities on the Kenai are fishing, camping, hiking, picnicking, and hunting. The leading attraction for most sightseeing visitors is the Portage Glacier Visitor Center (USDA Forest Service, 1979). The Russian River attracts the greatest number of sport fishermen.

In 1978, use of two of the largest campgrounds on the forest, Trail River and Russian River, was 12 percent and 105 percent respectively (of the rated capacity). Both rivers are located on the Kenai Peninsula. Use of backcountry cabins on the Kenai ranged from 17 percent to 253 percent, and averaged 123 percent

of the theoretical capacity (USDA, Forest Service, 1979).

Kenai National Moose Range: The Moose Range is considered by many Alaskans to be the region's most important outdoor recreational resource. It was created to protect moose habitat and promote a continued high moose population in the region. Encompassing 2,894 square miles of land and water, the range offers camping, hiking, and boating opportunities. One of the more popular activities is taking a canoe trip on the Swanson River Canoe Trail System. Regulated hunting and fishing are also permitted (Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1976).

Alaska State Park System: The Kachemak Bay State Park and Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park encompass over 300,000 acres of marine coastal wilderness on the Kenai Peninsula. Access is via Homer by aircraft or boat. Five camp sites are located at Kachemak Bay State Park; no development has occurred at the Wilderness Park.

The Captain Cook Recreation Area is a 3,620 acre site bordering Cook Inlet and is 25 miles north of the city of Kenai. Site development includes campgrounds with a total of 79 campsites, picnic areas, and swimming and boating facilities. The area receives little use compared to other areas closer to the Sterling highway. Most of the 11 State waysides offer camping, fishing, and picnicing. Some have trails and boat launches. Many are heavily used during summer months.

Kenai Borough Parks and Recreation: The Kenai Peninsula Borough and the cities of Homer, Kenai, and Soldotna have comprehensive development plans which include descriptions of existing recreation and proposals for a number of recreational facilities and parks located near areas of residential development. The 1970 borough plan is currently being updated and should be available by 1981. The other plans were revised or completed in 1978, 1979, and 1979 respectively.

Kodiak Island: The Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge covers much of Kodiak Island. It was established to preserve the feeding and breeding grounds for the brown bear and other wildlife. Recreation is permitted on the refuge as long as it does not interfere with wildlife protection management. Residents of towns bordering the refuge use it regularly for recreation. The number of off-island visitors to the refuge is small, but growing (personal communication, USFWS, Kodiak, AK, April 25, 1980). Twelve recreation cabins are provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; wilderness camping is allowed anywhere on the refuge. A private lodge at Karluk and several private guide camps further serve recreational demand. An interpretive center in Kodiak is scheduled for completion in FY 1981 (personal communication, USFWS, Kodiak, AK, April 25, 1980). Major recreation activities on the refuge are bear hunting, deer hunting, freshwater fishing, and trapping. Wildlife photography is becoming an increasingly popular recreational pastime. Bear hunting is well distributed throughout the refuge because it is regulated by Alaska Department of Fish and Game permits. The most popular and well-known sportfishing area on the refuge is the Karluk River. Here, anglers seek king salmon in May and June and steelhead trout in October. It is not uncommon to see seven or eight people fishing at the portage on any day during the summer.

Kodiak Island Borough Parks and Recreation Program: The borough has recently adopted a Parks and Recreation Plan which focuses on facility development in the Chiniak Bay area. The plan recommends several locations for development of improved park and recreational facilities. Some of the recommended facilities are to be coordinated with the city of Kodiak's recreation programs.

Afognak Island: Afognak Island is part of the Chugach National Forest. In 1978, the island accounted for only one percent of

the national forest's recorded recreation use (USDA Forest Service, 1979). Difficult access restricts visitation; either floatplane or boat must be used to reach the island. There are 25 miles of road and 7 miles of trail on Afognak. Facilities on the island consist of five Forest Service maintained cabins, private guidecamps, and a wilderness lodge. In 1978, none of the Forest Service cabins received over 44 percent use (USDA Forest Service, 1979). The U.S. Coast Guard maintains a major recreational facility on Little Waterfall Bay. Bear and elk hunting draw most of the island's visitors. Afognak Island and nearby Raspberry Island are the only two areas in Alaska where elk are found.

Alaska Peninsula: Nearly all of the Alaska Peninsula is wilderness. Access is restricted to boat or plane, so visitors are few relative to the Kenai Peninsula and Kodiak Island. Most non-local visitors are from the Anchorage area. Major recreational activities on the peninsula are caribou, bear, and moose hunting, freshwater fishing, sightseeing, and wildlife viewing. Several private lodges are available for recreational use. The most frequently visited areas include Katmai National Monument and the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary. Katmai is the least frequently visited of all of Alaska's national monuments (personal communication, National Park Service, Anchorage, AK, April 24, 1980). Limited transportation and availability of lodging are two reasons for this. Most recreation within Katmai occurs at Lake Camp, accessible by road from King Salmon; near the Brooks Lodge, one of two private lodges within the monument; and at the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, accessible by road from the Brooks Lodge. In 1979, 10,659 visits to the monument were recorded. Of these, some 8,000 were to Lake Camp and most visits were by residents of King Salmon. Flightseeing tours over the monument and bus tours from Brooks Camp to the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes are available. One tent campground and nearly 11 miles of maintained trail are located in the vicinity of the Brooks Lodge. Hunting is not permitted within the monument.

The McNeil River State Game Sanctuary is growing in popularity as a brown bear viewing area. Visits during summer months are limited by Alaska Department of Fish and Game permits. In recent years, demand for permits has far exceeded the number issued (see table III.C.5.-1).

Polly Creek, at the northern end of the peninsula, is a popular spot for gathering razor clams.

Table III.C.5.-1
McNeil River Game Sanctuary Visitor Information

Year	Person Days ^a
1969	48
1970	215 ^b
1971	51
1972 ^c	
1973 ^c	183
1974	204
1975	345
1976	256
1977	365
1978	390
1979	d

^a One person day is equivalent to one person visiting the sanctuary per 24 hour period.

^b Poor weather conditions resulted in lower visitation.

^c Permit system began. From 1973-1978 a 10 person per day limit was in effect from July 1 to August 25.

^d Figures not available at time of writing. Over 700 permit applications were received by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. A 5 person per day limit was in effect from July 1 to August 25.

Source: Personal Communication, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Anchorage, AK, April 24, 1980.

**III. DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED
ENVIRONMENT**

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