

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 5/2/2022 8:15:00 PM

First name: Bill

Last name: Hanson

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvements #53780

As a 4-decade inhabitant of Southeast Alaska, I have always supported carefully managed tourism. When managed sustainably, carefully, with respect for the needs and culture of Alaskans, tourism offers many opportunities for tourists to expand their horizons. As Alaskans, we have a chance to share our love for the land and cultures and landscapes that inspire us and others worldwide.

So, I'm very disappointed and concerned to discover that the MGVFI and MGRA run roughshod over local uses, and the places we love within the MGRA.

The proposal increases Visitor

I wasn't anti-tourism when use in the MGRA was 100,000 visitors, or 200,000 visitors or the 490,600 people who used the visitor center in 2019. Now, I'm scratching my head wondering when this is going to stop.

Capacity for the "Visitor Center Unit" will jump from 490,000 people in 2019 to nearly 1.0 million. I completely oppose establishing the "Remote Glacier Visitor Area," with 50,000 visitors at the base of the glacier. This is not "sharing" with local residents. It will completely overwhelm local use. For me, the vast expansion of boat traffic on Mendenhall Lake will have an even more intrusive presence than the huge expansion of cruise ships does on downtown Juneau.

I oppose motorized boat traffic on Mendenhall Lake. It will increase noise pollution not just on the lake, but on the surrounding trails.

I'm supportive of the current level of limited remote access for small commercial operators. I oppose the huge increase of visitors to the face of the glacier. I believe it will have a detrimental effect on everyone, not just local residents.

How in the world can the plan as proposed "protect the spaces that Juneau residents use" and stated in the Master Plan themes? This plan overwhelms these same spaces with an so many visitors that Juneau residents are likely to cease use or greatly decrease use.

The plan benefits commercial users, but it will destroy and degrade the landscape values including: a sense of remoteness, wild lands, trails and lake experiences that are NOT in the company of hundreds or thousands of people every day.

There's a lot to chew on in the Forest Service's draft environmental impact statement that allows even more commercial visitors at the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area.

This is a Tongass Forest Plan-designated Special Interest Area. And yet, it is being carved up, despite objectives that include: 1) "Provide opportunities for public study, use, and enjoyment of unique natural areas that are suitable to, and do not compromise, the characteristics of each area and 2) Allow only facilities and recreation developments that contribute to the interpretation of natural features or provide for compatible public uses, and that blend with the natural setting." 3) Provide for existing Recreation Opportunity Spectrum opportunities and activities, unless public use is specifically restricted for the protection of other resources." These are objectives and values that I hold dear.

I agree with the Opinion article in the Juneau Empire by Ken Post (3/17/2022):

"Here are a few examples of how the Forest Service is "protecting" areas of the recreation area around the lake:

- Expanding the Nugget Creek trail into a loop along the shoreline;
- Building a new 14-foot-wide, paved lakeshore trail along most of the south side of the lake and permitting up to 23,000 tourists into portions of Dredge Lake;
- Adding new trails along the west side of the lake;
- Allowing "exponential" visitor growth in the northwest (formerly ice caves) portion of the lake, now called the Remote Visitor Center Area. That growth will come via motorized boats on the lake, transporting up to 214,000 visitors from April through October
- Anchoring a barge with portable bathroom facilities near the Remote Visitor Center Area dock;
- The Proposed Action "would have a major effect on scenic resources;"
- "In high value use areas that are popular with Juneau residents, additional recreation experiences and easier access to more areas of the MGRA could interrupt the solitude and quiet they have come to expect in some places such as the Dredge Lakes and West Glacier Units. The Lakeshore Trail, in particular, would be expected to have an impact on walking and bird watching activities for which the area along the shoreline of the lake has become known."

How are some of these changes going to occur? The Forest Service will "rezone" units of the recreation area to accommodate more use. For example, the Visitor Center Unit would extend across the lake and absorb the ice caves area. Speaking of the Remote Glacier Visitor Area, the DEIS says, "many more" visitors at the base of the glacier and "conversational noise could approach crowd levels." This area could average 1,000 visitors per day or more during the prime part of the season. The East Glacier Trail would also be rezoned for more hikers, which means commercial use could increase 110%.

Sure, not all these changes are going to occur next year. However, the Forest Service updated its capacity in 2015 and now it is doing it again only six years later. That's how fast use is increasing. Tourism is no longer nibbling at the edges of the recreation area; it's gobbling up chunks.

Despite the increase in numbers, the 2020 McDowell Market Demand & Economic Analysis report states, "Tour operators report no noticeable change in guest satisfaction...as the glacier recedes."

This makes me wonder why people need to boat across the lake and "touch the glacier," a goal identified in the 2019 Mendenhall Glacier Master Plan. The report also stated "Responses [by guides] are mixed regarding prioritization of the remote visitor facilities and boat access" and "Tour operators hold mixed opinions about the need for boat access and remote facilities. Some operators suggested a lake cruise, but not allowing remote access. Others strongly questioned the need for remote access at all..."

Undoubtedly, locals will derive some benefit from the improvements. We'll use the trails, but is that what this proposal is really about? From all appearances, the tourist industry's continued growth is what is actually being protected."

So where does this leave me? I find that the US Forest Service is proposing a plan that will dramatically decrease the values, uses, and activities that I have admired in MGRA over the last 40 years. I believe that visitors will feel the pain of this change, but that locals are being essentially written out of the user base, with a

few crumbs tossed our way as "benefits".

And this will dramatically change my feelings about tourism in Juneau, moving me toward opposition.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment.