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Comments: To Whom It May Concern:

I spent the first 18 years of my life in the Mendenhall Valley and consider myself raised by it. I live in Montana now, which leaves me economically independent of the tourism economy of SEAK, while remaining deeply tied to the landscape of my home. In recent visits, I've been impressed with the content interpreting the changing climate to visitors at the Visitor Center.

When I read the 2019 Master Plan for the MGRA, however, I became deeply disheartened. Growing up, the chief relationship with the glacier wasn't built on having "direct access" to the ice. We were happy to simply live in its presence. I imagine the imperative has changed due to three things: 1) its accelerated retreat; 2) increased cruise ship demands; and 3) global urgency around "ice loss" and the desire for a rare experience

The values outlined in the Master Plan and even this comment proposal prioritize the cruise ship industry demands and pressure to identify "under-capitalized opportunities." This concerns me. Elevating development over longer term sustainability is unethical and a mistake. The Mendenhall Glacier is now the most visited sight in Alaska which creates an inherent temptation to milk the tour industry and reap immediate economic benefits in the relatively short run. If the visitor experience is compromised, that may be an indication of capacity. Another, more ethical approach would be to engage in crowd management, limitation of development, and even permitting.

As it stands, the plan is incongruent to the essential message of the USFS: "Caring for the land and serving people." If the land comes first, I'd like to see those values put in action. What good are our values, if they crack under pressure from industry?

Additionally, COVID-19 has revealed a fragility in the global tour and cruise ship economy. I think it is a mistake to invest millions of dollars in infrastructure that is single-serving in nature (cruise ship passengers) and reliant on a singular industry, which is now in a state of flux. In terms of the specifics of the Master Plan, I'm concerned about the environmental impact of the new trailheads and think it is an absolute mistake to build docks to put more boats on the water. Alaskans value the land above all else; that's why we live here. I am invested in finding other, meaningful ways for tourists to experience the glacier and its valley without compromising its rights and space.

If we are to recognize climate change and honor the glacier's story, the most respectful thing we can do is not chase the ice, but rather to witness its change and support a limited visitor population in understanding the land exists not for our use, but in its own right. Our job, then becomes to interpret the story it reveals, and to provide spaces for deep recognition within, about our own choices.

How can we best steward this piece of land and history? What other ways can we support visitors in having a meaningful experience, without compromising the glacier's space and sovereignty?

The glacier is a parable for the rest of the planet. Let's be the Alaskans we know we are, and be on the front lines of this new frontier: relating to the land, which is not ours, but ours to protect.

Sarah Aronson

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Sarah Aronson -Not an every day emailer; thanks for understanding.
She/Her/Hers