

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

ACTIONS TO IMPROVE TRAILS AND GROW THE ALASKA ECONOMY

This Chapter focuses on specific tools and policies that will facilitate the implementation of the projects presented in this document. By bringing together multiple agencies and stakeholders, we can increase the investments needed to better attract and retain residents, give visitors reasons to spend “one more day” in Alaska, and build a stronger, more durable Alaska economy while taking greater advantage of the potential economic benefits of outdoor recreation.

1. Invest strategically for greatest impact

- expand Fall/Winter/Spring opportunities - grow more year-round jobs
- focus on adventures for the “missing middle”
- create world class “long trails”
- develop better gateway towns
- provide “must see” high volume outdoor recreation destinations
- invest in a “bigger pie” for all tourism sectors

2. Spread the benefits

- improve trails in all regions of Alaska
- improve all kinds of trail-based activities – motorized & non, summer & winter, resident and visitor

3. Stabilize and expand resources for trails & outdoor recreation

- expand, maximize use & leverage of established federal outdoor rec funds (e.g., RTP)
- expand state & federal agency funding for operations and maintenance
- take advantage of bills pending in Congress
- solve the “Alaska Disconnect” – link growing demand for services with growing revenues
- develop partnerships to build & maintain trails

4. Streamline authorizations for public land use

- simplify trails approval regulatory process
- speed process for securing trails on state land
- expand options for commercial uses of trails

5. Improve marketing and user information

- take greater advantage of existing outdoor recreation resources
- provide the full spectrum of user info: website, visitor info centers, maps, signage

6. Political power and Leadership

- establish a state office of Outdoor Recreation
- continue to bring in new partners

7. Relentlessly make the case for all the benefits of trails

- collect better data, focused on the link between investments, use, economic impact
- include in & out of state recreation spending

8. Include outdoor recreation in “working landscapes”

- incorporate recreation into forestry, other active land uses

9. Actively guide growth through Management/ Stewardship

“These days, no place stays special by accident”

- invest in sustainable trail design, routes, construction
- “curate” recreation resources – actively, strategically plan for growth, maximize recreation values
- provide for a range of experiences, from intense and busy, to peaceful and little used
- include affected users, communities in planning

These recommendations are discussed in more detail on the following pages. We want to discuss these initial ideas with everyone who cares about Alaska’s future, and work together to refine and implement these strategies.

POLICIES AND TOOLS

1. Invest Strategically for Greatest Impact (take greater advantage of the potential economic benefits of outdoor recreation)

This section presents major themes for improving outdoor recreation in Alaska, informed by global travel and recreation market trends, experiences of successful destinations around the globe, and Alaska’s current outdoor recreation opportunities.

Increase Marketing and Infrastructure to Grow Fall/Winter/Spring activities (grow more living-wage jobs)

The more Alaska can grow Fall/Winter/Spring activities, the more the outdoor recreation and tourism industries can provide living-wage jobs.

Outdoor Adventure for the “The Missing Middle”

Alaska needs to expand opportunities for the “missing middle” of the outdoor recreation spectrum, the largest part of the outdoor recreation market. Alaska already offers many lifetimes of rugged outdoor adventures, and abundant opportunities for more passive outdoor experiences. We need more ways to enjoy outdoor Alaska that are active, accessible, affordable and memorable, but that do not require a lot of gear, experience and fitness, and provide a warm bed, good food and drink (and preferably fast internet) at the end of the day.

World Class Multi-Day “Long Trails”

While serving the “missing middle” mostly focuses on one day adventures, Alaska also needs a handful of well developed, signature “long trails”. These trails, like the routes in Europe or the Milford Sound Track in New Zealand, draw people from all over the world. Alaska particularly needs hut to hut, hotel-to-hotel trails, summer and winter, for motorized and non-motorized users. A “long trail” from Seward to Anchorage is one good possibility.

“Gateway Towns” – Walkable Center with Easy Access to Nearby Outdoor Recreation

From Whitehorse Canada, to Bend OR, Talkeetna and Sitka AK, communities are attracting visitors and residents by following the formula below:

- A concentrated, walkable center with lodging, food, bars, shopping
- Inviting trails, transit and an “active transportation” approach so it’s safe to get around without a car, and easy to reach outdoor rec. places
- Strong marketing for active recreation destinations and experiences
- Great outdoor-focused events

Alaska needs to create communities and overnight destinations that attract visitors and residents who have compelling options all over the world.

“Must See”, High Volume Outdoor Recreation Destinations

Alaska needs more outdoor recreation destinations that have the drawing power and the capacity to attract and please large volumes of visitors. The core attraction can’t be “created” but supporting infrastructure can make a big difference in how these destinations function. Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau is one of few good examples in Alaska. Anchorage and the adjoining Chugach Mountains has the potential but currently lacks a “must-see” outdoor destination with the capacity for large volume motorcoach tours and that can also attract individuals looking for more adventure.



Grooming the Denali Hwy –
Source Zach Fields



Inn to inn hikes in Portugal
<https://www.countrywalkers.com/destinations/europe/portugal/>



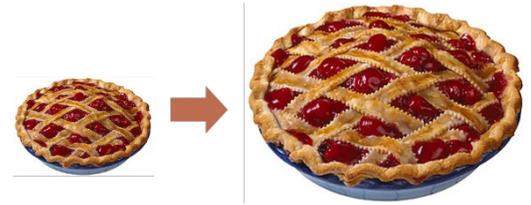
Above: Whitehorse: walkable, concentrated, connected

Below: Yehliu GeoPark, Taiwan – high volume, high quality “soft adventure”



Bigger Pie for All Sectors– Cruise, Independents, Residents

The objective of the Trail Initiative is to build support for all categories of users and tourism businesses. As noted in the previous section, from 2011-2016, the fastest growing activity for both cruise and air out-of-state visitors was hiking/nature walks. Working with tourism marketing organizations, more can be done meet the active recreation interests of all travel sectors, focused on expanded trails marketing and political support for investments.



2. Spread the Benefits – All Regions, All Kinds of Trail-based activities

From remote rural villages, to Southeast rainforests, to accessible lands on the railbelt, all of Alaska has real potential to expand outdoor recreation opportunities. That statewide scope is one of the real benefits of focusing on outdoor recreation as an economic strategy. Likewise, we need to provide options for all kinds of users: motorized and non, summer and winter, hunt and fish, sightsee and bird watch...



3. Throw off the “Poverty Mentality” – Stabilize and Expand Resources for Trails and Outdoor Recreation

Destinations competing for Alaskan visitors are building miles of trails, new trailheads, state of the art visitor centers, and revitalized walkable downtowns, while for decades, outdoor recreation has been significantly underfunded in Alaska. The best way for Alaska to avoid long term economic decline is to begin to match the investments in trails, maintenance, marketing, information found in competing states and countries. Possible options to fill this gap are below:

Maximum Use & Leverage of Federal Outdoor Recreation Funds

For the near term the key priority is sustaining existing outdoor recreation funding, even as the state faces severe fiscal challenges. The State should continue to make the investments – in staff and matching dollars – needed to leverage larger sums from federal trails and highways programs. Examples below support better trails and recreation access throughout Alaska.

- Pittman Robertson (PR) and Dingell Johnson Programs
- Recreational Trails (RTP)
- Land Water Conservation Funds (access to \$1.5 M with 50% match)
- Maximizing use of federal transportation dollars
- Continued support for the Snow Trac Program, and proposed \$5 increase in annual fee

A particular goal is getting the State to take full, timely receipt authority for all available federal funds, and allow third party use of funds, like PR funds, that might otherwise go unspent. And ensure that RTP funds are available for trail building and volunteers can use mechanized tools.

Take Advantage of Pending Congressional Legislation – “The Big Four”

- Continuing “Covid 4” Bills
- National Transportation Bill
- National Infrastructure Bill
- Great American Parks Act

RTP Two Step Leverage

1. State of AK Division of Parks invests \$106,000 in staff time, gets \$1.5 million of federal funds in return.
 2. Trail organizations get grants and translate this into 1000’s of hours of volunteer labor.
- Example:* in Delta Junction, volunteers have invested 14,000 hours in local trails, worth \$340,000 (at the federal rate of \$24.69 per volunteer hour)



Increase Agency Funding for Operations and Maintenance

Agencies – state and federal – need significantly expanded budgets to support existing and new trails and other recreation infrastructure. Two examples: Chugach State Park has a total of zero capital dollars to maintain or improve trails in the Park. Overall, the State Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation has a \$60 Million backlog in deferred maintenance, growing \$3 M per year.

Solving the “Alaska Disconnect”

Ultimately more basic approaches need to be found to provide substantial, sustained outdoor recreation investments. The key issue is solving the “Alaska disconnect”. This is the name given to the lack of fiscal policies at the state and local level that link growing demand for services with growing resources to meet that demand. Solutions include:

- Creation of local recreation service areas (local property or sales taxes go directly to meet local needs, as managed by a responsive, locally-directed service area board)
- Statewide revenue – income or sales tax, so that we do not continue to get poorer the more we grow.
- Statewide General Obligation Bonds (G.O. Bonds)

Develop Partnerships to Build and Maintain Sustainable Trails

State and Federal agencies around the nation are facing shrinking recreation and trail maintenance budgets, even as demand for these services grows. Going forward, land management agencies will increasingly require communities, businesses, non-profits, trail users, and other groups to step up and provide resources needed for trail construction and maintenance. Only with these types of partnerships will Alaska have the improved trails, public use cabins, and hut-to-hut systems we want and need. Alaska Trails and other trail organizations around Alaska have embraced this dimension of sustainability.

The Trail Stewards Program launched by Alaska Trails is building partnerships with diverse groups around the state, creating a cadre of reliable, skilled volunteers to work on trail projects. This growing program is helping to maintain existing trails and create new ones that would otherwise be impossible with just agency resources. Trail work is also a satisfying, enjoyable, and healthy way to get outside, meet new friends, and make a useful contribution.

4. Streamline Authorizations for Use of Public Land – “Regulatory Relief”

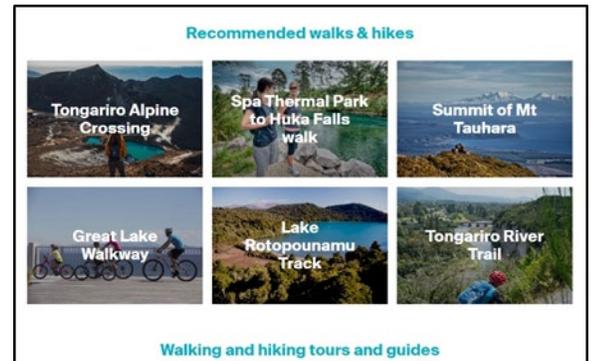
The steps from the identification of a trail need, to approval to build and use trails is remarkably slow and cumbersome, more like the process for building a major highway than a simple trail. Three specific actions that would help are outlined below:

- Simplify the permitting process
- Reserving trails on state land in Alaska today is costly, slow and difficult. The Mat Su Borough is waiting on requests for trail approvals from DNR for 5-10 years! New approaches are needed that respect the need for flexibility in the future use of state land, but allow reasonable assurance that trails can be reserved in a way that’s timely and affordable by local communities and user groups.
- New strategies are needed to make it easier for responsible commercial use of public lands by trail guides and small cruise ships. Solving this issue requires a combination of streamlined processing, adding agencies staff, expanding the supply of trails, and developing new solutions to capacity issues, such as allowing commercial use on weekdays when public use is limited. Supporting the “SOAR Act” in Congress is one step in this process.

5. Improve Outdoor Recreation Marketing and User Information – Take Greater Advantage of Existing Outdoor Recreation Resources

Better information and marketing offer cost effective means to maximize the value of trails and other outdoor recreation infrastructure and to make it more inviting for a broad range of users to get active outside. Most effective is a fully integrated package of information and marketing, that focuses on *experience* first, and then reference specific businesses as a way to have those experiences. Key elements include:

- Diverse tourism marketing materials that stoke interest.
- On-line user information, that makes it easy to set up adventures, from a one-day hike with shuttle service from downtown hotels, to a multiday snowmachine trip from lodge to lodge. (see LoveTaupo New Zealand, at right)
- High quality, hard copy collateral material – maps, trail descriptions, guidebooks
- Visitor Info Centers staffed by people armed with helpful maps and other collateral information and personal, up-to-date knowledge of outdoor recreation opportunities
- Informative, clear wayfinding signs on trails



Tongariro Alpine Crossing, New Zealand: seamless integration of Visitor Info Center, hardcopy maps, online details, vendor connections, trail signage
See <https://www.lovetapu.com> - extract above

6. Grow Political Power, Leadership

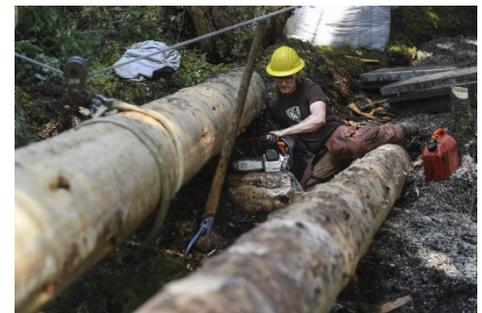
Establish a State Office of Outdoor Recreation

"Our mission," says Tom Adams, director of the Utah Office of Outdoor Recreation, "is to make sure that all Utahns can live an active lifestyle through outdoor recreation. People here tell their friends and family about Utah and tourism gets boosted. Then new businesses come to Utah. We've seen this happen time and time again. Every company we work with says that outdoor recreation is a vital point of why they're moving to Utah."¹

Starting in Utah in 2013, 14 US states have established cabinet-level outdoor recreation coordinators. Leadership at this level has helped these states made substantial advancements in the quality and diversity of outdoor recreation attractions, better coordinate strategies among different interest groups, and more quickly solve continuing policy issues. Creating comparable leadership in Alaska could help our state develop and implement strategies to take greater advantage of underdeveloped recreation resource and increase the economic benefits of outdoor recreation.

Support new partnerships, create a stronger outdoor recreation/trails coalition

Build political support across interest groups and party lines, particularly to bridge the gap between outdoor recreation/trail supporters and the skeptical views that traditionally have characterized Alaska businesses and more conservative political leaders. Follow the successful lead of the Mat Su Trails and Parks Foundation to partner with health foundations, or like in Juneau, set up a community foundation with strong ties to outdoor recreation. That foundation has been a key source of funding for slow, steady completion of the Treadwell Ditch trail.



Duncan Campbell, of Trail Mix, works on a log bridge for a new Treadwell Gorge reroute trail on the Treadwell Ditch Trail. Source: Michael Penn | Juneau Empire

¹ <https://siteselection.com/cc/utah/2018/outdoor-recreation-the-promised-land.cfm>

7. Relentlessly make the case for the economic, health, quality of life and other benefits of trails

The State of Alaska, through the Alaska Visitor Statistics Program (AVSP) and the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Program (SCORP) have gathered useful information on trends in visitation and outdoor recreation in Alaska, subject to the vagaries of the State budget. This data collection effort is essential for smart strategies to understand trends and values and make smart decisions that help maximize the potential of outdoor recreation. Priorities to improve and continue this work include:

- place greater emphasis on economic impact of different types of activities
- ensure surveys are done summer and fall/winter/spring (not done in recent years)
- As is done in other states and countries, include recreation spending and behaviors by both in & out of state recreators (see photo below)

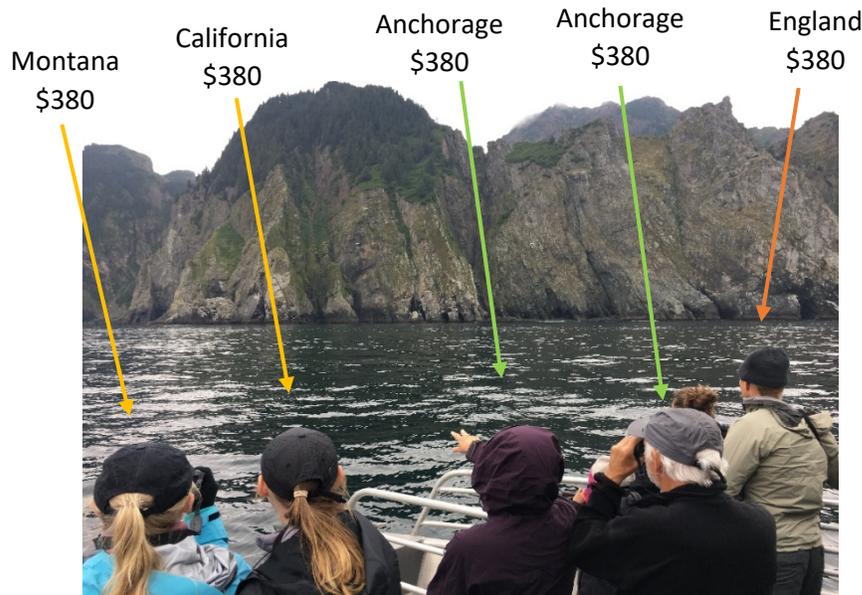


IMAGE SHOWS WHAT THESE WHALE WATCHERS IN DAY HARBOR SPENT FOR THE TRIP

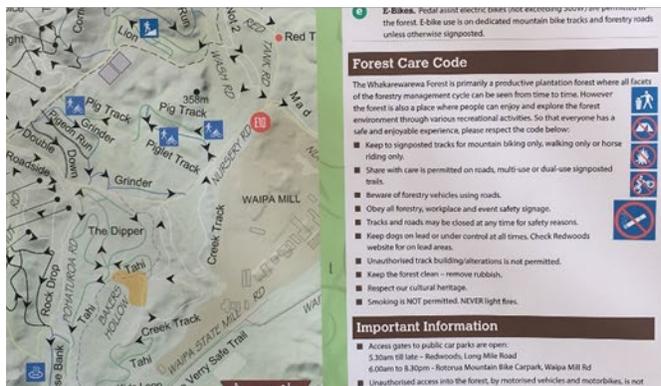
In-state dollars are just as appreciated by this Seward based charter company as out-of-state money.

And for you economists, “import substitution” is a legitimate increase in Alaska’s base economy (that’s when you or I have the option to stay and spend in Alaska rather than going outside, say for a hut to hut, or inn-to-inn bike or hiking trip

Source: Chris Beck

8. Include outdoor recreation opportunities in “working landscapes”

Alaskans tend to fall into polarized viewpoints, some supporting fully unconstrained growth; others pushing to leave natural landscapes unaltered. Examples in Alaska and around the world show how resource development can benefit outdoor recreation. Access to past and ongoing mining areas create some of Alaska’s most popular destinations – Hatcher Pass, McCarthy, Hope, for example. Two of the world’s most successful, high profile mountain biking areas – in Bend Oregon and Rotorua New Zealand – share a trail system with active timber harvests areas (see images below).



9. Actively Guide Growth: Alaska Land Management/Land Stewardship

Alaska has never engaged in the broad planning needed to take full advantage of our state's underdeveloped outdoor recreation potential. Planning is needed because outdoor recreation and tourism takes place on our public lands, in our communities, and generate and use public funding. The benefits and potential adverse impacts of outdoor recreation and tourism extend over large portions of the private sector and affect daily lives of Alaskan residents. Given these realities, this last section offers starting ideas on how we can both encourage and guide expanded outdoor recreation in Alaska.

Some starting reference points:

- *Invest in sustainable trail design, routes, and construction* Sustainability considers not just the initial construction of a trail, but also the needs of the trail throughout its lifetime. A sustainable trail is placed in the proper location and has been designed and built for that terrain and the type and projected amount of use. Upfront investment in sustainable trails saves substantial costs and time spent in ongoing maintenance. A sustainable trail provides high quality experiences, protects the environment, and attracts the support of partners and communities. Alaska Trails is committed to sustainable trails, and carries out this goal in multiple ways, including sponsoring sustainable trails design sessions each year at the annual spring Alaska Trails Conference.
- *“Curate” our outdoor recreation resources.* In a state with vast public lands, including 100 million acres of State land (an area the size of California) we have a tremendous opportunity to do what we have never done – to consciously maximize outdoor recreation opportunities. A perfect example is Chugach State Park, where trails and other facilities exist more by happenstance than a comprehensive consideration of what could bring the most benefits.
- *Growing outdoor recreation can create problems.* Alaskans are understandably skeptical about expanding outdoor recreation, especially for visitors, as nobody wants to see roads busier, or “their” trail or fishing spot be more crowded. Towns like Talkeetna benefit from tourism growth, but at some point the capacity to support growth – e.g., for sewer treatment – is not sufficient for demand. Equally important is managing growth to sustain the quality of places as destinations, as well as a place to live. The BMP (Best Management Practice) program in Juneau is one successful model of problem solving through better communication.
- *Planning at multiple scales.* Planning is needed at the local, regional and state scales, for example in the comprehensive plans for individual communities and in boroughs and regions without boroughs, like Bristol Bay or the Upper Copper River basin. Where plans do exist more resources are needed to act on the directions set out in the plans.
- *Planning with multiple partners.* The outdoor recreation industry is diverse and at times divided. Effective planning – for infrastructure, for marketing, for funding – requires working with diverse user groups, agencies, and non-profits.
- *Maximizing benefits requires balancing growth and restraint.* Alaska's core competitive advantage – what distinguishes our state from prominent outdoor recreation destinations like Switzerland or New Zealand – is our intact ecosystems, wildlife and wilderness. Good planning is needed to both grow jobs and business opportunities but also retain these unique values.
- *Minimize trail user conflicts through education, good trail design, signage.*
- *Provide for a range of experiences.* Alaska needs to deliberately provide a range of intensities of outdoor recreation environments, from wild/quiet to developed/active. Focusing growth in a handful of high capacity, destinations helps keep other places quiet.

The Bottom Line: “These days no place stays special by accident”

If we're smart, we can grow our economy while sustaining what we and visitors most love about our state. But this will require new levels of planning and investment in active outdoor recreation and tourism. As is shown by locations around the world, these investments pay tremendous dividends in jobs and business growth, health and the pleasures of getting outside.