

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Wildlife Observation, Wildlife Photography, Environmental Education, and Interpretation

Refuge Name: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Establishment and Acquisition Authority: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge, Arctic Refuge) was established by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) (Public Law 96-487 Stat. 2371) on December 2, 1980. The Refuge boundary encompassed 19.64 million acres of land, including the 8.83-million acre Arctic National Wildlife Range (Range), which was established on December 6, 1960, by Public Land Order 2214. ANILCA re-designated the Range as part of Arctic Refuge, designated 7.16 million acres of the Refuge as Wilderness, and designated three wild rivers. In 1988, Public Law 100-395 added 325,000 acres of lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to the Refuge. An additional 1.3 million acres of land, originally selected by the State of Alaska under the Alaska Statehood Act (Public Law 85-508) but later relinquished, was added to the Refuge in two actions occurring in 1983 and 1985. Both these additions were of lands already within the boundaries of the Refuge.

Refuge Purposes: ANILCA established four purposes for the Refuge (including lands and waters in the original Range):

- i. *to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, the Porcupine caribou herd (including participation in coordinated ecological studies and management of this herd and the Western Arctic caribou herd), polar bears, grizzly bears, muskox, Dall's sheep, wolves, wolverines, snow geese, peregrine falcons and other migratory birds and Arctic char and grayling;*
- ii. *to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats;*
- iii. *to provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraphs (i) and (ii), the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents; and*
- iv. *to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in paragraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity within the Refuge.*

Public Land Order 2214 established the original Arctic National Wildlife Range “for the purpose of preserving unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values...” These pre-ANILCA purposes apply only to those lands and waters in the original Range, and they remain in force and effect only to the extent they are not inconsistent with ANILCA or the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANILCA Section 305; 603 FW 2.8).

The Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577) creates the following additional purposes for the designated Wilderness area in the Refuge's boundaries; these purposes are within and supplemental to the Refuge's ANILCA and Range purposes: secure an enduring resource of Wilderness; protect and preserve the Wilderness character of areas in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS); administer the NWPS for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as Wilderness; and gather and disseminate information regarding the use and enjoyment of Wilderness areas.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission: The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee]).

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Description of Use(s): This determination re-evaluates the following non-guided (non-commercial) wildlife-dependent activities: wildlife observation, wildlife photography and/or videography, environmental education, and interpretation. These uses were found to be compatible under the original Comprehensive Conservation Plan in 1988 and were again determined to be compatible in 1994. While some visitors come to the Refuge specifically to engage in one or more of these non-consumptive activities, many visitors also include these activities as part of a Refuge hunting or fishing trip. (Compatibility of general non-commercially-guided hunting and fishing is evaluated separately). Associated activities, such as camping, backpacking, and hiking, support these wildlife-dependent activities for the purposes of this evaluation. Of these priority public uses, wildlife observation and photography are by far the most widespread.

Interpretive and educational efforts occur primarily at the airports in the communities of Arctic Village and Kaktovik, which are launching off areas for Refuge trips, and at the Arctic Interagency Visitor Center in the Dalton Highway Corridor rather than on the Refuge. Limited, informal interpretive and environmental education services are provided during contacts with visitors on the Refuge by staff on routine patrol. No formal environmental education or interpretive programs are regularly conducted on the Refuge nor are any formal on-site programs planned under the Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Visitors take advantage of opportunities to view and photograph wildlife, plants, and landscapes in the Refuge. Use is concentrated in areas that are accessible to rivers or larger lakes. These areas generally provide reliable opportunities for wildlife observation, especially

along major rivers including the Canning, Chandalar, Hulahula, Kongakut, Sheenjek, and Wind Rivers.

Refuge visitors usually camp on the Refuge for several days while engaging in the above activities. Campers use tents ranging from small backpacking tents to larger multi-person tents. People can visit the Refuge year-round, but most of the activities occur during the warmer months.

Most of these activities predate the establishment of the Refuge in 1960 and expansion in 1980. Recreational settings on the Refuge are remote. Typical forms of access for all areas of the Refuge include fixed-wing airplanes, motorboats, non-motorized boats, hiking, snowshoeing, snowmobiles, cross-country skiing, and other non-motorized means. However, most non-local visitors access the Refuge by commercial air transportation services from Arctic Village, Coldfoot, Fairbanks, Galbraith Lake, Happy Valley, Kavik, or Kaktovik. Private boats and airplanes are the most common means of access for local rural residents or the relatively few visitors not using commercial transporters. Day trips to remote areas of the Refuge are uncommon for visitors interested in wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and sightseeing. However, day trips are noticeably increasing in areas near the Dalton Highway Corridor.

Availability of Resources: Adequate Refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage these wildlife-dependent recreational activities. Administrative staff time primarily involves phone conversations, written correspondence, public use surveys, and interaction with visitors at the visitor center. Staff will also be involved with any subsequent step-down planning (visitor use management) or for monitoring recreational activities.

Field work associated with administering this use primarily involves conducting patrols to increase visitor compliance with State and Federal regulations. Refuge staff members opportunistically conduct outreach with visitors to minimize the impacts of camping, improve understanding of local residents' subsistence activities, and increase awareness of private inholdings and property. Outreach efforts at the Arctic Interagency Visitor Center in Coldfoot emphasize Leave No Trace or other minimal impact camping and hiking practices. Estimated staff time to annually monitor these activities is 1-20 days/year.

Anticipated Impacts of Use(s): These activities are anticipated to have negligible to minor effects on most Refuge resources. Possible localized adverse impacts to some plant and wildlife species could occur, but the activities would not have any long-term population-level impacts on Refuge plants and wildlife. Positive effects on the local economy, though small, are anticipated from these uses.

During peak visitation, limited landing areas in some drainages may contribute to perceived crowding and user conflicts. Additionally, some localized vegetation damage caused by landing aircraft or camping on non-durable surfaces has been reported. These are emerging issues that need to be further monitored and evaluated. Future actions may be needed to address these concerns.

Other impacts associated with these activities could be seen. Disturbance to vegetation is site specific, minor, and long-term and would likely be restricted to campsites that receive repetitive use and to aircraft landings on non-durable surfaces. Landing aircraft on non-

durable surfaces can cause minor to moderate site-specific and long-term effects to Refuge habitats and vegetation. In several areas, soil compaction, scarring, and occasionally rutting have been documented. This is not a problem where aircraft land on durable surfaces such as gravel and sand bars, water, ice and snow, and certain other durable or resistant surfaces. These effects can be minimized or prevented by limitations, including temporal limits, on where aircraft can land, or under what conditions, including aircraft weight or tire configuration. Although not known to occur on the Refuge, landing aircraft could introduce invasive species that could impact resources in the Refuge. We will continue to monitor for such occurrences. Low over-flights, and sometimes landings and take-offs, can disturb or displace wildlife and bother visitors, although the effects are brief and usually minor.

Landings on vegetated lowland tundra and disturbance to vegetation outside established landing areas have been limited in the Kongakut drainage under the stipulations of the special use permit. Access to the Refuge during summer months would be by landing aircraft primarily on gravel bars. Winter access would be by "ski-equipped" aircraft. Although non-commercial aircraft are not required to acquire a special use permit, when possible through outreach, we encourage those operators to land on durable surfaces such as gravel bars and to avoid vegetated tundra or soft surfaces.

Public Review and Comment: Public comments on compatibility determinations were solicited concurrently with the draft of the Refuge's Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan (Plan) and Environmental Impact Statement. Public comments on compatibility determinations were accepted during the public review period for the draft Plan, which was announced in the Federal Register, on local radio stations, and in local newspapers. The 90-day public comment period began on August 15, 2011, and ended on November 15, 2011. We mailed the full draft Plan, and a summary of the Plan, to the individuals and organizations on our mailing list and posted both on the Refuge's web site. Six public hearings were held in Anchorage, Arctic Village, Fairbanks, Fort Yukon, Kaktovik, and Venetie, during which the Service received comments on the draft Plan. We received one specific comment from an individual on this compatibility determination.

The individual suggested that we combine all recreational uses into a single compatibility determination titled "Visitor Use." The Service agrees that this is one way that compatibility determinations could be organized, and our policy allows for consideration of uses either independently or as a group of related issues. We feel that analyzing the commercial recreational uses individually and separate from the non-commercial uses serves us better for several reasons; the uses are not dependent upon one another, and we can better analyze the use, its potential to impact Refuge purposes, and propose stipulations that apply specifically to each type of use and to commercial users in the permit process when the uses are considered individually.

General comments were favorable to the quality of the Refuge's environmental education and interpretation programs and the information the Refuge supplies to the public. Several commenters wanted the Refuge to give a more formal orientation to Refuge visitors and make it a requirement so that people were informed about wilderness values and low-impact camping techniques. Partnering with guides was suggested as a way to improve communication. Other commenters felt that giving out specific information, or more than is currently available, would be "marketing the Refuge," and they were not in favor of it. One commenter thought that not allowing signs and kiosks on the Refuge was compromising

resource protection at the expense of a high quality wilderness experience. Some commenters from Kaktovik stated the Refuge needed to increase their efforts in the village. One person commented the Refuge should continue to support a reputable polar bear viewing program in partnership with local guides and the community of Kaktovik.

No changes were made to the compatibility determination as a result of public comments except that we updated information on the related (supporting use) issue of aircraft impacts, as in other compatibility determinations.

Refuge Determination (check one below):

Use is not compatible

Use is compatible

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility: Special use permits are not required for these wildlife-dependent recreational activities, so there are no associated stipulations. However, visitors will be required to comply with existing State and Federal regulations. The Refuge provides information on Leave No Trace principles, or other minimal impact techniques, and other means to minimize impacts to Refuge resources.

Justification: Wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation are four of the six (including hunting and fishing) priority wildlife-dependent uses of national wildlife refuges (605 FW 1). Other uses, such as camping, backpacking, and hiking, support these wildlife-dependent uses. Emerging issues will be further monitored and, if needed, regulated to ensure Refuge resources and visitor experiences are protected. When conducted in accordance with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) regulations, I find that these uses will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the Refuge was created, including Wilderness Act purposes for the Refuge Wilderness area and fulfillment of the mission of the Refuge System.

Supporting Documents:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1988a. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild River Plans. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Anchorage, Alaska. 609 pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1988b. Record of Decision: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild River Plans. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, November 10, 1988. Anchorage, Alaska, USA.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Draft Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild and Scenic River Review. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, June 2011. Anchorage, Alaska, USA.

Refuge Determination:

Refuge Manager/

Project Leader Approval

Richard M

8-4-12

Date

Concurrence:

Regional Chief

National Wildlife

Refuge System

Mike Boyla (Petty)

8/15/12

Date

Mandatory 10-year Re-Evaluation Date: 2022

Mandatory 15-year Re-Evaluation Date (for priority public uses): 2027

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision:

Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Memorandum

Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Memorandum

Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact

Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision