



Visitor Services

Issue

The Alaska Region has an extensive visitor services program that attracts about a million visitors a year through a unique mix of programs and facilities. This includes three major visitor centers, two information centers, two interpretive programs aboard the state ferry system, and numerous interpretive trails and wayside kiosks. These programs and sites provide outstanding opportunities to deliver interpretation on national forest resources to Alaska residents and visitors.

With the decline of the timber and fishing industries, tourism has taken a prominent role in the communities on and near the Tongass and Chugach National Forests in recent years. Now with national and international travel declining, Alaska is also feeling the decrease. In spite of this, tourism is still a major contributor to the economy of many Alaskan communities. The demand for visitor facilities and access to attractions requires strategic planning to maintain the outstanding settings and wildland character of Alaska's national forests.

Begich, Boggs Visitor Center

The Begich, Boggs Visitor Center is located near Portage Glacier about 55 miles southeast of Anchorage on the Chugach National Forest. The BBVC has hosted almost five million visitors since it opened in 1986. Visitation in 2009 was 82,836 with most of that occurring during the busy summer season.

Services include an information desk, a 200-seat theater featuring the award-winning movie *Voices from the Ice*, permanent exhibits, an education building opened in spring 2005, and an Alaska Geographic Association sales area that grossed over \$107,000 in FY09. A major renovation of the center's exhibit galleries was completed in June 2001.

Under partnership agreements, BBVC interpreters also staff Portage Glacier Cruises on Portage Lake, as well as Major Marine Tours and Phillips 26-Glacier Cruises vessels in Prince William Sound. They guide hikes for the Alaska Railroad, roundtrip from the Spencer Glacier Whistlestop to Spencer Lake. They also provide marine education assistance for Anchorage School District students aboard Prince William Sound Cruises and Charter vessels in Prince William Sound each spring.

The BBVC initiated a recreation fee program in July 1999, consisting of a \$1.00 user fee to view the movie, and collected almost \$20,000 in 2008. Beginning in 2009 this seasonal Recreation User Fee was increased to \$3 per adult and now includes both the movie and exhibits. The center increased the fee to \$4 in 2010 and plans to increase to \$5 in 2011. Operation and maintenance costs for 2009 were about \$445,000.

Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center

Juneau's star attraction and one of the most visited sites in the state, the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center (MGVC), is located about 14 miles from downtown. The surrounding landscape offers a textbook lesson on glacial dynamics and the process of plant succession that occurs in the wake of a retreating glacier.

The MGVC was opened in 1962 as the first visitor center in the Forest Service. Designed to handle 25,000 visitors per year, by the mid-1990s the center was overwhelmed as annual visitation exceeded 250,000. The Forest Service completed a major renovation of the center in 1999.

The MGVC initiated a fee demonstration program in June 1999, consisting of a year-round, \$3.00 user fee to enter the visitor center. In 2000 the fee program was changed from year-round to seasonal, because the cost of fee collection exceeded the fee revenue in the winter. The center is considering increasing the fee to \$5 in 2011. Public scoping will be conducted in the upcoming months. Recreation Fee collection in 2009 for MGVC was over \$757,000. An interpretive sales area in the center grossed more than \$530,000 in 2009. Annual operation and maintenance costs were about \$898,000. Over 445,000 people visited the center in FY09.

Southeast Alaska Discovery Center

The Southeast Alaska Discovery Center is located on the downtown waterfront of the gateway city of Ketchikan. Completed in 1995, the center is the fourth of the Alaska Public Lands Information Centers mandated in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The others are located in Anchorage and Fairbanks and are managed by the National Park Service; and in Tok, managed by the Alaska Division of Community and Business Development. Each of the public lands centers helps link visitors with information on Alaska's vast tracts of federal and state lands.

Services include an information desk, a 200-seat theater featuring live interpretive programs, permanent exhibits, a trip planning area, a classroom for school group activities, and an Alaska Geographic sales area, which grossed almost \$145,000 in 2009. The center staff present onboard/in port interpretive programs on some cruise ships while they are docked in Ketchikan. Another of the Region's recreation fee sites, the Discovery Center charges a \$5.00 per person user fee, seasonally, to view the exhibit galleries and theater presentations. Visitation in 2009 totaled over 40,000 which included those who entered the building for no-fee services such as gathering information, orientation to the Tongass National Forest, and access to the bookstore. Annual recreation fee collection was over \$92,000. Annual operation and maintenance costs were almost \$371,500 in 2009.

Marine Highway Interpretive Programs

Alaska's Inside Passage and Prince William Sound are among the most visited attractions in the state, and are home to unique shipboard interpretive programs known as the Tongass and Chugach Marine Highway Programs. This very successful partnership between the state ferry system and the Forest Service is over 30 years old.

Uniformed Forest Service staff travel the waterways, conducting talks, introducing communities, presenting films and videos, and staffing an information desk. This is a cooperative program with the State of Alaska, which contributes transportation, lodging and meals. Forest Service visitor contacts in 2008 totaled almost 91,500 for the Tongass Marine Highway and over 31,000 for the Chugach Marine Highway. Annual operation costs were about \$160,000 for the Tongass and \$45,000 for the Chugach.

Other Opportunities

Tourists in Alaska seek a wide variety of experiences, and we are working with the tourism industry to enhance those experiences related to national forests. The Forest Service builds viewing trails and platforms, and provides interpretive signing to enhance wildlife viewing areas. In Tracy Arm, kayak rangers board small cruise ships to present interpretive programs about wilderness values and wilderness management. Forest Service interpreters also lead guided tours of El Capitan Cave on Prince of Wales Island. Indications are that tourism on national forests in Alaska will increase. The Forest Service will need to continue planning strategically to provide additional tourism experiences.

Summary

We expect contact with over one million visitors this year in Forest Service interpretive sites, facilities and programs. Most of them will attend programs at the three large visitor centers or on the Alaska Marine Highway. Concentrating the heaviest use in those programs and onboard cruise ships limits impacts on national forest lands and resources. Providing access to all of the Region's visitor sites and attractions requires strategic planning to maintain the outstanding settings and wildland character of Alaska's national forests.

More Information

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