

Voices from Denali

"It's Bigger Than Wilderness"

BY ALAN E. WATSON, KATIE KNOTEK, and NEAL CHRISTENSEN

"Is the mountain out?" Someone on the right side of the plane wanted to know. In so many mountains, there was one mountain. The mountain was a megahedron—its high white facets doming in the air. Long snow banners, extending eastward, were pluming from the ridges above twenty thousand feet."

—John McPhee's voice, in McPhee, 1979, p. 97

Denali National Park and Preserve, at over 6 million acres (2.5 million ha) contains the highest point in North America. Mount McKinley, at more than 20,000 feet (more than 6,000 m) above sea level, watches over thousands of caribou, moose, packs of wolves, grizzly bears, and Dall sheep, as well as many other mountains and a vast amount of rare plant life. Research was conducted at Denali in 2004 as a way to understand the experiences people have when they either fly into the park to climb Mt. McKinley or the surrounding peaks, or just to see the glaciers and mountains within the park. Here is a glimpse of this place from the perspectives of the people who travel great distances to experience it and the pilots from Talkeetna, Alaska, who make their living flying visitors to the mountain (see figure 1).

What Do Visitors Expect?

The cold is extreme on that mountain. When we fly in the first week of May, it's minus forty every night. And then in June it warms up to about minus twenty-five."

—Peter Hackett's voice, in Strickland, 1992, p. 73

I expected a very cold mountain. (A climber's voice)

You know, it's hard to tell. A lot of them come up here with absolutely no real idea what they're going to see. (An air-taxi voice)

For the most part, people don't really come here to be up there alone...in some cases the climbers, they'll want to go some-

where where they cannot see other people. But, I mean, 90% of the people that go up there, especially on Denali, realize it's a pretty social route. (An air-taxi voice)

[It's] unlike anything they've ever done before, and there's no way you can describe what you're going to see. You can show pictures...show videos, but until you're actually there and experience it, it's unlike anything that you've ever done. (An air-taxi voice)

I didn't really have too many expectations. I guess I just kind of knew I was going to the Alaska Range and it was the big wilderness...I haven't been to Alaska before. So I didn't really expect too much. I mean, I know that Denali base camp's a bit of a circus and there's a lot of people there, but I kind of didn't figure there'd be too many people in the rest of the range. (A climber's voice)

On the scenic tour, people aren't there for a wilderness experience...we'll take two or three planes up at a time and land, and people get together and talk and sometimes they meet people from their hometown on the Ruth Glacier, 4,000 or 5,000 miles away from their home. (An air-taxi voice)

Climbers, they're only there for one reason, to climb the mountain. (An air-taxi voice)



Alan E. Watson

How Do Visitors Describe It?

One of our team members had refused to climb higher than 14,300 feet because he had seen himself dying in a dream...I admired him for being more in touch with his feelings, more willing to express his fears and his respect for the mountain than any of the rest of us.

—Jonathan Waterman's voice,
in Waterman, 1998, p. 37

My husband said, even though he's over there sick in the car, he said, that was a once in a lifetime...it was sort of like, even though I'm sick I'm really glad we did that. (A flightseer's voice)

Denali National Park's gorgeous. It was really interesting to see it from the south side as opposed to the north side. I think when you take the bus in from the north side you get a much different perspective of the park because it's green, it's tundra, there's flowers everywhere, there's animals everywhere. But on the south side, on the mountain, you know, there's not a stitch of green, there's not an animal to be had. It's just such a different landscape. (A climber's voice)

The thing they most often say is that they couldn't believe that it was so big...they could just not believe the vastness of it. For most people it's a very humbling experience because they've never been around or near anything that big. (An air-taxi voice)

It's awesome. Like you look at it in a whole view and then you look at the same thing again and zoom in and then you'll look at that thing you zoomed in on and zoom in again. (A climber's voice)

They've just gone and seen something that's way bigger than they could ever think of being, which really knocks them kind of on their ass. It really knocks their



Figure 1—“You zoom in and then you’ll look at that thing you zoomed in on and zoom in again.” A climber’s voice in Denali National Park and Preserve. Photo by Neal Christensen.

ego down a bit when they see that because they just couldn't believe it's so big. (An air-taxi voice)

It's like being on the moon; you've never seen it before. (A climber's voice)

It's kind of like flying into a whole other world. And I've had people describe it as going into orbit around another planet, and I've described it as flying indoors. I mean it's huge. (An air-taxi voice)

Maybe one of the most beautiful experiences in my life. It was very, very emotive for me to fly in the plane and watch those glaciers and very, very beautiful landing, the surrounding mountains, Hunter, Foraker, Huntington, and, of course, Denali. One of the most beautiful experiences I ever had, and also the hardest one I ever had. (A climber's voice)

I cried. I cried on the way in and on the way out because...that experience of flying is just fantastic, just fantastic. I love it. (A climber's voice)

People see the glaciers and the ground stuff a lot more when they can't see the mountains. ... They don't really see what you're flying over on a clear day when you can see everything because they're busy looking at McKinley and the other mountains and forget to look down and see all the other stuff (An air-taxi voice)

It's the beginning of everything. It's where everything stops. All animals. You know...it's like looking at a galaxy in the universe. You're looking back in time and looking at the glaciers. You're looking back, you know, those glaciers have been there millions of years and you're looking back into the Stone Age, and it's right now. (A climber's voice)

Most of the time the weather was pretty bad in terms of the wind. It was blowing too hard, 50-to-80-mile-an-hour average winds. So that never allowed us the opportunity to try and summit. (A climber's voice)



Figure 2—“You see a spot, you think, oh that’s 20 minutes’ walk and you’re there in four hours, so the scale’s just absolutely astonishing.” A climber’s voice in Denali National Park and Preserve. Photo by Fernando Ferrer.

In Alaska you have to wait for the good weather. You have to stay in the tent for four, five, six days...be strong in your mind...it’s really boring to wait. (A climber’s voice)

The cold, the wind, the vast nothingness, you know, just, sort of isolation from everything and then the physical effect of only getting about half as much air with a breath that you normally do down here at sea level make you wonder whether you’re going to actually be able to get out of there or not. (A climber’s voice)

It’s really subtle in a lot of ways and really powerful in a lot of other ways and you really have to think about who you are, why you’re there, and what you need to do in order to exist in that place and

just be safe, in order to be there and to witness a 20,000-foot mountain and what that entails. All the glaciers, all the rocks. It’s a dynamic environment. It’s changing all the time. It’s moving, it’s breathing, it’s falling apart, it’s avalanching. I think it just, it’s good for people to step out of their little safe zone and to go to these places so it helps them realize who they are and what it means to be alive in this place. (A climber’s voice)

It’s actually one-dimensional when you’re flying. But when you land and get out and actually the engine stops and you hear the silence and the occasional avalanche rumbling in the background...having your feet in the snow and just looking around at the vast scale...it will be the only time in most people’s lives that they ever are able to get into a mountain scene like that. (An air-taxi voice)

What Makes Denali Unique?

So I started off the next morning, short of dog feed and with only a vague notion of where I was going. But over on my right, far away, rose lofty Mount McKinley, called by the Indians Denali (“The Highest One”), and Mount Foraker beside it. These would guide me. By going eastward, I hoped to reach the Kantishna River by the end of March. I had good fortune. I came upon an occasional Indian camp and moved along steadily.

—Olaus Murie’s voice, in Hedin and Holthaus, 1989, p. 95

There’s only one mountain that looks like that. . . .It’s unique. (A flightseer’s voice)

One morning. . . we got up really early and we could see the light was just coming off, just coming onto Foraker and Hunter and the shades of different colors of blue and white and red coming off sides of the mountain. It was quite spectacular. A camera wouldn’t have done justice, but I’ve seen it and I can always imagine it. (A climber’s voice)

It’s such an extreme place, you know. I can’t really think of anywhere in the States that’s actually that intense of a place to go to. Usually there’s trails and off-glacier terrain. There’s nowhere in the Alaska Range that’s off glacier. The whole experience is kind of a step above anything else. (A climber’s voice)

It is huge...just the immensity and the scale is just really blowing me away. You see a spot, you think, oh that’s 20 minutes’ walk and you’re there in four hours, so the scale’s really just absolutely astonishing. (A climber’s voice)

You use your lower-48 scale and it just doesn’t quite pan out...it’s always twice as high or twice as far or twice as whatever. It’s one of the most amazing places in the world really, that I’ve ever been. It’s definitely the biggest place I’ve ever been. (A climber’s voice)

There’s no other place like this. . . .Standing at 5,600 feet and you’re showing them a mountain that’s three vertical miles above them, now tell me where else you’re going to do that. (An air-taxi voice)

Research was conducted at Denali in 2004 as a way to understand the experiences people have when they either fly into the park to climb Mt. McKinley or the surrounding peaks, or just to see the glaciers and mountains within the park.

On the Wilderness Character of Denali

If I go to the range and there’s a little turbulence, I can feel it as I go in and see little signs in the sky. I may see a little bit of snow drifting across one of the ridges

and be able to anticipate which way the wind is blowing and whether it is sinking or rising. I try to anticipate the flow of the air around the peaks and through the passes just like you'd watch water flowing in a brook."

—Doug Geeting's voice, air-taxi operator, in Strickland, 1992, p. 66

Wilderness beyond what most people consider wilderness, I guess, if that makes any sense. It's bigger than wilderness. ... There's, like, really no life other than yourself there... you can make shelter, but you can't make warmth, you can't make food. (A climber's voice)

It was 21 days without seeing or speaking to anyone other than in our group, so that was to me a rather rare experience. (A climber's voice)

It's like walking on the moon. There's nothing there but ice. So I guess it's a wilderness. It's just a different kind of wilderness than I'm used to. (A climber's voice)

It's a noninhabited area. You can't live there... it is the back of beyond. You get out there by flying and you take in with you what you need to survive and when that runs out you're pretty much game over. You've got to get out. (A climber's voice)

Wilderness to me means you can't just walk out of there. That's kind of my definition. It's going to be a major, major effort to try to walk out of someplace. So to me wilderness means remoteness, and that certainly qualifies out there. (A climber's voice)

Even beyond wilderness. I don't think much about the park aspect of it... it's one of the great mountains. So I think of it in

terms of the mountains of the world. And Denali is one of the mountains of the world rather than a park. So it's sort of, it's more rugged and cold and scarier than a wilderness area. (A climber's voice)

There's nothing there, other than the mountain house and then the climbers' tents. Definitely wilderness. And it's wilderness that's really unlike any other wilderness that most people have been exposed to. (An air-taxi voice)

People often ask, you know, they see what the glaciers have done up there and often ask whether man has piled the gravel up there or whether it's natural. ... It does look like it's been contrived in a sense, that man could have possibly done a few things up there. ... Once they get a handle on where they are and just the immensity of the type of work that's been up there over millions of years, then you realize, well, nobody could ever do that. (An air-taxi voice)

By the time I unloaded and whoever I was taking in there, and loaded up the people that were wanting to go home, why the fog builds up on the runway or something and you just can't go, and there you are. And so, it is, in fact, wilderness and you figure that out pretty quick if you have to spend any time there. (An air-taxi voice)

Well, by definition I think wilderness is certainly devoid of mankind. There's no presence, or the presence of human life is confined, you know, to a dot here and a dot here that'll get pointed out to you. But the rest is just, I mean, it's owned by nature. It's not owned by, owned or controlled by anything but nature working its course. That's wilderness. (A flightseer's voice)



Figure 3—“It’s like walking on the moon.” A climber’s voice in Denali National Park & Preserve. Photo by Fernando Ferrer.

Conclusion

These Denali voices are not the only ones that can describe human experiences there (see figures 2 and 3). Besides the climbers and flightseers, there are backpackers, skiers, campers, dog mushers, people viewing wildlife, scientists, educators, managers, and people engaged in subsistence activities in this large, remote area. Denali has many meanings to many different people. We have only glimpsed a few of these meanings here. **IJW**

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