



Lake Clark Wilderness Character Narrative

A wilderness character narrative is a positive and affirming description of what is unique and special about this wilderness.

Lake Clark Wilderness is *Kijik (Qizhjah)*, a place where people gathered. First the mountains were gathered; brought north by the Pacific Plate and scraped off on the edge of the North American Plate. The colliding plates tore faults through the mountains and left weak spots where rising magma has formed a string of volcanoes. Older mountains on the western flank are eroded and rounded, becoming more recent and rugged east across the Alaska Range and ending at Cook Inlet in raw exposures of Jurassic sediments that shed fossils onto the beach.

Storms gathered over the mountains, brought to the region by North Pacific low pressure systems, cooled by Arctic highs. The mountains serve as a fulcrum for the air masses pushing and tugging each other across the park. Copious snows fill the cirques and valleys with glaciers. At least four major glacial advances have carved a cradle of lakes that form the headwaters of three major drainage systems and are the nursery for rearing the largest wild salmon run in the world.

Melting snow and rains gather to form a network of rivers flowing from the Alaska Range into three different seas. These rivers are the bloodstreams of the landscape, flowing from the first drop gathered on a leaf in the alpine, through cirques, over waterfalls, braiding through wide valleys, traversing large lakes and into arctic oceans. In return, salmon pulse upstream every summer; scarlet cells of protein, fats and nutrients that nourish the landscape, the bears and ravens, the people and the next generations of salmon.

The Dena'ina gathered and spread throughout this region as well, forming an enduring connection to what we now call the Lake Clark Wilderness. What emerged from this relationship with the land is the Dena'ina language, spirituality, identity, and cultural connection to the land.

This narrative describes five tangible and measurable qualities of wilderness character at Lake Clark Wilderness: natural, solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, untrammelled, undeveloped, and other features. These qualities provide the setting from which a suite of wilderness values are derived. One of the most important of these values is the connection the Dena'ina have to this place and the role it's played in shaping the Dena'ina culture. An essay that recognizes and celebrates this vital connection closes this narrative.

Natural: Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization

Lake Clark Wilderness is a dynamic landscape where forces of nature continue unfettered and whole ecosystems function. The park has four major ecosystems: Boreal in the northwest, Subarctic in the western Bristol Bay basin, a Maritime fringe on the Cook Inlet coast, and the Montane spine of the park.

This rich diversity provides a framework for natural functioning of spectacular ecosystems. The park holds two active volcanoes, vast icefield and glacier systems, coastal salt marshes where brown bears gather to feed and breed. Complex riverine systems carry nutrients both up- and downstream. Ground

water allows late freeze up of sloughs and facilitates salmon spawning into early winter. Bears patrol the rivers as ice closes in, taking the last few salmon before heading up the mountain to hibernate. Throughout the park, complex predator and prey webs play out their evolving adaptations and patterns. Caribou herds swell and decline and grow again. Moose and sheep populations colonize new territory and retreat with weather and predator pressures. Shorebirds and waterfowl arrive with breakup, breed, nest and return to wintering grounds. And over it all the storms sweep among the peaks, the lakes freeze and breakup and berries bloom and ripen and for thousands of years, people have gathered to harvest the returning salmon. Today, local residents continue to pursue a subsistence lifestyle dependent on resources including salmon, wildlife, berries, birch bark and spruce. There are few remaining places in the US where subsistence lifestyles are an active part of the ecological integrity.

Lake Clark's ecosystems are among the most dynamic in the world: tectonics, glaciers, volcanoes, intact wildlife and fish populations and human activities. Dynamic landscapes, by their very nature, are capable of absorbing a wide range of changes while maintaining their fundamental functionality. The problem arises when the changes exceed the ecosystem's capacity to absorb them, driving the country to a different ecological state. Often these changes are forced by human activities. Multiple human activities interact with each other and with natural systems to produce unexpected consequences that the park cannot absorb. These activities cause a cascade of impacts that exceed natural buffering in the system and often result in completely different ecosystem processes. Major threats to Lake Clark's natural character at this time include impacts from climate change and external developments.

Climate change is already changing temperature and precipitation regimes in the region, resulting in longer growing seasons, shorter ice-seasons, glacial retreat, warmer lakes, shrub and tree invasion into tundra (fewer berries and lichens), more lightening, and warmer and acidic oceans. External developments and associated activities are also changing Lake Clark ecosystems. Exploratory work brings many people and aircraft into the region; many of them flying through, and now subsisting in Lake Clark. Predator control on two sides of the park impacts the natural predator/prey systems that are a hallmark of the area. Developments will likely change streams with major impacts to salmon runs throughout the park.

Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation

Unforgettably beautiful and unforgivingly rugged, Lake Clark Wilderness provides a setting where visitors can leave behind societal constraints in search of solitude, challenge, discovery, and renewal.

Largely void of recreational developments and management restrictions on visitor behavior, Lake Clark Wilderness is a place where it's possible to detach from modern life and become steeped in the timelessness of a landscape that hasn't been altered in hundreds of years. Such a place gives one's soul a chance to experience the unencumbered freedom that often corresponds with seeing wild country expand to the horizon.

Here a person can choose from a variety of activities and modes of travel, though whether one chooses to hike, climb, boat, ski, snowmachine, hunt, fish, or camp, visitors tend to experience the wilderness on the land's terms. Rapidly changing weather, rugged topography, and abundant wildlife force us to relinquish control over the land. The immensity of the landscape (large glaciers, waves of mountains, sweeping tundra plains) makes people feel small and insignificant, which can be both a profoundly

humbling and empowering experience. It is these same qualities that provide an opportunity for a heightened awareness of the senses, evoke a connection with the larger community of life, and awaken a sense of mystery.

The sense of immersion in the landscape that one feels at Lake Clark is enhanced by the physical separation of the wilderness from urban centers and the fact that, practically speaking, a person can only get there by using an airplane. Inside the Lake Clark Wilderness, the feeling of remoteness is heightened by knowing it is a great distance to assistance should a person need it. Most forms of communication aren't reliable and weather can prevent aircraft from rescue. The sense of isolation enhances the feeling of being on one's own, and while it may feel disconcerting, part of the appeal is knowing that the Lake Clark Wilderness is a place where true challenge exists.

Lake Clark Wilderness combines remoteness with harsh weather, lack of infrastructure, and rugged geography (including an extensive network of crevassed glaciers, steep mountainsides carpeted in thick vegetation, swift cold rivers); this combination creates opportunities for personal growth, self-discovery, and the self-fulfillment that comes from overcoming obstacles. Without trails, bridges, designated campsites, markers, and public use cabins, visitors must rely on themselves. There are real consequences for mistakes. The physical and mental challenge is a positive aspect that forces people to live in the moment, pay attention, and participate in their present reality in a way that often isn't easy to do in everyday life.

Visitors get the opportunity to navigate the challenges associated with protecting food from weather and wildlife, staying dry, traveling through bear country, staying warm in extreme weather, figuring out how to cross rivers, avoiding falls down cliffs or slips into crevasses, and evaluating the hazards of active volcanoes, rock fall, and avalanches. It is these challenges and the promise of the corresponding rewards that attract people to the Lake Clark Wilderness.

There are a number of things on the horizon that could degrade opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. Unmitigated impacts of increased visitation, and increased availability and use of technology from satellite phones to web cams to personal tracking devices, diminish solitude. Developments outside the park boundary including the prospective Pebble Mine, Chakachamna Lake Hydro Project, and Chuitna Coal Mine could degrade the feeling of remoteness.

A paradox exists with aircraft, which degrade the undeveloped quality and can be heard frequently in many parts of the wilderness. The ability to use aircraft to transport people into a remote setting is an integral part of the Alaska wilderness experience. In fact, the way people access wilderness can be part of the wilderness experience itself: the quick feeling of isolation when a plane takes off and leaves you there can enhance the feeling of intimidation and excitement of being truly alone in a vast landscape.

It may be necessary in the future for park managers to take actions that restrict visitor behavior or movement in the wilderness in order to protect natural or cultural resources or to reduce visitor conflict. Restrictions on where visitors can go and conditions on their use of the wilderness can negatively affect unconfined recreation. Similarly, visitor contacts and ranger patrols reduce the feeling of being alone and relying solely on yourself.

The park must also consider the tradeoff of recreational facilities such as trails, outhouses, and cabins that facilitate access and use of the wilderness, and/or help protect park resources, but that also diminish the self-reliant quality.

Untrammeled: Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human actions that control or manipulate the community of life

Lake Clark Wilderness protects a complex mosaic of landforms and ecosystems that continue to evolve from dynamic tectonic, volcanic, glacial, and climatic processes. The isolation, geography, and weather associated with the Lake Clark Wilderness make human influence difficult. If explorers from the 1800s returned to the region, they would see a similar landscape (with the exception of more vegetation and receded glaciers) and similar fish and wildlife as they did in the 1800's. It's one of the few areas in the world where ecological systems are not intentionally modified by the actions of our modern management.

The park resists wildlife manipulation, and wildlife habitat in the wilderness varies naturally based on complex interactions between recent physical (e.g., precipitation, temperature) and biological (e.g., insect outbreaks, plant disease) factors. Wildlife is free to move through the landscape and populations such as caribou that currently range outside the park are free to return and populate the area as before.

Water flows through intact ecosystems connecting mountain headwaters with tidally influenced streams. Lake Clark Wilderness protects critical habitat at the headwaters of the world's most productive red salmon fishery, which anchors the economy, ecology, culture, and history of southwest Alaska. Dynamic ecological processes continue as they have for millennia, unimpeded by park management.

There is a legacy of not taking management actions in order to maintain the untrammeled quality of wilderness character. The park's attitude in protecting magnificent landscapes from development reflects a culture of restraint and humility.

This legacy has an inspirational value to people in a larger public arena including those who may never visit but who take solace in knowing such protected places exist. It has also inspired the park's visitors who seem to quietly come in without publicizing their arrival, float rivers and pick berries and quietly leave with blueberry stains on their behinds. The legacy extends also to local residents and commercial operators who share a sense of responsibility for Lake Clark Wilderness as a land that is wild and free.

Forces largely beyond the control of park managers threaten to erode the untrammeled quality. Predator control efforts outside the park boundary threaten to manipulate natural predator/prey systems. Mining districts around the border of the park could introduce pollution to the water, air, fish and wildlife. Climate change could create higher incidences of fire and perhaps a corresponding rate of suppressing fires in order to protect private property.

Undeveloped: Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvements or modern human occupation

Lake Clark Wilderness has an undeveloped feel despite numerous cabins and ruins throughout the park. The 37 installations in wilderness include equipment used to improve communication, aviation safety, and to monitor the park's volcanoes, climate, and geologic dynamics. In general, developments that occur in the Lake Clark Wilderness are barely noticeable across the landscape and do not include large structures such as prominent buildings or roads. It is unlikely that visitors will find any sign of

contemporary human civilization such as mechanized equipment, signs, unnatural noise aside from airplane noise, and other modern artifacts. A mental and emotional freedom emerges from such settings where visitors experience nature essentially free of the reminders of society, and can feel part of this vast landscape.

There is a sense of mystery and the unknown that comes with a lack of development and lack of assigning English names to natural features. Visitors have the opportunity to feel like the first person to ever be there. Standing on a high point a person can look to the horizon and know there are no roads, no traffic. The undeveloped quality allows people to feel released from the grip of civilization.

The park actively preserves the undeveloped quality by administering its commercial services program in a manner that allows people with an existing connection to the place to continue to work here but without adding structures or facilities. In addition, while the park continues to make significant progress acquiring inholdings, there still exist numerous parcels within the park where development could occur.

A couple of paradoxes exist within the undeveloped quality. For example, structures and installations that support scientific inquiries or park communications degrade this quality but also provide essential information for park management. The data gained from many scientific installations are often our best indicator and assessment of the Natural quality. Cultural resources like historic cabins can negatively impact one's ability to feel free from the reminders of civilization and connect to the larger community of life; however, for others, the presence of that same cabin enhances the connection to place and the meanings associated with it bolster appreciation and enjoyment of the area (see Cultural Resources section below).

Other Features: Wilderness preserves other features that are of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

Many specific features that are of exceptional cultural, historic, and scientific value are preserved because of their location within Lake Clark Wilderness.

Prehistoric sites and cultural artifacts lend a sense of timelessness to the Lake Clark Wilderness. Prehistoric sites represent past human and ecological interaction on ancient landscapes and relict lake shores. These sites contain fish and animal bones as refuse or as artifacts representing species hunted or gathered since the close of the last Ice Age. In rare cases, such as high elevation ice patch sites that are melting with global warming, organic artifacts are preserved, providing direct radiocarbon dates and a point in time for extraordinary bone and wood artifacts. Faunal remains in sites may contain proxy climate data that can be derived from their isotopes as well as DNA possibly distinct from what exists today. Cultural sites are windows into other worlds, worlds that no longer exist, and although they are invisible, we know that ancient footsteps crisscross our wilderness. The undeveloped and untrammled character of the Lake Clark Wilderness allows us to discover and preserve these sites and artifacts and to imagine these other worlds without the disruption of inventions of modern humans.

Historic sites like the Proenneke cabin contribute to education and understanding of the rusticator era when many people like Dick Proenneke went into the country to carve out their own personal relationship with the wilderness. The Proenneke site represents the intrepid, pioneering spirit and the

courage to follow the pull of one's own inner compass to immerse oneself in a rural environment free from developments and amenities.

In general, a number of things threaten cultural resources: loss of traditional knowledge, place names, stories, and traditional practices that are practiced on the landscape; off-airport landings on exposed areas with near-surface artifact scatters; vandalism; catholes excavated year after year at popular camping sites disturb vegetation cover as well as shallowly buried cultural sites; fire rings placed on surface or shallowly buried sites can move rocks from original prehistoric placement; and heat from campfires or wildland fires alters surface artifacts (the heat fractures the lithics) and introduces contaminant wood charcoal.

Specifically, over-use of the Proenneke site can break down the stream bank at the Hope Creek outlet, trample vegetation, and increase human waste. These impacts degrade the symbolic value of this important cultural site. The park will need to find the right balance of protecting this site and providing appropriate infrastructure to accommodate visitors.

A Dena'ina Perspective: Respecting *Etnena* (Land)

The legacy of unseen footprints of the Dena'ina people has sustained the place now called Lake Clark Wilderness for centuries. The Dena'ina people of the Lake Clark area believe that everything has a spirit and should be treated with respect. We call this '*K'etniyi*' meaning 'it's saying something.' This is the power of nature's voice – an ancient connection to the spirit of the Dena'ina people. This is how we define Wilderness. Our ancestors' beliefs for caring for the land has been simple – respect all living things; not taking more than you need, giving something back when you take – this can be a prayer, deep thoughtful respect or a small material item such as a safety pin. What has emerged from this relationship with the land is the Dena'ina language, spirituality, cultural connection to the land, and identity.

The land provides for us and we were taught to be respectful. This respect is not questioned and we are conscious that when we interact with nature, we are praying. We harvest our food from the land, we put up salmon every summer, we hunt for meat, and we pick berries. As we stoke the fire in the smokehouse full of drying salmon, this is prayer. As we pressure cook the meat from the black bear for canning, being careful not to waste any of the meat, this is prayer. As we pick berries this is done with prayer. The relationship with the land is filled with gratitude and respect, for we are nothing without the blessings of the land in which we were raised.

We recognize and feel the connection to weather and understand the importance of paying attention. Look to the tops of spruce trees; if there are a lot of spruce cones this means there will be a lot of snow. If there are a lot of white Hudson bay tea blossoms, this tells us that there will be a lot of salmon this summer. Just this fall before the lakes froze, a heavy fog came over the lakes – hovering over Sixmile Lake and up through Lake Clark. A Dena'ina elder watching through the window said, "A long time ago they used to say that when the fog came in over the lakes, this means that the fog is spreading the word over the lakes – the fog is sending the message that the lakes will be freezing soon."

Fish camp continues to be an important tradition of the Dena'ina people. The comparison used, when asked what fish camp is: It's like Christmas, only better. We are not paying a price for gifts or experiencing a fleeting moment of joy and celebration. We are preparing all year long for our few months of celebration. We are coming together as family and community and sharing the gratitude of putting up fish – fulfilling our spirits, minds, emotions and bodies from the same source and practices our ancestors did. It's hard to put into words the feeling - the connection that ignites the spirit when it comes time for fish camp. It is an ingrained, unconscious movement that is felt when spring turns into summer. Fish camp is a communion with every aspect of putting up fish. It's a relationship that has been created from the time of birth, sensing when summer comes, it's time to go back to fish camp, it's the smell, the slime, it's nature -connecting back to the water, bringing relatives home, it's knowing you have fish for winter not only for your family but to share at potlucks and with relatives and friends. It's a spiritual igniter that restores this underlying excitement after a long winter. It's a part of life that is not questioned, whether we go to fishcamp or not. It's done every summer. It's the contented labor of splitting fish, of stoking the smoke house fire, and of taking care and pride in putting up fish the right way. This deep-rooted way of life cannot be measured, cannot be priced, and it can be easily overlooked by an outsider, because it's beyond the visual and the spoken.

Reflecting on the idea of wilderness, Michelle Ravenmoon noted, "I have learned to appreciate even the smallest interactions between animal and land. As a child, I would watch the spiders spin webs; they put unwearied effort into their webs. I learned a respect for the work put into a web and I took great care not to destroy webs just because they were in my path. I also learned to pay attention to when spiders spun webs because spiders seem to have an ability to predict when the wind would not blow and that was web-making time. By paying attention to the spiders, I learned a technique to predict the weather. I think many people look at wilderness and think that they need to see a bear or a moose for a true experience with nature, but it is through patience and mindfulness that the true experience takes place."

To some people, the word "wilderness" conjures thoughts that we are separate from nature, that the woods are unknown, untouched, perhaps mysterious, or even dangerous. This may create feelings of fear, excitement, adventure, longing for connection to nature...but when all thoughts of the individual components dissolve and we let go of the attachment or judgments we've given them, all we see is the beauty of the natural surroundings. We feel right at home, we want to care for and not take from the land, and we realize that we are not separate from nature but part of it. The wilderness and all that it encompasses is not a mystery; it is us and it is home. It's as familiar as looking in the mirror

Many places in the Lake Clark Wilderness have Dena'ina place names developed over time through stories, events and experiences. It was not common to name a place after a person; natural places were left with a name that came from the experience and gifts it offered – '*Dilah Vena*' – fish swim in lake; '*K'dalghek'tnu*' – scraping noise (of antlers) stream; and '*Ch'kentalqeyitnu*' – someone throws spear stream. Over two thousand place names like this are spread across the region and each place holds meaning. It is important that the Lake Clark Wilderness encompasses these meanings and that we continue to honor the footprints of culture as integral to our contemporary idea of Wilderness.

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