

High Altitude Mountaineering: Visitor Types and Management Preferences

By Alan Ewert

A recent study at Denali NP identified some of the characteristics of the mountaineering visitor, the climbers' perception of the mountain environment, and certain preferred management options affecting the mountain environment and the mountaineer on Mt. McKinley and adjacent Alaska Range peaks. To date, the research community has paid little attention to such areas in terms of who the participants are, what are the underlying reasons for their visits, and what types of management issues are at stake.

Approximately 360 registered climbers were asked to complete a 26 item questionnaire as they checked out at the ranger station in Talkeetna. Response rate for the questionnaires was close to 100 percent; 84 percent attempted the West Buttress route and the remaining 16 percent climbed the Muldrow, West Rib, or Cassin. Since this study was exploratory in nature, the questionnaire was printed only in English. The sampling began in June and was concluded in August. It covered approximately 36 percent of the total number of climbers registered to climb McKinley in 1992.

Who Is the Climber?

Of the climbers responding to the questionnaire, the average age was 32 (range=18-62). Within this group more than 90 percent were male. Climbers reported an average of 10 years of mountaineering experience. It should be noted that the sample was skewed toward the low end of numbers of years of

mountaineering, with over 40 percent of the sample reporting six or fewer years of experience.

Within the sample, 67 percent indicated that they made the summit or completed their route. Of these, the reasons for their success included (in descending order of importance): Preparation, experience, acclimatization, food, good weather, patience/perseverance. The primary reasons given for not summiting or completing the route included: Bad weather and sickness/medical problems. The majority of the people (66%) were classified as independent climbers (not a member of a guided party), with 32 percent being part of a guided party and 2 percent being solo climbers.

The Mountain Environment

By a wide margin, the majority of climbers utilized the Southeast Fork Kahiltna landing strip. As depicted in Figure 1, levels of trash were perceived differently at various locations. Of all the locations reported in the study, the campsite at 17,200 feet on the West Buttress was the only consistently reported area to have trash problems.

In dealing with trash, the vast majority of climbers reported carrying out their trash. This was followed by dropping it in a crevasse (14%), and burying (1%). A note of caution here: Carrying out garbage is the administratively correct thing to do; without an actual behavior observation there is no way to ascertain the accuracy of these "reported" actions. On the other hand, it should be noted that filling out the questionnaires was voluntary and anonymous.

A number of suggestions were made by climbers on how to handle trash. The more popular ones included: Carrying it out, education, establishing collection sites and using helicopters to remove it, and burning it. Currently, NPS policy emphasizes a carry-out procedure; burning trash is not allowed.

Regarding human sanitation on the mountain, human waste disposal was not a problem at base camp for most climbers (72%). In camp locations, only 3 percent reported that disposing of human waste was a problem that detracted from their mountaineering experience. On their climbing route, 30 percent reported that human waste disposal was a problem.

Ninety percent of respondents reported they used plastic bags for human waste disposal in crevasses; however, the questionnaire did not determine whether climbers used this method all the time or interspersed it with other techniques. Problems in disposing of human waste included: Not enough latrines, inadequate directions on how to dispose of human waste, too severe environment to adequately use plastic bags or build latrines, and latrines inadequately placed. Possible solutions listed by climbers were: Limit number of parties, have more plastic bags available and enforce a human waste disposal policy, furnish more latrines, dump stations, and chemical toilets. Currently, NPS recommends using plastic bags as latrines and then disposing of the bags in deep crevasses.

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Figure 1. Levels of Trash at Various Locations (in percent).

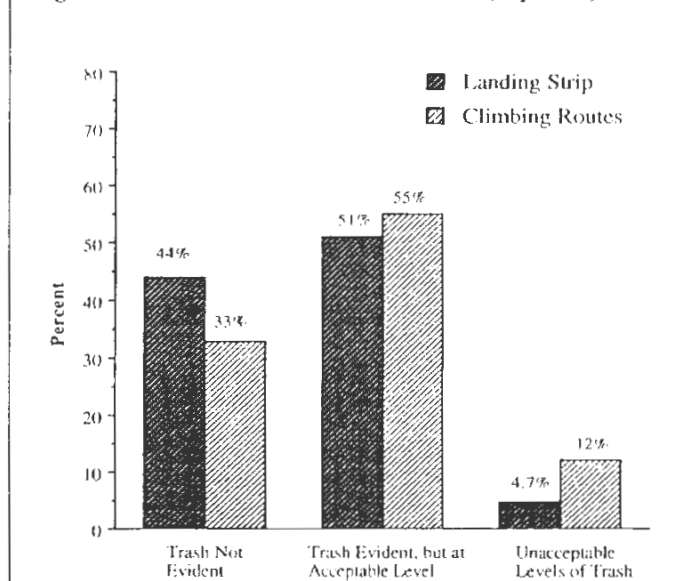
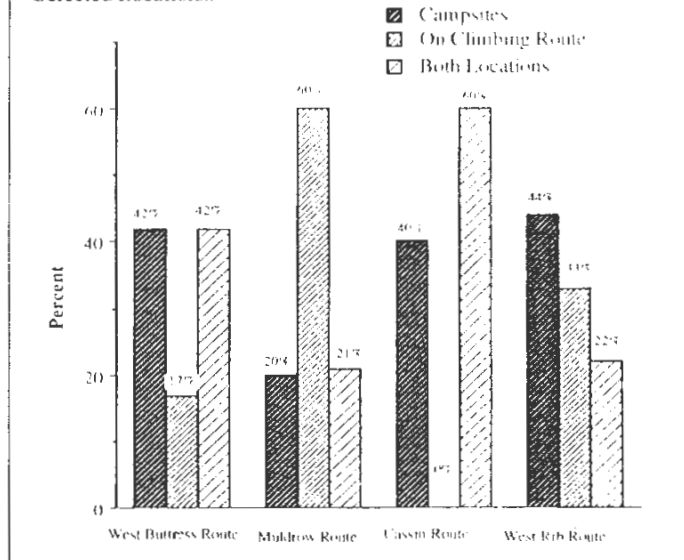


Figure 2. Percent of Climbers Reporting Crowded Conditions at Selected Locations.



Sociological Factors

Given the international popularity of Mt. McKinley and the increasing numbers of climbers over the past decade, the issue of crowding was considered an important study element. Although the size and complexity of Mt. McKinley would seem to preclude a crowding problem, only a few routes receive the majority of use. In this study, 32 percent of the climbers reported crowding as a problem. As shown in Figure 2, perceived crowding varied with the location. For example, crowding was prevalent on the Muldrow route and non-existent on the Cassin route.

On the issue of limiting the number of climbers, a slight majority of respondents were against limitation (57% to 43%). These numbers might change if climbers were actually faced with being denied a climbing opportunity on the more heavily traveled routes. When asked about ways to deal with the crowding problem, two responses were most often given: Establish a permit system, and limit group sizes.

The literature now is fairly consistent in differentiating between solitude, user-density, and crowding (Patterson and Hamnitt, 1990; Stewart and Carpenter, 1989). While density can be an actual physical measure-

ment (numbers of climbers in a given location), solitude and crowding are psychologically determined. In the case of crowding, how "crowded" an area is depends in part on the expectations and past experience of the individual. At Mt. McKinley, climbers (particularly on the more popular routes) may be expecting to see larger numbers of other climbers and consequently feel less "crowding" even though a relatively high user-density obtains.

Conclusions

Drawing conclusions from a one-time snapshot of people and time can be a risky business. Some information from this study bears up under the weight of common sense, experience, and past findings from the literature. The demographics from this study's sample are congruent with the general population of climbers visiting Mt. McKinley. To the extent that this is true, it would seem reasonable that they reflect many of the views and demographics of most McKinley climbers. It should be noted however, that the study did not sample those climbing in the earlier part of the season—April and May. The variables of age, gender, and years of mountaineering experience do seem in line with

the overall climbing population of Mt. McKinley.

Trash and human waste are problems in some areas but not overwhelming for most climbers. Most-offered solutions, such as crevasse dumping or helicopter-assisted removal, either are not new, or represent a significant increase in maintenance and personnel costs.

The study showed that trash, sanitation, and crowding still are within acceptable limits for most Mt. McKinley users. If problems eventually do occur in these or other areas related to management of the climbing environment, future studies should strive to determine what types of solutions or management options would be most acceptable to the user.

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References

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- Stewart, W. and E. Carpenter, 1989. Solitude at Grand Canyon: An application of expectancy theory. *Journal of Leisure Research* 21(1):4-17.