



Figure 1 (left). Wildlife observation was one factor that shaped visitor attitudes positively regarding the Denali Visitor Transportation System (VTS).
Figure 2 (map). One of five transportation options at Denali National Park and Preserve (Alaska), the VTS operates on an 89-mile gravel road and includes trips from the main park visitor center to Toklat River, Eielson Visitor Center, and Wonder Lake.

An assessment of visitor satisfaction with public transportation services at Denali National Park & Preserve

By CRAIG A. MILLER AND R. GERALD WRIGHT

National park system areas are increasingly confronted with problems associated with private vehicle use, and managers at many areas are actively seeking solutions to mitigate the impacts caused by vehicle use including congestion, parking, and potential resource degradation. Denali National Park and Preserve offers a unique example of a management solution directed at resolving traffic congestion, while at the same time maintaining a quality visitor experience and protecting the natural resources of the park. However, although this system has been in place for 25 years, the park administration has had, until the present study, little definitive knowledge regarding visitor attitudes toward and satisfaction with the transportation system. A brief questionnaire survey of visitor opinions toward park transportation policy conducted in 1972 by Harrison (1975) and a similar follow-up personal interview survey conducted by Singer and Beattie (1986) have provided the only insights into visitor attitudes toward the extensive transportation system.

Before 1971, park roads experienced limited private vehicle traffic, as visitors wanting to visit the park in their own vehicles had to travel the difficult, dirt "Denali Highway" connecting Cantwell with the Alaska Highway or ship their vehicles by rail from Anchorage. In late 1971 the George Parks Highway, linking Fairbanks to Anchorage, was completed, providing a direct paved route to the park. Anticipating a substan-

tial increase in vehicle traffic, the park took a proactive approach by closing the park road the following summer to private vehicles past milepost 14. Beyond that point, only those visitors holding campground permits or those traveling to the private inholdings in the Kantishna region were permitted access in private vehicles. A transportation system was developed to replace the use of private vehicles in the park (figure 1).

At the time of its inception, the transportation system in the park was unique among the national parks in the United States and remains so today, as visitor access to the park's interior is controlled. This service, presently known as the Visitor Transportation Service (VTS), is now one of five transportation options available at the park. Two other transportation options are principally booked through private tour companies, while a fourth system is a camper bus that transports backcountry permit holders into and out of the park. The fifth transportation type is a private service that takes visitors to private lodges in the Kantishna region.

The VTS system includes trips to three locations within the park (figure 2). The first of these destinations is the Toklat River, a distance of 53 miles and duration of 6 hours. The second is the Eielson Visitor Center 66 miles into the park an 8-hour round trip. Wonder Lake is the third destination, requiring an 86 mile and 11-hour round trip. Tickets are available at the visitor center or through advanced reservations.

Study Design

We examined visitor satisfaction with the three VTS trips as part of a larger study of all the transportation options within the park. A survey examining visitor attitudes toward the transportation service was conducted in the park during the summer of 1996. Researchers boarded VTS buses before departure from the visitor center, explained the need for the study, and asked visitors to complete the 8-page survey on their return trip. Visitors were asked to rate: the quality of the bus as a means of viewing the park, their satisfaction with the wildlife viewing experience, and perceptions of crowding on the park road. In addition to these questions, visitors were also asked if they had visited Denali or other national park sites before their current trip. The questionnaire also asked for demographic information such as age and gender.

Results

Visitor response to the survey was very favorable. Of the 1,385 visitors using the VTS buses who were asked to participate in the survey, 860 returned usable questionnaires for a response rate of 69%. Spot surveys undertaken by researchers riding the buses at various times indicated that most of the passengers consisted of family groups and that the overall response rate was influenced by the fact that often only one member of a family group returned the questionnaire. Based on this observation, we are reasonably certain that there was probably a minimal non-response bias. Returns from the survey indicate the mean

age of VTS passengers was 46, 137 (16%) had visited the park in the past, and 109 (80%) of the visitors who had previously visited the park had used the VTS buses.

Visitors were asked to rate the quality of the bus seating, the bus as a platform for viewing wildlife, the driver's knowledge of the park, and the courtesy of the driver. These results, presented in table 1, show visitors to be satisfied with these aspects of their trip, as the majority of visitors rated each of these items as "good" or "excellent."

In order to assess what factors contributed to visitor satisfaction with the transportation service, the questionnaire asked each passenger to select from lists those items that either contributed to—or detracted from—their satisfaction with their park experience. Visitors responded that the freedom to view the park instead of focusing on driving, driver courtesy, and wildlife observations were each positive factors in providing a satisfactory experience. The responses to those factors that contributed to satisfaction and detracted from visitor satisfaction are presented in table 2.

To examine the effectiveness of the transportation service, the questionnaire asked visitors to respond to the three statements shown in table 3: "The transportation service buses enhanced my visit to Denali National Park;" "seeing buses or other vehicles detracted from my enjoyment of the park;" and "buses and other vehicle traffic interfered with my enjoyment of wildlife." The responses to these statements indicate the majority of visitors using the VTS buses see the buses as an enhancement to their park experience and do not feel the buses interfered with their reason for visiting the park, which was primarily to view wildlife.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that visitors to Denali National Park and Preserve who use the VTS buses are very satisfied with the service. Visitors gave high ratings for the bus as a platform for viewing wildlife, and bus driver courtesy and knowledge of the park. In addition, visitors did not express negative attitudes toward other vehicles encountered in the park. One point of special interest is the ratings given to comfort of the buses. Visitors spend from 6–11 hours on the buses traveling over a gravel road. A negative experience in terms of uncomfortable bus seats could serve to undermine any other efforts to provide the visitor with a quality experience. Visitor satisfaction remains high, despite the

Table 1.
Visitor ratings of quality for VTS buses

Item	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
	# responses (%)			
Comfort of bus seating (n=855)	13 (2%)	234 (27%)	523 (61%)	85 (10%)
Bus as a place for viewing wildlife (n = 838)	31 (4%)	208 (25%)	431 (51%)	168 (20%)
Driver's knowledge of the park (n = 837)	1 (<1%)	21 (3%)	259 (31%)	556 (66%)
Courtesy of driver (n = 839)	2 (<1%)	6 (<1%)	141 (17%)	690 (82%)
Overall quality of transportation service (n = 855)	11 (1%)	85 (10%)	568 (66%)	191 (22%)

Table 2.
Visitor attitudes toward the transportation system

Factors that contributed to visitor satisfaction	Yes	No
Freedom to view park instead of focusing on driving	623 (72%)	110 (28%)
Courtesy of transportation service driver	630 (73%)	230 (27%)
Wildlife observations	749 (87%)	110 (13%)
Factors that detracted from visitor satisfaction	Yes	No
Uncomfortable ride	67 (8%)	795 (92%)
Traffic on the road	76 (9%)	784 (91%)

Table 3.
Visitor attitudes toward the VTS buses

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
"The transportation service buses enhanced my visit to Denali National Park"	190 (23%)	466 (56%)	120 (14%)	41 (5%)	15 (2%)
"Seeing buses or other vehicles detracted from my enjoyment of the park"	11 (1%)	84 (10%)	120 (14%)	441 (53%)	176 (21%)
"Buses and other vehicle traffic interfered with my enjoyment of wildlife"	15 (2%)	68 (8%)	114 (14%)	440 (53%)	186 (22%)

length of the tours. Overall, visitors gave the transportation service high approval ratings, with 88% of the visitors rating the service good to excellent.

Denali National Park and Preserve offers an exciting wilderness experience for visitors, and the visitors contacted through our survey indicate that this experience is enhanced by the transportation service. Responses also suggest that this quality experience is to a large extent dependent on the courtesy and knowledge of the bus driver. This is an important consideration, as the visitors spend more time with the driver than any other park personnel. The transportation system in Denali not only allows visitors to experience the wild beauty of the park and its wildlife, but also affords a high degree of resource protection and visitor safety. **P₅**

Literature Cited

- Harrison, G. S. 1975. The people and the park: reactions to a system of public transportation in Mt. McKinley National Park, Alaska. *Journal of Leisure Research* 7:6–15.
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Craig Miller conducted the study as a research associate with the Dept. of Fish and Wildlife Resources, University of Idaho. He is now a scientist with the Illinois Natural History Survey in Urbana, Illinois. Gerry Wright is an ecologist with the USGS Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and Professor in the Dept. of Fish and Wildlife Resources at the University of Idaho in Moscow; gwright@uidaho.edu.