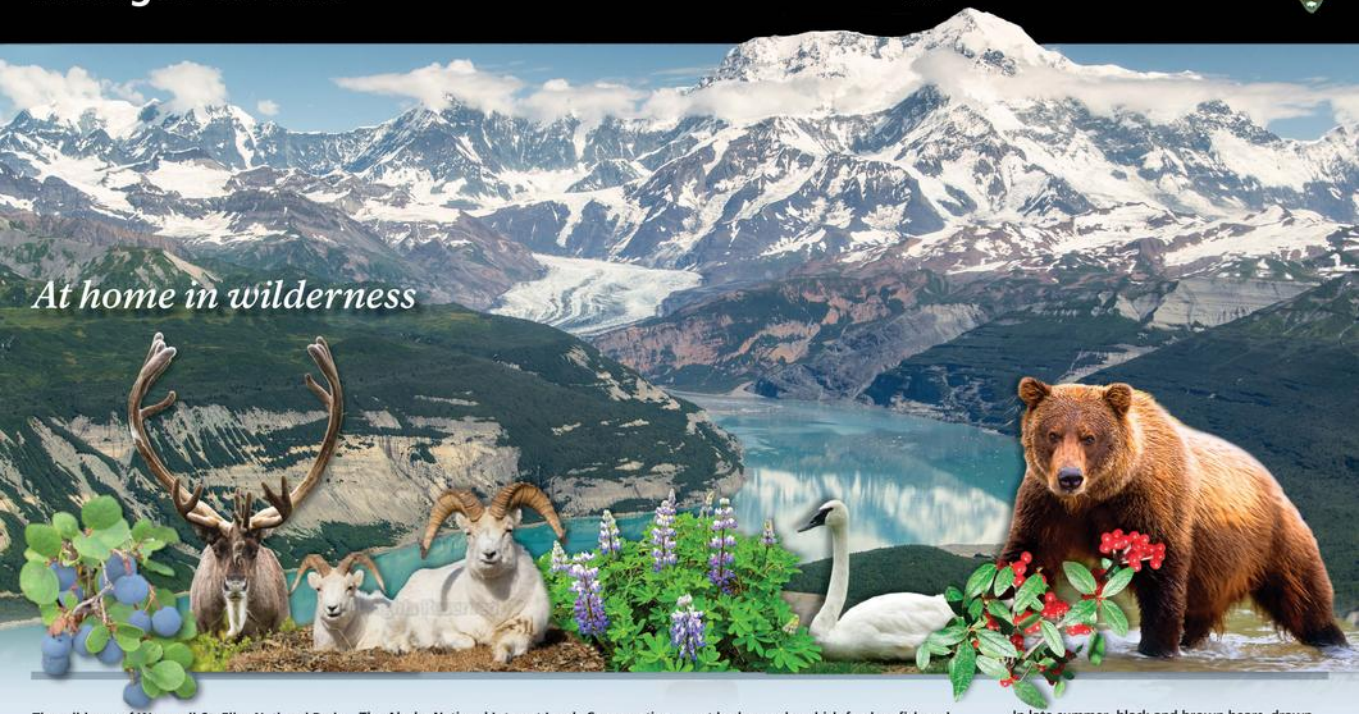
Wrangell-St. Elias

Wrangell - St. Elias
National Park and National Preserve
Alaska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



At home in wilderness

The wildness of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is uncompromising, its geography awe-inspiring. Mount Wrangell, namesake of one of the park's four mountain ranges, is an active volcano. Hundreds of glaciers and ice fields form in the high peaks, then melt into rivers and streams that drain to the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea. Ice is a bridge that connects the park's geographically isolated areas.

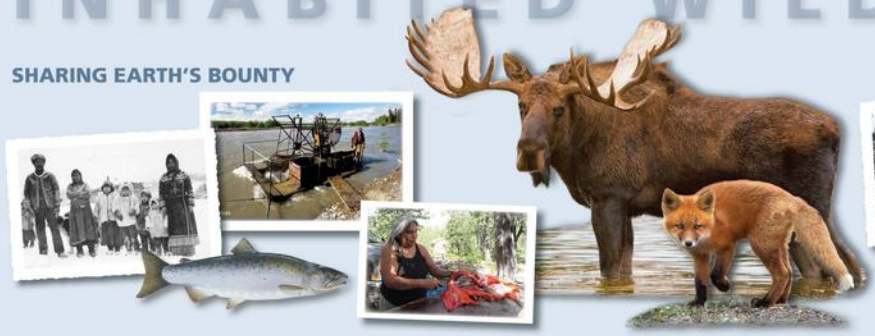
The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980 allows the subsistence harvest of wildlife within the park, and preserve and sport hunting only in the preserve. Hunters find Dall's sheep, the park's most numerous large mammal, on mountain slopes where they browse sedges, grasses, and forbs. Sockeye, Chinook, and Coho salmon spawn in area lakes and streams and are caught in the Copper River with fish wheels, dip nets, and rod and reel. In the park's southeastern corner, Tlingit people harvest harbor seals, which feed on fish and marine invertebrates. These species and many more are key foods in the subsistence diet of the Ahtna and Upper Tanana Athabaskans, Eyak, and Tlingit peoples. Local, non-Native people also share in the bounty.

Long, dark winters and brief, lush summers lend intensity to life here. The sounds of migrant birds, including trumpeter swans, thrushes, and warblers, enliven long summer days.

In late summer, black and brown bears, drawn by ripening soapberries, frequent the forests and gravel bars. Human history here is ancient and relatively sparse, and has left a light imprint on the immense landscape. Even where people continue to hunt, fish, and trap, most animal, fish, and plant populations are healthy and self-regulating. For the species who call Wrangell-St. Elias home, the park's size and remoteness ensure a naturally functioning ecosystem.

INHABITED WILDERNESS

SHARING EARTH'S BOUNTY



The living cultures of south central Alaska include the Upper Ahtna, or 'Headwaters People' (Tatl'ahwt'aenn). Their identity is embedded in the earth, water, and ice of the upper Copper River region, where they draw upon traditional ecological knowledge to hunt, gather, trap, and fish. Their knowledge, born of discipline and wisdom passed down through generations, contributes to an economy based on sharing natural resources. This differs from the market economy that prevails elsewhere in the United States.

During winter the Upper Ahtna people traditionally hunted Dall's sheep, caribou, and moose, and trapped small mammals in the uplands. In summer they moved to fish camps. They built fish traps in slow-moving, flat-bottomed creeks.

In the Copper River's fast-moving waters, people used dip nets to harvest salmon before they adopted fish wheels in the early 1900s. The fish wheel's arms are like spokes on a wheel. As the current propels the paddles, revolving baskets lift the fish from the water. In summer, you'll see many of these wheels along the river edges.

As newcomers began to arrive in the late 1800s, new economic opportunities emerged. Some Ahtna people began to work for money, but they also continued to harvest natural resources to provide for their families. Although some Alaska Natives now live in cities, they also continue to participate in the traditional sharing economy.

PHOTOS, TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: BLUEBERRIES—NPS / BARBARA CELLARIUS; CARIBOU—CREDIT; DALL'S SHEEP—CREDIT; LUPINE—NPS; TRUMPETER SWAN—© TIM DREW; SOAPBERRY—© EDDIE KING; BROWN BEAR—CREDIT BACKGROUND: ICY BAY AND MOUNT ST. ELIAS—NPS / NEAL HERBERT

PROSPECTING FOR WEALTH



PHOTOS, ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: CHARLEY SANFORD FAMILY, UPPER AHTNA; —NATIONAL ARCHIVES; COHO SALMON—USFWS / TIM KNEPP; FISH WHEEL—MICHAEL QUINTON; CLEANING SALMON—© KATHERINE McCONKEY; MOOSE—CREDIT; RED FOX—CREDIT; DOG SLEDDING TEAM—ALASKA STATE LIBRARY P178-097; COPPER ORE— NPS / MELINDA SCHMITT; TOURING KENNECOTT MILL—NPS / JAMIE HART

After the Klondike gold strike in 1896, thousands of prospectors poured into Alaska. Many headed to Chisana and Nabesna, but found only small amounts of gold. The discovery of copper deposits in the Chitina River valley drew investors who formed a syndicate to develop a mine. To transport the ore they built a railroad, completed in 1911. It linked Kennecott mine to Cordova and from there to profitable markets.

At its peak of operation the company employed 600 people, many of them immigrants who worked seven days a week while living in crowded, rough bunkhouses. By 1938, when the mine closed, workers had extracted ore with a market value of about $200 million at that time.

Although Kennecott mine and mill closed, the community continues to thrive. Restoration crews bring life to relics of a time of industrial growth, expanded markets, global migration, and innovation. At Kennecott you can walk in the footsteps of mill workers and their families, and contemplate what made this rugged place home.

ENTER ANOTHER WORLD



Glaciers, icefields, rivers, and mountains offer challenges and incomparable rewards to the adventurous.

In spring, climbers attempt Mounts Drum, Sanford, Blackburn, and St. Elias. Hikers usually begin from points along the Nabesna or McCarthy roads—the only two roads into the park. Others strike out across Root Glacier (*right*), whose sheer breadth and distant views of Mount Blackburn and the Stairway Icefall are otherworldly.

Before you head into the backcountry, get familiar with techniques for safely crossing glaciers, rivers, and streams. Many rivers are impassable, and some can quickly become raging torrents.

Float the Copper River from Chitina to the Gulf of Alaska, near Cordova, to see some of the park's most rugged terrain. Sea kayakers may opt to paddle in Icy Bay and Yakutat areas. Crosscountry skis offer yet another way to explore in winter and spring. Campers find August and September cool, with fewer mosquitos. For bird's eye views, you may fly or charter a plane.



PHOTOS, LEFT TO RIGHT: ICE CLIMBER, ROOT GLACIER—NPS / JACOB W. FRANK; CAMPING AT AIRSTRIP—NPS / NEAL HERBERT; SAFE HIKING WITH CRAMPONS ON ROOT GLACIER—BETSY BRADBURY

