

# Alaska: Wild at Heart



photo: Jeff Foott

**Hikers in Denali National Park, Alaska's oldest preserve, reported noise from as many as 40 "flightseeing" planes and helicopters during a single day of backpacking. Booming tourism in Alaska is a blessing and a curse, say experts.**

(NAPSA)—Back in 1867, the United States bought from Russia the area that we recognize today as Alaska, the 49<sup>th</sup> state. At that time, the purchase of this distant land was widely mocked as "Seward's Folly," after Secretary of State William Seward, who closed the deal. Alaska has since repaid many times over the \$7 million paid for it. The real folly of Alaska did not occur at the time of the purchase. It is occurring right now.

Alaska is what the Lower 48 used to be, long ago. And much of Alaska is federally protected to maintain that purity to the extent possible in the modern, mechanized world: Alaskan national parks alone comprise 55 million acres, nearly two-thirds of the total acreage in the National Park System.

In the Lower 48 we can hope to protect only fragments of wild lands, and these become increasingly isolated in an ocean of devel-

opment. coastal Alaskan wilderness. Developers want to cut a new road into Denali National Park, home to wolves and grizzlies and herds of hoofed species, from moose to mountain sheep. Some want to build big hotels on pristine lakes. Others would turn national parks into playgrounds for motorized recreation, shattering the natural sounds of Alaskan wilderness with the piercing drone of snowmobiles, which also pump out incredible amounts of pollution because their engines burn fuel so inefficiently. In Yellowstone National Park, where snowmobile pollution has been measured, the vehicles account for 68 to 90 percent of certain park air pollutants even though automobiles outnumber snowmobiles there by sixteen to one. This is what snowmobile enthusiasts would bring to Alaskan national parks as well.

Alaska's wild lands are protected by a landmark conservation law, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. The law created 10 new Alaskan national parks and preserves and expanded three others. It continues to provide legal protection for these public lands, as do various National Park Service regulations designed to control snowmobile use and other activities in the parks. But the proponents of development and unregulated motorized use, fronted by the Alaska congressional delegation, are seeking to reduce the potency of the Lands Act.

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), an 82-year-old citizens' group, is working hard to ensure that the Lands Act is not gutted by development interests and the politicians who serve them. NPCA has been instrumental in keeping snowmobiles out of the oldest part of Denali, a wilderness core that is the heart of the park. NPCA also is working to prevent misguided and harmful development schemes while ensuring that Alaska's Native and rural residents can continue traditional lifestyles.

Learn more about Alaska park issues and NPCA-sponsored tours of Alaska by visiting the group's Web site at [www.eparks.org](http://www.eparks.org).

**Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is adorned by many sparkling rivers, such as this one which runs through some of the 104 million acres in Alaska celebrating 20 years of ANILCA stewardship.**



photo: Pat O'Hara

In the Lower 48 States you cannot get more than 10 miles from a road. In some states, every lake suffers from dangerous pollution, stimulating warnings about eating certain fish. More than 90 percent of virgin forests have been cut and more than 95 percent of native preserves have been overturned by the plow.

In Alaska we find an altogether different story. In parts of Alaska you can walk for more than 700 miles without encountering a single village. Alaska is home to the nation's longest undammed river.

opment. This situation makes Alaska the best place left for protecting our wild heritage. In the future, the wildlands protected in Alaska are likely to stand out as rare gems in a developed world, and they will be valued accordingly.

But they are not always so valued today. There are among us people who want to make Alaska a lot more like the Lower 48 States. Not content with punctuating Prudhoe Bay with oil wells, the oil industry wants to lay siege to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the last stretch of unsullied