

South Denali Visitor Complex  
**Themes and Messages**  
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**Themes** are the important ideas that organize the messages to be communicated at the South Denali Visitor Facility. They create a framework for planning and help place resources and events into meaningful contexts for visitors. Once these significant concepts are identified, decisions can be made about what site resources and media are most appropriate to tell these stories. Compelling interpretive themes link a tangible resource to the interests of visitors.

The theme statement, which is the main idea of an interpretive opportunity, should always contain universal concepts. A **universal concept** is an intangible meaning that has significance to almost everyone, but may not mean the same thing to any two people. They are the ideas, values, challenges, relationships, needs, and emotions that speak to the human condition.

Interpretation is most effective when media and other interpretive opportunities allow visitors to grasp the meanings expressed in themes and apply them to their own lives. Visitors may not parrot the themes we write—but if they are provoked, inspired, or can relate to something within themselves, we have been successful.

- A **primary theme** expresses the main idea and unifying concepts that tie together the stories of South Denali. To provide a cohesive visitor experience, all interpretation at the facility complex should relate to this holistic theme.
- **Sub-themes** split the primary theme into several more specific and workable ideas. These broad storylines guide visitors to discover deeper meanings and relationships with the resources of the site.
- **Messages** break down the broad sub-themes into specific, discrete stories that can be told with interpretive media and programming.

**Primary theme:**

South Denali is a gateway to the Alaska wilderness, offering intimate experiences in tundra, taiga, and alpine lake habitats, showcasing sweeping vistas of the Alaska Range and Chulitna River Valley, and revealing the natural and cultural forces that have shaped this rugged landscape.

## **Sub-themes:**

**Sub-theme 1:** Curry and K'esugi Ridges are the backbone of Denali State Park, harboring dynamic ecosystems of specially adapted wildlife and plants.

### **Messages for Sub-theme 1:**

Alpine Tundra, found in the higher elevations of Curry and K'esugi Ridges, is a miniature world of plants adapted to harsh conditions of sunlight, wind, cold, drought, and a short growing season.

- Alpine environments are characterized by short, cold, and unpredictable growing seasons. Soils are thin, nutrient poor, and dry out quickly.
- The principle characteristic of an alpine environment is its lack of trees which allows high wind and intense solar penetration into the ground vegetation and soil.
- Alpine plants are usually slow-growing, long-lived perennials. They store energy in a good year to make it through a bad year. They often reproduce vegetatively rather than sexually. Many are evergreen; they don't grow stems, leaves, flowers and fruit each season.
- Tundra plants are specially adapted to the harsh conditions of high elevation. Dark colors absorb more heat. Many leaves are small, needle shaped, or silver colored to reduce stress from intense alpine sunshine. Some plants have hairs, which allow them to trap heat and diffuse the harmful solar radiation. Hairy undersides of leaves may also trap and retain moisture, such as those found on Labrador tea. Other plants, like mountain cranberry, store water in their waxy leaves, which also prevents desiccation from drying winds.
- Most alpine plants are matted against the earth, away from the harmful wind. They cling to rocks which retain warmth better than the soil. Many have renewal buds close to the ground where they are protected from cold and wind.
- Crowberry, dwarf blueberry, and low-bush cranberry attract a variety of animals, including black and grizzly bears. Other wildlife species that inhabit this association at some time during the year are ptarmigan, fox, coyote, ground squirrel and moose.
- Many "trees" in the tundra grow stunted and horizontally instead of standing upright. This alpine phenomenon is termed "krummholz," or twisted wood.
- Hardy alpine trees often demonstrate "flagging"—branches only grow on the leeward side of the trunk and point the wind direction.
- Lichens are well adapted to the rocky substrate and proliferate. They initiate the process of soil accumulation that will allow other pioneer plant species to succeed them.
- The alpine tundra association is fragile—it is easily damaged and recovers very slowly. Thin soils, short growing seasons, high winds, and low moisture contribute to the sensitivity of this habitat.

The High Brush (scrub/shrub) system is a transition zone between treeline and alpine tundra that provides significant browse and cover for large mammals.

- Vegetation cover in this association ranges from very dense to open with widely scattered spruce trees. Dominant species are willow and alder, intermixed with a groundcover of berry plants (blueberry, soapberry, lingonberry, thimbleberry, salmonberry, currant) and devil's club.
- High Brush systems provide important browse and cover for large mammals in the park. The large number of berries supports black and brown bear populations.

Upland Spruce/Hardwood Forests are fairly dense forest systems that provide cover more many of the larger mammals in the park.

- This forest type is a mixture of white spruce, Alaska paper birch, quaking aspen, black cottonwood, and balsam poplar. It covers most of the lower elevations within Denali State Park.
- Understory species provide browse for moose and cover for larger mammals found within the park.

Bottomland Spruce/Poplar Forests are productive, dense forest systems found on level floodplains, low river terraces, and thawed south-facing slopes.

- The dominant species of these forests are white spruce mixed with black cottonwood and balsam poplar. Large cottonwood trees are located in areas adjacent to river channels or less active flood plain zones.
- This association provides understory brush used as browse by moose. Moose often congregate in this association for cover and feeding.
- The high productivity of these sites is due to frequent flooding that adds nutrients to the soil and removes the accumulated litter layer.

Wetlands on the Ridges (streams, sedge meadows, bogs, and muskeg) support distinct vegetation and wildlife, while serving as important sources of water for all wildlife species.

- Wetlands are found in river bottom lowlands, along lake shores, upland terraces, and low-lying drainage systems throughout Denali State Park.
- In moist tundra meadows (muskeg), cottongrass tussocks, dwarf shrubs (birch, willow, alder and black spruce) and sphagnum moss are the dominant species.
- The Chulitna, Susitna, and Tokositna Rivers provide essential habitat for bald eagles, trumpeter swans, and other waterfowl. These rivers and associated creeks are essential habitat for several species of anadromous fish.
- A scenic chain of still ponds and swiftly flowing streams cut through a valley that separates the visitor center site from the rest of Curry Ridge to the northeast. Numerous dams, lodges, and fresh tree cuttings demonstrate the ability of beavers to change and diversify a landscape.

Lake 1787, an alpine lake perched on Curry Ridge near the visitor center site, attracts a diversity of waterfowl and supports a rich shoreline habitat.

- Lake 1787 is about 2,800 feet long by 1,000 feet wide.

- Alpine lakes are extreme habitats with cold temperatures, a lack of nutrients, and alternating periods of intense UV radiation contrasting with months of darkness.
- Due to their isolation, simple food chains, and extreme conditions, alpine lakes have been used as early warning systems for global environmental changes.
- Around its shore, the lake harbors sedge meadows, flowing streams, alder and willow thickets, and stands of spruce. The diversity of habitat coupled with a constant water supply is a wildlife magnet.
- Lakes provide important feeding habitat for the Arctic Tern, Long-tailed Jaegers, and Ospreys.
- The haunting yodel and excited laugh of loons adds a primal atmosphere to Lake 1787. Groups of Pacific Loons were observed on the lake in August and September, 2007. Swans and a swimming black bear have also been observed by members of the planning team.

Denali State Park's size, diversity, and proximity to other wild areas make it home to many unique, northern wildlife species.

- The South Denali Region south of the Alaskan Range, receives greater precipitation and thus supports more lush vegetation and wildlife than Denali National Park on the north side of the mountains. Dense cover also makes animals harder to observe.
- The river valleys and ridges are migratory routes for many birds and serve as areas of seasonal concentration for bears and other large mammals.
- Denali State Park's wildlife is vulnerable to human activities both within and outside the park boundaries. Hunted species in the state park retain a wariness not seen in game species living in the refuge of Denali National Park.
- Altitudinal migration is commonly practiced by many animals in this mountainous region. Food is plentiful in alpine meadows in summer but these high, open areas are colder and windier in winter. Therefore moose, porcupine, and a number of predators move to lower, protected elevations.

The diversity of habitats on Curry Ridge attracts many bird species, most of which are migrants and spend just the summer breeding season in the area.

- More than 130 bird species use the park for breeding or during migration.
- Most birds are migrants, but a few year-round residents include the gray jay, raven, willow ptarmigan, rock ptarmigan, spruce grouse, and black-capped and boreal chickadees.
- Lakes and streams attract water birds such as Pacific loons, red-throated loons, common loons, horned grebes, trumpeter swans, American widgeon, mallard, shoveler, pintail, green-winged teal, greater and lesser scaup, harlequin duck, surf and white-winged scoters, buffleheads, Barrow's goldeneye, semiplumated plovers, lesser yellowlegs, least sandpiper, spotted sandpipers, common snipe, red-necked phalarope, long-tailed jaegers, Arctic terns, and mew gulls.
- Smaller migratory bird species fill the trees and shrubs with color and song. These include northern flickers, Say's phoebe, horned larks, violet-green swallows, bank swallows, cliff swallows, orange-crowned warblers, yellow-rumped warblers, Arctic warblers, Wilson's warblers, ruby-crowned kinglets, northern wheatear,

- northern shrikes, golden-crowned sparrows, tree sparrows, white-crowned sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, Lapland longspurs, snow buntings, gray-crowned rosy finches, and common redpolls.
- Raptors, like bald eagles, golden eagles, northern harriers, and gyrfalcons, ride the updrafts of Curry Ridge and may be seen soaring past the visitor center. Uncommon hawk owls hunt from tree top to tree top, short-eared owls nest in open tundra habitats, and great-horned and boreal owls may be found in forests.
  - Many large bird species in Denali are ground or cliff nesters partially due to the abundance of cliffs and the relative lack of large trees.
  - Select areas of the Park serve as rich, breeding grounds for many species of birds, like swans and cranes, which depend on the abundance of sunlight, summer food, and the relative lack of predators to rear young in this northern environment. Many of these birds migrate latitudinally thousands of miles to wintering grounds in South America and Africa.
  - The sandhill crane is Alaska's largest game bird. Cranes can be seen on Curry Ridge in late summer and early fall as they begin flocking and feeding on the abundant berries. These belong to the Pacific Flyway Population, which overwinter in the Central Valley of California. The birds come together in great flocks before and during migrations but are wary and scatter widely in their breeding and nesting areas. Cranberries were originally called “cranberries,” because their flowers look like cranes and early English settlers to North America saw cranes feeding on the berries.

Several mammal species provide potential (although infrequent) viewing opportunities.

- Large mammals include moose, black bears and grizzly bears (attracted to the berries in the high shrub and alpine tundra), and occasional hunting wolf packs. Caribou were historic migrants into the tundra, but are now uncommon. Common smaller mammals include beaver, mink, red fox, pine marten, ermine, least weasel, snowshoe hare, porcupine, and collared pika. Red squirrels and flying squirrels are common in spruce forests. Arctic ground squirrels and hoary marmots are found in open alpine areas. Coyotes, river otters, wolverines, and lynx are less common in this area.
- Marmots and ground squirrels, like most small mammals in Denali, hibernate through the winter in underground burrows.
- Beaver adapt their behavior to changing seasonal conditions rather than migrating or hibernating. Caches of food stored underwater provide nourishment to overwintering beavers.
- Animal species that remain active throughout the winter may turn white such as the ptarmigan, weasel, and snowshoe hare.

**Sub-theme 2:** Dramatic mountain, glacier, lake, and river landforms visible from Curry Ridge illustrate the major geologic forces that have sculpted the landscape of this region.

**Messages for Sub-theme 2:**

Curry Ridge offers spectacular views of the Alaska Range, dramatized by the flat Chulitna River valley in the foreground.

- On a clear day, several major peaks can be seen from Curry Ridge: Mount Foraker (17,400 feet), Mount Hunter (14,573 feet), Mount Huntington (12,240 feet), Mount McKinley/Denali (20,320 feet), Mount Dickey (9,545 feet), Moose’s Tooth (10,335 feet), and Broken Tooth (9,050 feet).
- The vantage point provides an overview of geologic landforms like glaciers, outwash plains, rivers, cirques, and U-shaped valleys—an ideal staging area to connect viewers to the sweeping stories of geology and the adventures of explorers, pioneers, and climbing expeditions.
- Mount McKinley/Denali is the highest peak in North America at 20,320 feet. However, with an astounding 18,000 foot vertical elevation above the surrounding landscape, Denali has the most dramatic local relief of any of the world’s tallest mountains. It has two major summits: the South Summit is the highest and most climbed, while the North Summit is 19,470 feet. The mountain is regularly climbed today with just over half of the expeditions successful. Extreme temperatures and wind, however, make it a dangerous climb.
- The debate over calling the mountain “Denali” or “Mount McKinley” continues today. Denali is derived from the language of Athabascans who lived north of the mountain and means “The Tall One.” In 1896, William Dickey, a gold rush reporter, named the peak after presidential candidate McKinley, who supported the gold standard. After President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, the name of the mountain was officially changed to Mount McKinley. Over the years, Alaska residents have repeatedly lobbied to have the name changed back to the Athabascan “Denali” without success. Although the Alaska Board of Geographic Names changed the name back to Denali in 1980, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names still maintains McKinley.
- At 17,400 feet, Mount Foraker is the second highest peak in the Alaska Range and the fourth highest peak in the United States. The mountain was named for Joseph Foraker, a U.S. Senator from Ohio, in 1899. The Tanana Indians in the Lake Minchumina area called the mountain “Sultana” or “Menlale,” meaning “Denali’s Wife.”
- Mount Hunter at 14,573 feet was known as “Begguya” in the Dena’ina language, which means “Denali’s Child.” It is the third highest peak in the Alaska Range. The mountain is topped by a large glacial plateau with long steep ridges. In 1903, a reporter of the Frederick Cook expedition named a peak after his aunt Anna Hunter. Although it was a different peak than this one, a government surveyor mistakenly named this third highest peak Hunter in 1906.

- Mount Huntington at 12,240 feet has a steep pyramid peak—in nearly every direction, the face drops over 5,000 feet in a mile. The mountain is therefore a much more technical climb than Denali. The peak was named after Arch Huntington, former president of the American Geographical Society who sponsored an early expedition of the northwest branch of the Ruth Glacier.
- Moose’s Tooth is a unique rock peak on the east side of the Ruth Gorge. Its summit is a craggy, angled, long ridge that runs east-west for about a mile, giving the appearance of a tooth. The name was translated from an Athabascan name for the peak. Despite its lower elevation of 10,335 ft., its large rock faces and deep gorges (couloirs) make it a difficult, technical climb. Broken Tooth at 9,050 feet is also part of this rocky complex.
- Mount Dickey is a peak on the west side of the Ruth Gorge. At 9,545 feet, it has a relatively low elevation. However, its sheer granite east face is nearly a vertical mile, making it one of the tallest rock walls in the world. It is named after William Dickey, a prospector who named Mount McKinley in 1896.
- Nestled between the mouths of the Ruth and Tokositna Glaciers, the tooth-like granite crags of the Tokosha Mountains rise 6,148 feet from the Chulitna River valley in front of the larger mountain peaks. The mountains were named in 1906 from a Dena’ina word meaning “the place where there are no trees.”
- The Peters Hills, also visible from Curry Ridge, are foothills of the Alaska Range rising to about 3,373 feet. They are important to the gold mining story of the region is popular for recreational activities such as moose hunting and hiking.
- The Talkeetna Mountains are visible to the east side of Curry Ridge on clear days. The range stretches northeast-southwest about 150 miles north of Anchorage, with the tallest peak, called Sovereign Mountain, at 8,849 feet.
- Fed by numerous glaciers from the Alaska Range, the braided Chulitna River valley stretches before the Alaska Range at the base of Curry Ridge.

The dramatic and rugged scenery of the region has inspired the work of artists, like renowned painter Sydney Laurence.

- Sydney Laurence was the first professionally trained artist to make Alaska his home in 1904. His image of Mount McKinley from the Peters Hills above the rapids of the Tokositna River (visible from the visitor center site) became his trademark.
- Laurence applied the “tonalist” techniques that he learned in New York and Europe to the Alaska wilderness. His paintings helped to define Alaska as “The Last Frontier.”
- An image of Mt. McKinley had been painted on the wall of the Curry Lookout, which provided a view even when the clouds masked the peak. There is speculation that the painting may have been started by Sydney Laurence. At some point, the wall board was cut away and the painting removed.

The Alaska Range was formed by global tectonic forces that are still occurring today.

- The Alaska Range is a relatively narrow band of mountains that extends for about 400 miles. It forms an east-west arc with its most northerly section in the middle.

The range curves southwest towards the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands, and southeast into the Pacific Coast Ranges.

- The Alaska Range is a patchwork of sedimentary, metamorphic, and granitic rock.
  - From about 150 to 80 millions years ago, this region was covered by a sea that deposited layer upon layer of sand, shells, and other debris. These sediments hardened into enormous blocks of sedimentary rock.
  - During a period of volcanic activity 56 million years ago, large pools of magma rose toward the surface and cooled, forming a massive blocks of granite called the plutons—they would eventually be uplifted as Mount McKinley and the Ruth Gorge. Another pluton formed 38 million years ago that became Mount Foraker.
  - The highest peaks of the Alaska Range are composed of granite plutons, which erode slower than the neighboring sedimentary mountains.
- Plate tectonics, a theory that the earth’s crust is divided into several massive moving plates, explains the formation of the Alaska Range.
  - The Pacific Plate moves north and plunges beneath the North American Plate on the south coast of Alaska.
  - The moving plates act like conveyor belts, hauling large chunks of crust from other places on the planet.
  - About 50 million years ago, a massive piece of crust called the Yakutat microplate (terrane) hitched a ride north on the moving Pacific Plate from the coast of British Columbia. Between 10 and 20 million years ago, this lump began smashing into southern Alaska, creating the eastern Chugach-St. Elias Mountains.
  - As the Pacific Plate continues to plunge beneath the North American Plate, the lump of hitchhiking Yakutat microplate is being forced underneath. This has caused a massive wedge-shaped piece of the North American Plate, called the Wrangell Subplate, to break loose and rotate counterclockwise.
  - The blocks of sedimentary and granitic rock of the Alaska Range are being buckled and forced upward where the broken Wrangell Subplate is pushing against the North American Plate. The Yakutat microplate underneath is somewhat buoyant and light, and is likely driving the rise of the Alaska Range to great heights.
  - The Denali Fault is 600 miles long and is the most significant “strike-slip” fault (where two sides slip horizontally past each other) in Interior Alaska. In the center of the Alaska Range, the mountains straddle the fault. It defines the northeastern margin of the Wrangell Subplate.
  - Mount McKinley was likely thrust up higher than other peaks due to its unique position near a bend in the Denali Fault, where both vertical (thrust) and lateral (strike-slip) movements occur between the plates.
  - The Pacific Plate continues to move northward and plunge under the North American Plate at a rate of about 5.5 cm per year. The Alaska Range is being uplifted along the Denali Fault at about 1 cm per year.
- The mountains act as a high barrier to the flow of moist air from the Gulf of Alaska northwards. The heavy snowfall contributes to a number of large glaciers,

including the Canwell, Castner, Black Rapids, Susitna, Yanert, Muldrow, Eldridge, Ruth, Tokositna, and Kahiltna Glaciers.

Curry and K'esugi Ridges were formed by the same processes that shaped the Alaska Range.

- Curry and K'esugi Ridges are 35 mile-long north/south alpine plateaus between the Chulitna and Susitna River. They are composed of the same sedimentary (150-80 million years old) and granitic (56 million years old) rock that makes up the Alaska Range.
- The broad, flat rocky areas on top of Curry Ridge are composed of the same 56 million year old granite that forms the peak of Mount McKinley and the Ruth Gorge. It is a direct connection to the towering formations visible from the visitor center site.
- As plates move horizontally past each other in a strike-slip fault (like the Denali Fault), narrow pieces of the earth are broken apart and thrust upwards along cracks parallel to the strike-slip fault (called "thrust faults"). The resulting landscape is like a series of rugged steps—the highest steps are nearest to the main strike-slip fault, and steps decrease in size the further away they get from the main fault. The highest peaks of the Alaska Range straddle the Denali Fault. Curry and K'esugi Ridges were formed similar to the Alaska Range, but were uplifted to a lesser extent due to their greater distance from the Denali Fault.
- Faults tend to weather and erode more quickly than unfaulted rock. Glaciers naturally follow the weaker thrust faults and overtime carve out deep valleys. The Chulitna and Susitna River Valleys likely follow thrust faults that may have lifted Curry and K'esugi Ridges.

Ruth Glacier is an impressive and recognizable feature of Denali National Park and Preserve

- The dirty snout of Ruth Glacier flows into the Chulitna valley providing a front and center view. Denali and its companion peaks are accented by spectacular valley glaciers and steep ice-carved gorges and a year-around mantle of snow and ice above 8,000 feet. These glaciers, such as the Ruth, Buskin, and Eldridge, are from 14 to 38 miles long and up to four miles wide. They flow from the high peaks and melt into the broad U-shaped Chulitna Valley, giving the Chulitna River the milky waters and braided channels that are typical of a glacial stream.
- In 1903, Dr. Frederick Cook made the first low-altitude circumnavigation of Denali. He named the Ruth Glacier after his step-daughter.
- Don Sheldon Amphitheater on the Ruth Glacier was listed by Reader's Digest as one of the ten most spectacular places on earth. The Ruth Gorge is equally spectacular.
- The head of Ruth Glacier receives all of the snow that falls on the southeast side of the mountain where moisture-laden winds blow in from the coast.
- The snow and ice that accumulate in this area flows through the narrow restriction of the one-mile-wide Great Gorge. The glacier, dropping 200 feet every mile, cracks into hundreds of dangerous crevasses here.

- The walls of the Great Gorge loom 5,000 feet above the surface of the Ruth Glacier. The ice has been estimated at 3,800 feet thick, so the Gorge is actually 8,800 feet deep; deeper than the Grand Canyon.
- Ruth Glacier currently races down the mountain at 3.3 feet per day. Four million pounds of ice push through the canyon daily.

**Sub-theme 3:** The broad open crown of Curry Ridge offers unrestricted views of atmospheric patterns and phenomenon.

**Messages for Sub-theme 3:**

The Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights, is a uniquely northern phenomenon that contributes to the mythology of Alaskan winters.

- Auroras are naturally occurring, atmospheric light displays that are best viewed during darkness in Polar Regions. These lights are named for the Greek goddess of dawn, Aurora. In the northern hemisphere they are called Aurora Borealis, in reference to the Greek name for the north wind, Boreas.
- Auroras are produced by the collision of charged particles in the Earth's magnetosphere with particles swept into it by solar winds. This occurs at altitudes between 50 and 200 miles above the Earth's surface.
- Many northern cultures have developed folklore and mythology about the Aurora Borealis. People have long associated these mysterious dancing lights with the spiritual world and wonder about their origins. In Norway they were sometimes referred to as "Herring Flash." It was believed that they were the reflections of huge schools of Herring cast onto the sky. Some Algonquin Tribes in North America believed them to be ancestors dancing around a fire. Many gold-struck Klondike prospectors thought the lights reflected the huge mother lode of gold (see Robert Service poems of Alaska during that era). Today in Japan, many consider the viewing of the Aurora Borealis to be a romantic opportunity to conceive a child of outstanding fortune. Native peoples of the circumpolar region believe that one should be very quiet and respectful when observing the northern lights. Mocking them, singing, or whistling could invite bad fortune and danger.
- Optimal viewing times are from December to March when nights are long and dark. They can be seen in a full spectrum of colors but red is the rarest. The aurora is most active late at night or early in the morning when the sky is clear and the air is chilly.
- Auroras tend to be brightest two days after intense solar activity since it takes two days for the "solar wind" to reach Earth.

As the highest point in North America at 20,320 feet, Mount McKinley/Denali experiences some of the most severe weather in the world.

- Denali is considered to be one of the coldest mountains on earth, with air temperatures falling to -40 degrees Fahrenheit even in June. At 19,000 feet temperatures range from -30 to -70 degrees Fahrenheit in winter.

- Windstorms on Denali can last over a week with wind speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour.
- Halfway to the summit, the climate of Denali is equivalent to the North Pole.
- Denali is large enough that it can create its own localized weather. The summit is often shrouded in clouds. The entire mountain is only visible a few days each summer.
- The Alaska Range creates a massive rain shadow to the north. Moist air from the ocean travels northward and is forced up the high peaks of the range. As it cools, moisture condenses to form clouds, rain, and snow. By the time the air descends the north side of the ridge, much of its moisture is gone.
- According to some Alaska Native stories, the clouds on top of Denali are the smoke from fires of the “mountain people.” When the fires burn, clouds appear around the summit and the temperature begins to warm. When the fires no longer burn, the clouds clear from the peak and the temperature drops.

Sun halos and sun dogs are a common sight in Alaska, especially in winter.

- Sun halos are faint rings of light visible around the sun. They form when sunlight passes through ice crystals in high cirrus clouds (30,000 feet above the earth). The crystals bend the light 22 degrees.
- Sun dogs are two colorful bursts of light that appear on either side of the sun. They also form when light shines through cirrus clouds or falling ice crystals called “diamond dust.” The crystals fall with their flat surfaces parallel to the earth, and bend the light into colors like a prism. They are also known as “mock suns” and scientifically as “parhelia.”
- Sun halos and sun dogs are most often seen near sunrise or sunset.

**Sub-theme 4:** Denali State Park is a microcosm of the intact Greater Denali Ecosystem, an important indicator for global environmental changes.

**Messages for Sub-theme 4:**

- The Greater Denali Ecosystem is one of the few systems in North America that is almost entirely intact, complete with top level predators within their natural ranges (grizzly bears, black bears, wolves) and a diversity of large mammal species.
- Much of the ecosystem is composed of ice field, glaciers, and rocky slopes. In higher elevations, alpine vegetation of dwarf shrub communities dominates. More protected slopes support scrub communities of dwarf birch, willows, and alder. Well-drained sites harbor white spruce, black spruce, paper birch, and quaking aspen.
- The higher elevation soils of the ecosystem tend to be poor, shallow over bedrock, and may not retain enough moisture to form permafrost.
- Denali State Park (325,240 acres) and Denali National Park and Preserve protect over 6.3 million acres of the Greater Denali Ecosystem.

- Much of Alaska’s environment exists near the melting point of ice. Small increases in global temperatures can have significant impacts on the ecosystem. The region serves as an important indicator for worldwide climate change.
- According to a 2006 study (National Assessment Synthesis Team), Alaska has warmed 4 degrees Fahrenheit in the last 50 years. This compares with the global average of just over 1 degree Fahrenheit.
- As the earth’s temperature increases, tundra vegetation has given way to shrubs and trees, reducing wildlife populations that depend on the tundra habitat. According to geophysicist Ken Tape of the University of Washington, the growth of shrubs across the tundra has increased by 40% in less than 60 years.
- Increased forest insect infestations and fires are caused by longer and dryer growing seasons.
- Permafrost temperatures in Denali have increased 0.5-1.5 degrees Celsius since 1980, causing forest damage and the eroding of tundra riverbanks.
- Many glaciers in the Greater Denali region are retreating. Studies (Geophysical Institute and the USGS, 2006) have found that 95% of Southeast Alaska’s glaciers are thinning. These glaciers are more susceptible to climate change due to their low elevation and flat, broad surfaces. Projections indicate that a sustained warming of 1 degree Celsius will reduce glaciers by 15%.
- Sustainable building practices help to reduce greenhouse gases that are warming the planet. Denali State Park and Denali National Park and Preserve can serve as demonstration and educational areas for sustainable practices that minimize human impact on the Earth.
- The altitudinal diversity of Curry Ridge, and the panoramic views it offers of the landscape, make it an excellent location to introduce visitors to the interconnectedness of ecosystems and their own effects on the Earth.

**Sub-theme 5:** Alaska Natives have depended on the rich resources of the ridges and rivers for survival, maintaining an important network of trade and spiritual connection to the land.

**Messages for Sub-theme 5:**

- “Athabascan” is a family of culturally and linguistically related Native American groups that traditionally lived in the interior of Alaska, northwest Canada, and the American southwest.
- Living in the harsh condition of interior Alaska, traditional Athabascans were a nomadic people that seasonally followed their food sources. In summer, they traveled to camps on small rivers and lakes where they fished and hunted waterfowl. In winter, they moved to semi-permanent villages to hunt caribou and moose and trap smaller animals.
- Extensive trade networks were in place between Athabascan groups and their neighbors long before white settlers arrived in the region.

- The Dena'ina (Tenaina) is a group of Athabascan Alaska Natives who originally inhabited the south-central part of the state, including the area around Cook Inlet and K'esugi and Curry Ridges.
- With access to the rich waters of Cook Inlet, the Dena'ina people did not need to be as nomadic as other Alaska Native groups.
- Shem Pete, a Dena'ina born near Susitna Station in 1896, is renowned as an expert of Dena'ina language and culture. His knowledge was recorded in a book entitled *Shem Pete's Alaska*, first published in 1983.
- K'esugi (for which Kesugi or K'esugi Ridge is named) is a Dena'ina name meaning the "Ancient One." Curry Ridge was known to the Alaska Natives as K'esugi Ken, which means "Base of the Ancient One."
- The Ridges were important hunting areas for the Dena'ina people. Shem Pete relates a story of killing 14 bears on Curry Ridge in 1914. He also tells of native people hunting caribou on K'esugi Ridge every summer and floating the meat in skin boats back to Kroto (about 10 miles south of visitor center site on the Susitna River).
- The Chulitna River was known as the "Ts'ilutnu" in Dena'ina, which possibly means "Straight Hand," "Forearm," or "Tongue" River.
- The Chulitna was more navigable in a skin boat than the Susitna. Belmore Browne, a famous mountaineer, floated the Chulitna River in 1910 in an attempt to find a route to Denali. He reported:
 

*[The Indians] drifted past us in boats made of the green skins of moose and caribou. The primitive canoes were loaded to the gunwales with men, women, children, and dogs, and in the bow of each sat an Indian man tapping the river bottom with a slender pole and searching the channel for danger that might wreck his frail craft.*
- The Dena'ina called Ruth Glacier "Dghelay Ka'a Li'a," which means "Big Mountain-Glacier." According to Shem Pete, early crossings of the glacier could take an entire day. Leaders would haul packs of grass and use it to mark a safe route over the ice.
- Denali is derived from the language of Athabascans who lived north of the mountain. "Deenaalee" means "The Tall One" (also referred to as "The Great One" by Ahtna people). The Dena'ina word is Dghelay Ka'a, which means "Big Mountain." These names were often used interchangeably to describe all of the high peaks in the Central Alaska Range. Athabascan people are quietly reverent toward Denali, rarely speaking of it.
- According to many regional Alaska Native traditions, Denali is the birthplace of mankind. The Creator in the form of a raven lives at the base of the mountain fashioning people. The tallest peak in North America marks the beginning of the world, from which all humans spread throughout the land.

**Sub-theme 6:** The lofty peaks of Denali/Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range and the promise of riches have beckoned adventurers and thrill-seekers since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Messages for Sub-theme 6:**

The highest mountain in North America attracts climbers from around the world.

- Mount McKinley has a larger bulk and rise than Mount Everest. Even though the summit of Everest is about 9,000 feet higher as measured from sea level, its base sits on the Tibetan Plateau at about 17,000 feet, giving it a real vertical rise of little more than 12,000 feet. The base of Mount McKinley is roughly a 2,000-foot plateau, giving it an actual rise of 18,000 feet.
- About 1,200 people have attempted to climb the summit of McKinley annually in the last decade; only about half succeed.
- Mount McKinley is a non-technical climb, but still entails considerable risk due to severe weather, avalanches, and altitude sickness. Over 100 climbers have died attempting to summit; on average 1 out of every 200 climbers die on the mountain.
- Safe climbing on Denali is from May 1<sup>st</sup> to the first week in July.
- 80% of all climbing expeditions today use the West Buttress Route pioneered by Bradford Washburn. Nearly 20,000 climbers have attempted that route.
- Most climbs take about two weeks but bad weather can stretch the time required to over a month. Descending the mountain is more dangerous and time-consuming than going up.
- Climbers are expected to be responsible for their own safety, to know their limitations, and be prepared. The National Park Service conducts search and rescues only when conditions are reasonably safe for rescuers.
- Trash must be carried off the mountain and human excrement must be deposited in designated pits or crevasses.

Mount McKinley is one of the greatest mountaineering challenges in North America and has inspired some colorful climbing adventures in its short history.

- Denali, the tall one, is legendary for its wild and unpredictable moods. Since its “discovery,” people have been enthralled with the goal of reaching its peak. It is a fitting Alaskan icon.
- Dr. Frederick Cook, a celebrated explorer, falsely claimed to have summited in 1906. His claim was eventually discredited but the fervor generated by his claim ignited passion in some local Alaskans who subsequently did make a successful ascent to the summit.
- The “Sourdough Expedition of 1910” was one of the most unlikely and phenomenal ascents in mountaineering history. Four locals (Tom Lloyd, Peter Anderson, Billy Taylor, and Charles McGonagall), known as the **Sourdough Expedition**, with little or no climbing experience and homemade equipment hauled a 14 foot spruce pole up 8,000 vertical feet to Mt. McKinley’s north summit. The round trip from about 11,000 feet took them less than 18 hours. They

enjoyed doughnuts and hot chocolate on the summit. Their climb was met with skepticism by the public for the next three years until the Stuck Expedition successfully scaled the south summit and reported seeing the spruce pole erected on the north peak.

- The first ascent of the main summit of McKinley came on June 7, 1913 by a party led by Hudson Stuck. The first man to reach the summit was Walter Harper, an Alaska Native. Harry Karstens and Robert Tatum also made the summit. Archdeacon Hudson Stuck was steadfast in his plea that the mountain should be known as Denali, not McKinley; a view shared by many Alaskans today.
- After the Stuck Expeditions undisputed conquest of the south summit, incentive to climb the mountain declined. Nineteen years would pass before another party attempted the climb.
- The first double peak expedition to ascend both the North and South Summits was accomplished by the Lindley-Liek Party in 1932.
- The first woman to reach the summit was Barbara Washburn in 1947. Her husband, Bradford, was the first climber to summit twice when he accompanied her.
- The first successful attempt that did not use the traditional Muldrow Glacier route to the summit was led by Bradford Washburn up the West Buttress Route in 1951. Washburn a serious and respected mountaineer devoted his life to researching the mountain. He is widely considered to be the world's leading authority on Mount McKinley.
- The popular West Buttress Route was discovered and successfully used by Bradford Washburn in 1951. It is a 14 mile climb with a vertical gain of 13,000 feet.
- The first truly technical ascent of Denali was made up the Cassin Ridge by Riccardo Cassin and his team of Italian climbers in 1961.
- In 1967, the team of Ray Genet, Art Davidson, and Dave Johnston successfully climbed the mountain in winter. Later that year, Denali recorded Alaska's most deadly mountaineering disaster when seven members of the Wilcox Party died.
- In 1970, Naomi Uemura succeeds in a solo attempt to summit the South Peak. He dies in the descent.
- Dr. Mira Ercolani is the first woman to solo the peak in 1982.
- Vern Tejas is the first solo winter ascent with a safe return in 1988.

After the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867 by the United States, miners and prospectors journeyed into the Susitna and Chulitna River valleys.

- The name, Mount McKinley was proposed by an early prospector and explorer, W. A. Dickey who navigated the Susitna River upstream to the Indian River in 1896. His name is etched with three others near the mouth of Portage Creek.
- Gold Creek, which was an active mining area with 200-300 residents, was supplied by sternwheeler and tunnel hull barges that traveled up the Susitna River. The area remained remote to most travelers until the construction of the Alaska Railroad.
- Gold was discovered in the Yentna Cache-Creek Mining District of the upper Susitna Valley in 1898, soon followed by claim staking. Placer mining was

- reported in the Cache Creek drainage of the Dutch Hills by 1906. About 200,000 ounces of gold has been produced from these placer deposits.
- The Petersville region ranked among Alaska's major placer gold districts in the early 1900's. The Peters Hills have many named streams as a result.
  - By 1927, a road from Talkeetna was constructed into the mining area, known today as The Petersville Road. The abandoned mining camp of Petersville, Alaska served as the area Post Office for several years in the late 1920's and early 1930's.
  - Two areas have been set aside for recreational gold mining, the North and South units of the Petersville State Recreation Mining Areas. Many smaller one-man and family placer mining operations continue today.

Bush pilots are part of the romantic lore of the Alaska Range and Mount McKinley.

- Alaska is famous for bush flying. In this roadless country, remote communities depend on the skill and tenacity of resourceful pilots to bring in life sustaining supplies. These bush pilots frequently must contend with unpredictable weather, rugged landscape, and challenging landing strips on lakes and tundra. The danger and romance of bush piloting is mythical in Alaska.
- Don Sheldon was a legendary bush pilot who flew out of Talkeetna in the shadow of Mount McKinley. He spent a lifetime time delivering hunters, fishers, and climbers to wilderness locations. He conducted numerous rescue missions and saved more than a few lives. The Don Sheldon Amphitheater, at the head of Ruth Glacier was named in his honor. He was awarded the Alaska Certificate of Achievement for his many rescue missions.
- Don Sheldon's most harrowing rescue might well have been his lifesaving flights into Devils Canyon to rescue an eight man Army scout team stranded on the rugged cliffs above the rapids. Don spotted the boat debris floating down the Susitna River and then saw seven men clinging to a ledge just above the raging water. He navigated the swirling winds of the canyon and landed his float plane on a straight stretch of river upstream from the men. Sheldon's plane raced backwards downstream at 30 mph. He maintained power to control his speed and to steer the plane. In the first pass one man managed to jump aboard. He repeated the adventure three more times and lifted out two men with each attempt. He then found the eighth man 18 miles downstream.
- Talkeetna's Cliff Hudson's bush flying deeds have made the pages of numerous Alaskan adventure stories. He is a pioneer of glacier flying in Denali National Park. Hudson Air Service celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2006.
- On February 5, 1954, an Air Force C-47 flying towards Fairbanks broke apart over the Susitna Valley and fell onto K'esugi Ridge. Ten died in the crash but six miraculously escaped, survived bone-chilling cold, and were rescued through the efforts of pilots Cliff Hudson and Don Sheldon. Hudson was in the air within an hour to pinpoint the crash location prior to a storm front that would postpone rescue operations. He later spent the night with the survivors before the storm broke and they could be flown to safety.

**Sub-theme 7:** The Chulitna and Susitna Rivers are historic travel routes into the rugged interior of Alaska.

**Messages for Sub-theme 7:**

Curry and K'esugi Ridges are flanked by two rivers—the Chulitna River on the west (visible from the visitor center site) and the Susitna River on the east.

- The Chulitna River is fed by multiple valley glaciers from the Alaska Range. It flows 77 miles past the west side of Curry Ridge before joining the Susitna River.
- The milky waters and braided channels of the Chulitna River are typical of a glacial stream. The water of the main channel is clouded with pulverized rock called “glacial flour,” limiting opportunities for sport fishing. Salmon do ascend the Chulitna for spawning, however, and the clear side streams that flow into the river are popular fishing areas.
- The floodplain of the Chulitna River is just 550 feet in elevation, showcasing the dramatic height of the adjacent Alaska Range mountains.
- The Chulitna River valley is pitted with landforms left by recent glaciation, including ground moraines, drumlin fields, eskers, kettle lakes, and outwash plains.
- The Susitna River originates at the Susitna Glacier and flows 313 miles to the Cook Inlet, passing the east side of Curry Ridge. Ranked by volume discharge, the Susitna is the 15<sup>th</sup> largest river in the world.
- “Susitna” is a Dena'ina word that means “Sandy River.”
- The Susitna is one of South Central Alaska's premier sport fishing streams for Chinook salmon, Coho salmon, grayling, burbot, and rainbow trout.

People traditionally accessed the interior of Alaska by following the rivers.

- Dena'ina people traditionally used the Susitna and Chulitna Rivers as a primary means of travel between villages and hunting/fishing areas. In the warmer months, they traveled in birch bark canoes and moose/caribou skin boats. When the rivers froze in winter, they became ice highways for travel by foot and dog sled.
- Although much of the Susitna and Chulitna floodplains are swampy and difficult to travel, early pioneers followed higher ridges that paralleled the rivers to reach the Alaska Interior. Trails created by Native Alaskans and pioneers crisscrossed the landscape.
- In the late 1890s, discovery of gold and copper in Alaska's interior spurred the development of better transportation for the influx of prospectors.

The development of the Alaska Railroad opened the interior of Alaska to settlers, miners, and travelers. Curry, for which Curry Ridge is named, was developed next to the tracks and became a flourishing community in the Alaska wilderness.

- The Alaska Central Railroad was the brainchild of Seattle real-estate developer John Ballaine in 1900. The first tracks were laid in 1903 from Seward 50 miles north. In 1905-06, survey crews entered the Susitna River Valley to determine the

- best routing of the railroad. In 1907, the railway went bankrupt and was reorganized as the Alaska Northern Railway. About 20 more miles were constructed before it too went bankrupt in 1910.
- In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Alaska Railroad Enabling Act, and Congress agreed to fund the construction and operation of the railroad from Seward to Fairbanks for an estimated \$35 million.
  - Curry was originally known as Deadhorse Hill, supposedly named in 1916 when a team of horses fell to their death from the top of a steep hill. It became the main supply and equipment staging point north of Talkeetna for constructing the Alaska Railroad.
  - Supplies for the railroad construction were shipped by large river steamers and sternwheelers to Old Kroto Landing on the Susitna River. From here, smaller tunnel boats (with chambers that protected propellers from the river bottom) hauled supplies in shallow water to camps like Deadhorse Hill.
  - In 1917, a roadhouse was built at Deadhorse Hill to serve overnight railroad workers. Nellie Neal Lawing, more popularly known as Alaska Nellie, was given the contract to manage the roadhouse.
  - Alaska Nellie was already well known as an innkeeper, dog musher, and big game hunter.
  - The name of “Deadhorse Hill” was changed to a more traveler-friendly “Curry” in 1922 to honor Congressman Charles F. Curry of California, a great supporter of the railroad. The tall ridge directly west of the community became known as “Curry Ridge.”
  - In March of 1923, the lavish Curry Hotel was opened on the nearly completed Alaska Railroad. The settlement, near the mid-point of the line running from Seward to Fairbanks, was a logical stopover for travelers.
  - In July of 1923, President Warren Harding was the first president to visit Alaska. He enjoyed Alaska Nellie’s hospitality at the Dead Horse Roadhouse on his tour. On July 15, he celebrated the completion of the Alaska Railroad by driving the golden spike in Nenana. He died of a stroke or heart attack on his return trip to San Francisco on August 2.
  - Curry Lookout, also known as Regalvista Camp, is a small hexagon-shaped shelter located on top of Curry Ridge. It offers sweeping views of Denali and the Alaska Range. Built in the 1920s by employees of the Alaska Railroad, visitors to Curry could reach the lookout by crossing a 537-foot suspension bridge over the Susitna River and climbing a steep 5-mile trail to the top of a 2,600 foot ridge. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.
  - A 1924 [Pathfinder of Alaska](#) article describes the Curry Lookout...
 

*A short jaunt across the Susitna River... affords one an unusually magnificent view of Mount McKinley, as the vantage point at Curry is many miles closer to this majestic mountain than is any other point along the Alaska Railroad. Seekers of the beautiful in Nature will consider this feature alone well worth a stopover in Curry.*
  - Curry continued to grow in the 1930s and 40s with expansions to the Curry Hotel and the development of a ski area in 1947, one of the first in Alaska with a tow-rope and jump.

- The beginning of the end for Curry occurred on April 9, 1957 when a major fire burned the Curry Hotel to the ground and took the lives of three people. Faster diesel trains eliminated the need for extra stopovers along the rail line. As more operations moved to Talkeetna and other communities, Curry was abandoned. A mess hall was the last building standing which operated into the 1980s.
- Today, Curry is once again a stop for travelers on the Alaska Railroad, with interpretive signs that tell the history of the community and a growing network of trails.

Alaska is one of the last true American frontiers, challenging pioneers with rugged terrain, extreme weather, and isolation.

- The Homestead Act was passed by Congress in 1862, providing 160 acres of land for less than \$20. Homesteaders were required to live on the land, build a residence, and farm part of it within 5 years. Thousands of eager families flocked to the undeveloped American West.
- When Alaska became the 49<sup>th</sup> state in 1959, the Homestead Act again lured homesteaders by offering land for just a \$10 filing fee. Pioneers to this new land, some of whom traveled thousands of miles, were known as “59ers.”
- The Alaska 59ers were considered by many to be “modern day pioneers setting out to tame the Alaska wilderness.”
- Homesteaders faced many hardships on their journey. For example, on March 5, 1959, a group of 21 Detroit families embarked on a 4,500 mile route to the Alaska wilderness. Flat tires, vehicle breakdowns, and bad weather turned what should have been an 18-day trip into a 53-day arduous journey. Just 12 families made it to the remote Susitna River valley. Only 4 families stayed long enough to claim a homestead.
- Homesteading was grueling work that brought neighboring families and friends together. Summer was a time for clearing land, cutting firewood, planting gardens, collecting wild berries, and canning salmon to survive the long, dark winters. Settlers helped each other during the hard times and provided a social outlet. This “frontier spirit” is still alive in the small communities and cabins that dot the Susitna River Valley.
- The Homestead Act was finally repealed in 1976, though Alaska was granted an extension until 1986. Nearly 10% of U.S. land was settled in the 114 years of the Act, which included significant portions of Alaska.
- The Trapper Creek Museum on Petersville Road is now housed in a log cabin built by the Donaldson family, one of the members of the Michigan 59ers.

The Parks Highway, visible from the visitor center site, is a marvel of engineering—a 323-mile modern road that took just 12 years to construct through the rugged terrain of the Alaska Interior.

- The Talkeetna Trail was an early pioneer route from Cook Inlet to Talkeetna that followed the flat floodplain of the Susitna River and its tributaries. It was a forerunner of the Parks Highway.
- The Alaska Road Commission was formed by Congress in 1899 to oversee construction and maintenance of roads and trails in Alaska. It was transferred to

- the federal Bureau of Public Roads in 1956, making it eligible to receive funds under the Federal Aid Highway Act. When Alaska became a state in 1959, one of its first projects was the construction of a new Anchorage to Fairbanks highway.
- The route for the new Anchorage-Fairbanks highway was chosen to follow the flat Susitna River drainages, the most direct accessible route between the two largest cities.
  - Construction of the highway started in 1959 and took 12 years to complete at a cost of \$150 million. When completed in 1971, it was originally named the Anchorage-Fairbanks Highway.
  - The highway was renamed in 1975 for George Alexander Parks, governor of the Territory of Alaska from 1925 to 1933. Its proximity to Denali state and national parks was also recognized.
  - The Parks Highway runs 323 miles from the Glenn Highway 35 miles north of Anchorage to Fairbanks in the Alaska Interior. Mileposts along the road start at Mile 35.
  - The Parks Highway travels through some of the most diverse and spectacular scenery in all of Alaska. A 116-mile segment (milepost 132 to 248) was designated as an Alaska State Scenic Byway and is currently under consideration to be designated as a National Scenic Byway.
  - The recently completed “George Parks Highway Scenic Byway: Corridor Partnership Plan” describes the significance of the road.

*If one byway could epitomize all that is Alaska, that byway would be the Parks Byway. Passing through Denali country, dominated by the lofty, snow-covered peaks of the Alaska Range, active glaciers, rolling tundra, boggy muskegs, and spruce forests laced by rivers, the Parks Byway is, according to some residents, the best drive in Alaska.*

Communities near Curry Ridge were formed to provide supplies and serve as social gathering areas for trappers, miners, and homesteaders.

- Talkeetna is located at the confluence of the Susitna, Chulita, and Talkeetna Rivers, an important fishing and trading site for the Dena’ina people. The name comes from the Athabaskan word “K’Dalkitnu” which means “River of Plenty.”
- The gold rush in the Susitna River area brought prospectors to the region as early as 1896. Talkeetna became a riverboat steamer station in 1915 to provide supplies to prospectors heading out to mining claims. Talkeetna was chosen as the divisional headquarters for the Alaska Railroad in 1916, and its population peaked near 1,000. The townsite was established in 1919 when the railroad surveyed and auctioned 80 lots. The community continued to supply area miners until 1940.
- In 1964, a 14-mile spur off the Parks Highway opened Talkeetna to vehicle traffic and development. Today, the village of about 770 people celebrates its past with rustic log buildings, wooden signs, and a true Alaska small town atmosphere. The community is a staging area for climbing expeditions up Mt. McKinley, scenic flights, and jet boat tours. The historic downtown was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.
- Trapper Creek is located at the intersection of two roads. The first semi-permanent settlers of the Trapper Creek area were two brother trappers, Oliver

and Noah Ribidoux, who built a cabin in 1909. In 1917, an early day miner named Henry Bahrenburg blazed a trail leading east from the Cache Creek gold mines to Talkeetna. The Alaska Railroad improved the trail into a wagon road, with the present name of Petersville Road.

- In 1939, Shorty Bradley settled along Petersville Road a few miles west of “The Landing,” a point directly across the Susitna River from Talkeetna. Other settlers joined Bradley to farm the fertile land, including the Michigan 59ers in 1959.
- Trapper Creek became an official community when the Parks Highway was constructed in 1968, intersecting with Petersville Road near the same area that Shorty and other homesteaders had settled. Today, the community of about 420 people has a variety of services and tourist attractions.

**Sub-theme 8:** Denali State Park offers unique opportunities for residents and visitors to intimately experience the diverse landscapes and habitats of the region.

**Messages for Sub-theme 8:**

- The mission of Alaska’s Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation is to provide outdoor recreation opportunities and conserve and interpret resources. Guided by this mission, the South Denali visitor complex will serve as a hub for diverse outdoor recreational activities in Denali State Park.
- Much of Denali State Park’s 325,240 acres are in a wilderness state. Wilderness ethics and “Leave No Trace” principles are important for visitors to understand before engaging in recreational opportunities.
- Black bears and grizzly bears are common throughout the park, especially near salmon spawning streams in spring and ridge blueberry patches in fall. Safety information about bear behavior and encounters must be provided to visitors.
- Camping is an ideal way to experience the park, allowing people to witness the landscape in the changing light of day and encounter wildlife in their dynamic traveling patterns. Roadside camping is available at Byers Lake (74 units), Lower Troublesome Creek Trailhead (20 units), and Denali View North (23 units). The campgrounds offer toilets, picnic sites, and drinking water. Three log public use cabins are also available for rental on Byers Lake.
- For the more adventurous, several rustic trails provide hikers and backpackers access to the park’s backcountry region. The backcountry is a totally immersive experience, showcasing world-class vistas, providing unlimited opportunities to observe wildlife and plants, connecting people to the rugged landscape, and offering true exposure to the Alaska wilderness. About 50 miles of trails start at various points along the Parks Highway and climb steeply to the top of K’esugi Ridge. Low impact camping is allowed anywhere in the backcountry.
- Hunting is a popular activity in Denali State Park, a tradition that spans back to the Dena’ina people hunting caribou and bear on Curry and K’esugi Ridges. The entire park is open to hunting, except within a quarter mile of the Parks Highway

and a half mile of developed facilities. Common species harvested include black bear, brown bear, moose, and ptarmigan. Fish and wildlife in the park are managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

- The clear streams of Denali State Park are ideal habitat for many fish species. Black and brown bears flock to the spawning areas during spring, which have given rise to names such as “Troublesome Creek.” Humans are also attracted to the waterways in pursuit of Pacific salmon, rainbow trout, arctic grayling, and Dolly Varden. Small numbers of lake trout, whitefish, and burbot are found in Byers Lake. The major rivers are clouded with glacial silt, so fishing is limited.
- A plethora of edible wild berries in the park sustain wildlife populations and entice human gatherers. In the higher elevations, colorful blueberries, crowberries, cloudberries, and low-bush cranberries blanket the tundra habitat. In more protected areas, highbush cranberries, currants, and watermelon berries (twisted stalk family) grow.
- Motorized vehicles can cause lasting damage to vegetation and trails in the park, and are limited to maintained roads and parking areas.
- In winter, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and dog mushing are popular activities in the park, especially in lower, protected areas where snow is deeper. Snowmachines are allowed in the park when the snow depth is sufficient (about 18 inches) to protect vegetation.
- In winter, the windswept upper reaches of Curry and K’esugi Ridges often have exposed rock and tundra areas, not ideal for winter recreation. Deeper snow is concentrated in the lower areas around Lake 1787 and between the flat rocky outcroppings.

## **Relationship to Existing Interpretation and Education at Denali National Park and Preserve**

The themes and messages for the South Denali Visitor Complex were developed based on site-specific resources and region-specific stories that can facilitate the most powerful connections with visitors.

Denali National Park and Preserve is a significant partner in the South Denali Visitor Complex that will likely contribute to the staffing of the facility and interpretive programming. It is important that the theme framework established for South Denali complements and integrates with existing national park facilities and goals, while maintaining its unique site-based storyline and management ethic that will be most meaningful to visitors.

### **Existing Denali National Park—Interpretive Theme Matrix**

The Denali Education Plan (Draft, 2006) describes a twenty year vision for educational and interpretive program development, implementation, and evaluation at the national park. Within the plan, an Interpretive Theme Matrix identifies the major topics and themes that will guide the development of programming and facilities.

Many of the site-based themes for the South Denali Visitor Complex fit within the broader interpretive goals of the national park, providing a unified basis for education and evaluation. The relationships are listed on the next page:

Denali National Park and Preserve: Interpretive Theme Statements	South Denali Visitor Complex: Related Interpretive Themes
<p><b>1. Extensive Natural Ecosystems:</b> Denali’s intact, natural ecosystem embodies a wisdom from which humans can learn and promote the workings of a healthy planet for a sustainable future.</p>	<p><b>Sub-theme 1:</b> Curry and K’esugi Ridges are the backbone of Denali State Park, harboring dynamic ecosystems of specially adapted wildlife and plants.</p> <p><b>Sub-theme 4:</b> Denali State Park is a microcosm of the intact Greater Denali Ecosystem, an important indicator for global environmental changes.</p>
<p><b>2. Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat:</b> The size and ecological integrity of Denali preserves a home of extraordinary quality for populations of large northern mammals, birds, and other wildlife, where they can live and be observed interacting with one another and their natural habitat with minimal human disruption.</p>	<p><b>Sub-theme 1:</b> Curry and K’esugi Ridges are the backbone of Denali State Park, harboring dynamic ecosystems of specially adapted wildlife and plants.</p>
<p><b>3. Denali/Mt. McKinley:</b> Mount McKinley’s magnitude captivates human imagination and inspires exploration and protection of the Denali region’s landscapes, wildlife, and wilderness.</p>	<p><b>Sub-theme 2:</b> Dramatic mountain, glacier, lake, and river landforms visible from Curry Ridge illustrate the major geologic forces that have sculpted the landscape of this region.</p> <p><b>Sub-theme 6:</b> The lofty peaks of Denali/Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range and the promise of riches have beckoned adventurers and thrill-seekers since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.</p>
<p><b>4. Wilderness Values and Wilderness Recreation:</b> Denali’s wild lands create a refuge from modern civilization where we can discover, challenge, and connect with the primal pulses and prevailing forces of nature.</p>	<p><b>Sub-theme 8:</b> Denali State Park offers unique opportunities for residents and visitors to intimately experience the diverse landscapes and habitats of the region.</p>
<p><b>5. People and the Land:</b> The ways Denali shapes and is shaped by the character, lives, and values of people past and present offers us insights into our relationship with our natural heritage.</p>	<p><b>Sub-theme 5:</b> Alaska Natives have depended on the rich resources of the ridges and rivers for survival, maintaining an important network of trade and spiritual connection to the land.</p> <p><b>Sub-theme 6:</b> The lofty peaks of Denali/Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range and the promise of riches have beckoned adventurers and thrill-seekers since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.</p> <p><b>Sub-theme 7:</b> The Chulitna and Susitna Rivers are historic travel routes into the rugged interior of Alaska.</p>
<p><b>6. Dynamic Change:</b> Denali preserves a dynamic landscape, ever shifting, changing, and adjusting to cycles and process, seen and unseen.</p>	<p><b>Sub-theme 4:</b> Denali State Park is a microcosm of the intact Greater Denali Ecosystem, an important indicator for global environmental changes.</p>

## Existing Denali National Park Visitor Centers

Currently, two facilities in Denali National Park and Preserve provide interpretive experiences for visitors: the Denali Visitor Center and the Eielson Visitor Center. Interpretation developed at South Denali should complement the two visitor centers, repeating important messages while avoiding significant overlap of specific stories.

The following lists the primary themes and experiences at each existing visitor center, and how they will relate to South Denali.

### Denali Visitor Center:

- **Primary theme:** Denali is connected to the world. Denali is not an island, but is affected by many forces, both inside and outside its borders.
- **Sub-themes:**
  - **Denali and Beyond:** Exploring the meaning of Denali and its connections to the world, and the consequences of our actions both inside and outside the Park.
  - **Natural Systems:** Exploring the complexity, interconnectedness, and vulnerability of Denali's natural systems through the seasons
  - **People and Denali:** Comparing the emotional, intellectual, physical, and economic connections between Denali and its people.
- The Denali Visitor Center is located at the entrance campus. It serves as an introduction to the National Park and Preserve, with a primary purpose of revealing the relationships between Denali and the global community. A large Alaska-centered satellite image above the front desk, migrating sandhill crane models, a topographic map of the park, and an award-winning 18-minute introductory video help make these connections. Sustainable design features, such as solar windows, are highlighted throughout. Realistic models of Denali wildlife and habitats demonstrate seasonal natural changes in the park, while interactive exhibits tell the story of Alaska Natives, pioneers, and early Park history.

### Eielson Visitor Center:

- **Primary theme:** Honoring the spirit of the place by understanding and respecting its wildness.
- **Sub-themes/topics:**
  - Preservation by Design/Come Explore
  - People's Place in the Wilderness
  - Ecosystem Connections
  - Dynamic Landscape
- The Eielson Visitor Center, located at Mile 66 on the Park Road, highlights spectacular views of Mount McKinley's north side. The center's primary purpose is to interpret the connection between people and wilderness through journals, paintings, and photography. Mount McKinley will be a focal point with a viewing deck on top of the building, large interior windows, and a topographic model that

lights up various climbing routes. The center showcases state-of-the-art design features that connect to its human/wilderness themes.

### **South Denali Visitor Complex:**

The South Denali Visitor Complex complements the themes that are presented in the existing national park interpretive centers. However, its primary purpose is to serve as a “gateway” for visitors to explore the Alaska outdoors.

- The facility will be designed with the expectation that the “real experience” is outside the building.
- Media inside the facility will prepare visitors for their outdoor experience through discovery of habitats and wildlife they will likely encounter (wetlands, alpine lake, tundra, spruce forests, high brush), descriptions of recreational activities available in the state park, and demonstrations of the geologic forces that have created the rugged landscape.
- The building will be designed to encourage visitors out onto a network of trails that provide interactive and intimate encounters with the Curry Ridge ecosystems.
- The loop trail system on Curry Ridge will provide a more comfortable outdoor experience for visitors who might otherwise avoid the trail-less wilderness of the national park or who are concerned about surprise encounters with large mammals. Well-defined and marked trails provide obvious wayfinding, path locations will avoid dense vegetation areas to limit surprise encounters, and the visitor center will often be visible from the trail.