

## Daily News

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## OPINION

## If Pilgrims lose land to park, we all do

There is legitimate confusion over events surrounding a family's run-in with officials in Wrangell-St. Elias Park. Press reports have focused on the Pilgrim family's colorful background, deflecting attention from the compelling issue of access to private property in the parks. Without some basic knowledge of ANILCA, the law that created Alaska's conservation units, the publicity can be misinterpreted, obscuring the historic significance of the situation.

A long drive to Glennallen and McCarthy and conversations with residents helped clarify the picture for me. About 75 people gathered in Glennallen for a meeting of Residents of the Wrangells to pursue solutions to "access and other problems continuously encountered with the National Park Service." Glennallen is outside the park, and other communities are along the edge, with McCarthy, Kennicott and others you've never heard of in the middle.

Concerns included excessive shows of force and weaponry, selective enforcement of regulations, threats of extreme access fees, apparently illegal trail (road) closures, misuse of agency funds, disagreements over traditional uses, and more. While the Pilgrims attended, the meeting was not about them.

Relations between residents (in-holders) and park employees are visibly touchy. Why? The Park Service wants private uses and landowners out of Alaska's parks. In Lower 48 parks, the agency's mistreatment of in-holders and pressures to sell became apparent far too late. Alaska's political leaders avoided that with language in ANILCA protecting access, property rights and local culture. Regardless, as the Wrangells meeting revealed, the Park Service has ways to help people become "willing sellers."

In the Wrangells, residents are determined to coexist peaceably with park personnel. They have every right to demand

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the park be governed by Alaska-specific legislation that allows more private activities than in Outside parks. Why do Park Service employees have such difficulty accommodating them?

Wrangell-St. Elias is America's largest national park. Nearly 1 million of its 13.2 million acres are state, Native and private lands with access guaranteed. Because "roads" as most people envision them don't exist, overland routes are navigated with virtually all transportation modes, including dozers, horses, swamp buggies, ATVs, snowmachines, etc., during different seasons. Congress insisted these traditional methods of access would continue.

When park employees and their environmental allies continue to mislead the public with inflammatory wording as the Pilgrims "bladed a swath across park land to establish a road," they do not tell the truth. If there are three mining sites (Marvelous Millsite, Spokane Placer and Mother Lode Mine — and these are not dinky little mines), it stands to reason, absent levitation, that a road existed to get to them.

I wanted to be absolutely certain it was a road, so I flew over the entire route. It is a clearly defined road/trail, including tunnels, designated RS 135 (Revised Statute) by Alaska's government. It is the most logical route to the Pilgrim property that meets the federal statutory definition of "economic and feasible access." It has been periodically maintained with heavy equipment for

80 years. With no highway department to call, residents traditionally do their own maintenance, and until the Pilgrims' recent clearing action, there wasn't a peep from park officials about permits.

To further aggravate residents, when the Park Service closed RS 135 to mechanized vehicles after the Pilgrims' maintenance work, it let others continue using the road. One resident was so incensed over the closure that she decided to test the Park Service response to neighbors on her road who had clearly bladed park land for a long driveway. After providing the details, she asked, "Now, are you going to close this road too?" The park official responded, "We would never stop you from getting to your house." Curiously, no citations were issued for the unauthorized roadwork.

"It's a police state when the Park Service won't say what the rules are until you break them," a meeting participant said. With agency discretion, even the most benign activities can be found "against the rules." Residents say they walk on eggshells, fearing retaliation for the slightest infraction. Now, encouraged by the media attention, they are talking, and they hope someone will listen and respond to their concerns.

The Park Service desperately wants the Pilgrims' 410 acres, but it can be patient. Its employees have nothing but time and nothing to lose. With endless studies, litigation, fines, fee assessments and other delay tactics in its toolbox, the agency can easily wear the Pilgrims down and ultimately nationalize their land. Mark my words: Without a "Come to Jesus" intervention, the Park Service won't back down. Like the Pilgrims or not, if they lose their land, other property owners face some very bad times, and most know it.

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