

Daily News

Dougherty President & Editor
Steve Lindbeck Associate Editor

Norman C. Brown
 Fanning, Editor and Publisher, 1971-1983
 Fanning, Editor and Publisher, 1967-1971

OPINION

COMPASS: *Points of view from the community*

Let national park residents thrive

By NEIL DARISH

Many people dream of living in the wilderness. Residents inside Wrangell-St. Elias National Park are examples of "self-reliant living" made real. The National Park Service is mandated to preserve not only wilderness but also heritage and culture. Wrangell-St. Elias National Park contains a remote wilderness culture, deep within America's largest national park. Should this community be allowed to continue?

In the 1960s, conservationists considered man a threat to the wilderness. Old Park Service management philosophy marginalized or eliminated locals. New Park Service management ideas incorporate cultural assets, and some parks are "run with, for and, in some cases, by local people." Management by Park Service is changing to better realize the value of indigenous cultures and local residents as stewards. Man is not always a threat to preservation, especially when communities are part of the landscape.

The George Wright Forum is a Park Service institution. It acts as a think tank, a place where ideas about conservation and managing national parks are developed. By publishing studies on "evolving living landscapes" where residents are "inclusive and constructive elements" to protected areas, they help mold the future of our National Park Service. In Europe and much of the developing world, "living landscapes" and residents are embraced as an essential part of their national parks; and it has been that way for the last 50 years. America's Park Service still struggles with thriving cultures as a resource worthy of preservation.

In the Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio, there is fresh thinking about the notion of a "lived-in" park. The superintendent, John Debo, views continued occupancy, in certain circumstances, to contribute to the purposes for which the park was cre-

Park Service rangers share with local residents the love of nature, local history, the appeal of self-reliant living, and the importance of preserving this for future generations. The Park Service can become our hero if we as resident stewards are treated with respect by the Park Service — here and in Washington, D.C.

ated. He uses the terminology "residents" and "partners" rather than "in-holders," the latter implying something to be eliminated. Debo emphasizes that each park must carefully evaluate how the natural and cultural resource protection mission of that park can best be accomplished, and that a "one size fits all" approach is the antithesis of good park management. By the 1980s Cuyahoga had eliminated most of its residents, condemning and burning down their houses to bring the land back to wilderness. Today the Park Service regrets those actions.

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act enshrines Alaska's preservation of the cultural elements of remote living. The Park Service did not welcome private property in parks when Wrangell-St. Elias was formed. Congress created ANILCA to protect against the old Park Service management objective of eliminating all private land. Alaska, with its huge distances and lack of paved roads, has a flourishing remote culture, dependent on motorized vehicle trails like any other community on Earth. Locals aren't asking for new land or roads, just continued use of private land, roads and trails pre-dating the park, thus safeguarding a uniquely Alaska lifestyle. For 100 years residents have "broken trail," and "subsistence" has required driving funky vehicles somewhere unpopulated. Today these same trails and access

seem lined with unbreakable red-tape.

Park Service rangers share with local residents the love of nature, local history, the appeal of self-reliant living and the importance of preserving this for future generations. The Park Service can become our hero if we as resident stewards are treated with respect by the Park Service — here and in Washington, D.C.

Nature and thriving pre-existing communities are not mutually exclusive concepts. Around the world, administrators of protected areas have proven this. Current access issues, visitor kiosk closures and lawsuits reflect a need for a more inclusive agenda. Management actions reflecting the 1960s philosophy of "man is a threat to the wilderness" instead of the worldwide standard that "the residents are a resource" are counterproductive. Marcia Blaszak, the new Alaska regional director for the National Park Service, could set the tone for better cooperation between local residents and managers of Wrangell-St. Elias. Why move to Alaska if not for the love of nature? Who better to partner with than those who choose to live a wilderness lifestyle?

What is needed is a clear statement from our Park Service Alaska regional director that her philosophy allows the residents in this park to thrive.

■ Neil Darish is owner of the McCarthy Lodge in McCarthy and homesteaded outside of Fairbanks in the early 1990s.