



ENVISION: An inclusive approach to building scenarios and visioning for the future of communities around protected areas

Summary

The region surrounding Denali National Park and Preserve has many interest groups with distinct visions for sustainable growth and development that have yet to be integrated across a regional scale. We are a team from the University of Illinois conducting social science research to establish a process for 'inclusive conservation' that incorporates multiple viewpoints into decision-making about resource management. Our goals are to open up a dialogue about community preferences for future growth scenarios and listen to different perspectives on social and environmental change in the Denali region. Over a five-year period, we are collecting qualitative (e.g., interviews, discussion groups) and quantitative (e.g., household survey, participatory mapping) data to learn from local residents and collectively identify ways to strengthen and balance social, ecological, and economic well-being. We are working in four different protected areas, including Denali, to build strategies for how public land management agencies can focus policy in response to community needs and conservation objectives.

Objectives

The objectives of our research are to:

- (1) Engage residents in conversations about how the Denali region is characterized
- (2) Assess the consequences and tradeoffs of different future growth scenarios
- (3) Facilitate group conversations and social learning about the values of places
- (4) Communicate project findings across the Denali region and other protected areas

Methods

- (1) Conduct a 'social-ecological inventory' that identifies key individuals and organizations in the Denali region that are involved in environmental management and support community well-being. The local communities included in this study are Anderson, Cantwell, Healy, Lake Michumina, McKinley Park, Nikolai, the Stampede, and Talkeetna. Interviews and participatory workshops will be held to describe the relationships between people and places. We will also be hiring a community member and engaging a local Executive Committee for feedback on our results and to ensure the research process is transparent and grounded in a local context. Timeline: Fall 2018 – Fall 2019.
- (2) Administer a survey in the Denali region to examine people's views on future growth scenarios in the face of change. We will quantify the relationships explored in the first phase of this research and seek input from our Executive Committee. The survey will be made available by mail, online and in person. Timeline: Fall 2019 – Fall 2020
- (3) Develop a learning program that brings people together in participatory mapping exercises to evaluate how learning influences the values of places. This program will help build discussion about the future of the region surrounding protected areas. Timeline: Spring 2020 – Spring 2021
- (4) Organize workshops across all communities to discuss project results and foster mutual learning about how local residents are visioning and prepared for their futures. This final phase of the study will create space for learning from other people living near protected areas and facilitate reflection on how to strengthen social, ecological and economic well-being. This process will result in outcomes such as a film about 'inclusive conservation' among communities in the Denali region. Timeline: Spring 2021 – Fall 2022



Study Areas

Our research is being conducted with people living around Denali National Park and Preserve. We are also working with communities near three other protected areas, including Kemmer Rijn reserve (Netherlands), Sierra de Guadarrama National Park (Spain), and the Västra Harg nature reserve (Sweden). All of our study sites represent a diversity of ecological contexts such as marshes, a peri-urban mountain landscape, and agricultural-dominated oak forest. The potential for comparison across communities will allow people living around Denali to learn about how others are balancing competing interests in future growth and development. This comparison will also foster discussions about how protected area management agencies can better represent community interests across a diversity of land use contexts.

Research Outcomes

Our research engages local communities in discussions about the Denali region and explores the reasons why stakeholders hold different visions for the future. We will provide an in-depth description of the strategies adopted by local residents, as well as a detailed stakeholder map that characterizes the networks and governance structures in the region (Objective 1). We are sending out a survey to empirically assess how different future scenarios are being evaluated by all community members. Participant information will be confidential, and all of our data will be made publicly available through the project's website. We will give public presentations, newsletters, policy briefs, and a report to communicate what we learn about the tradeoffs people are making among alternative scenarios (Objective 2). From our group conversations and learning program, we will facilitate discussions among different interest groups about how to be more inclusive in setting conservation agendas (Objective 3). Finally, we will organize workshops for reflecting on our results, discussing the future of the Denali region, and learning from experts living in other communities surrounding protected areas (Objective 4). All phases of our study will involve close contact with the local Executive Committee and partnership with the community to support consensus-based decision-making. Results will be communicated through scientific publications, presentations, learning program, press releases, a policy brief, website, newsletters for both resource management agencies and the public, and a documentary film on communities in the Denali region.

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