

Prince William Sound Marine Trail – Concept Paper

The Prince William Sound Marine Trail—a 300-mile water trail connecting the remote communities of Alaska’s Prince William Sound and offering the marine traveler a unique opportunity to enjoy the magnificent coastline and diverse wildlife of one of the world’s most biologically rich ecosystems.

Prince William Sound

Prince William Sound is one of the world’s richest marine and coastal ecosystems. Its protected waters provide habitat for a spectacular array of fish and wildlife including five species of Pacific salmon. Over half of Alaska’s 500 bird species spend a portion of their lives in the Sound’s temperate rainforests, streams, and coastal mudflats. While Prince William Sound is renowned for its spectacular scenery and wilderness character, it is also home to the residents of Chenega, Cordova, Tatitlek, Valdez, and Whittier.



Recreation and Tourism in the Sound

Many people believe that tourism has become the world’s largest industry. The Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development reports that tourism has become the state’s third-largest private sector employer. Visitation in Prince William Sound has more than doubled since the state opened the Whittier Tunnel to automobile traffic in 2000 and officials predict it will continue increasing in coming years. At the same time, traditional industries such as timber and mining have declined in the region.

With the possible exception of global warming, tourism presents the greatest threat and greatest opportunity in Prince William Sound. The challenge is to *proactively manage tourism so that we capture its local benefits while protecting our environment, culture, and quality of life*. In many parts of Alaska, the growth in tourism is attributable solely to

the expansion of the cruise ship industry. The goal of the Prince William Sound Marine Trail is to attract more small groups and independent travelers—the kind of visitors who spend the most money locally with the fewest impacts—and create a significant niche for smaller, locally-owned tourism businesses that have a real investment in Prince William Sound communities.

Prince William Sound Marine Trail

The Prince William Sound Marine Trail is a collaborative effort to address the inevitable growth of tourism. It seeks to develop an infrastructure for *sustainable* forms of tourism and attract visitors who will appreciate and respect the fragile wilderness character of the Sound. The trail will wind along the Sound's coastline and connect the communities of Whittier, Valdez, and Cordova with a spur trail leading to the Chenega area. The trail will link a series of campsites, cabins, and day use areas and be used by individuals and small groups in kayaks, sail boats, motorboats, and other small watercraft. Facilities will be located on both public and private lands and include various levels of development.

In other parts of the country that have shifted from traditional natural resource-based economies to tourism, regional trails have been effective ways of promoting the type of tourism that is most compatible with local communities and fragile environments. Well known examples include the Maine Island Trail, Cascadia Marine Trail, BC Marine Trail, and SeaTrails in southeast Alaska. Of course, none of these other trails would rival the Prince William Sound Marine Trail in terms of scenery and wilderness character!

Benefits of a Prince William Sound Marine Trail

The marine trail would serve the region and local communities in a number of important ways. In particular, a world-class marine trail would be a tremendous tool for boosting the local economy and marketing Prince William Sound to small groups and independent travelers. If we assume that tourism pressure will continue to grow in coming decades, these are the people we want to attract.

A marine trail is also a great way of managing and educating tourists who visit the region. The Prince William Sound Marine Trail project is a proactive effort to manage recreation use in the Sound by directing use away from culturally and environmentally sensitive sites to areas that can sustain the use. People tend to stay on trails, so they are effective tools for concentrating visitors in areas that are well suited for recreation while routing them around cultural, subsistence, and other sensitive sites. At the same time, trail guides and other supporting materials can educate people about Leave No Trace practices, natural history, and safe recreation. The project will guide recreation use in Prince William Sound for the next 20 years.

What's Happening Now

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been signed by Alaska State Parks, Chugach National Forest, National Park Service, National Wildlife Federation, and

Prince William Sound Economic Development District. The MOU sets out a cooperative framework for developing the marine trail. In addition, a steering committee representing many of the Sound's major stakeholders has been created.

Public meetings will be held this spring in all five Prince William Sound communities plus Anchorage. At the meetings, we will solicit input on local tourism plans, trail route, site locations, sensitive areas, and other topics. This input, along with environmental and cultural reviews, will be considered by Alaska State Parks and other major land managers before deciding whether to proceed with marine trail development.

We invite anyone who is interested to get involved by attending the public meetings, working with the steering committee, or receiving email updates. For more information, please contact Tony Turrini at turrini@nwf.org or call 907 339-3911.

DRAFT

The Prince William Sound Marine Trail: Perspectives on developing and managing a boating corridor in Southcentral Alaska.

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With increasing popularity for recreation and tourism in the south-central region of Alaska the concept of a water trail is being discussed for Prince William Sound (PWS). Similar to trails already operating in other parts of the United States and Canada, the Prince William Sound Marine Trail (PSMT) would foster public stewardship of coastal resources, generate revenue for local communities, encourage compatible recreation uses, and better connect the Sound's communities-all under the umbrella of sustainable tourism.

Although modern water trails are used primarily for recreation, the idea behind them is ancient. Before the convenience of automobiles, railroads, and airplanes; boats and water ways connected people and places. Early travelers and explorers used rivers and oceans for trade and sustenance. Although modern humans are far less dependent on the natural resources for mere survival these days, the same water ways can reconnect people with the past and even the future. By developing an organized water trail, communities can share their cultural heritage and unique

natural environment while creating a base for sustainable tourism through stewardship and education opportunities.

Perhaps the first modern recreational boating route, the Maine Island Trail (MIT) was conceived in 1988, as a 350-mile water-path specifically adapted for small-boat access. By organizing local information, developing an invested community, and fostering a commitment to the continued environmental wellbeing of the trail, the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA) created a paradigm for many of the 500+ water-trail systems currently found throughout the US and Canada (Welch, 2008). Since then, the MITA has been “a steadying influence during the national boating boom of the last 20 years”(Gretchell, 2008).

Most water trails share similar characteristics with each other and even land-based trail systems. Physically, they include beginning and end points that provide a guide for visitors to experience a place or series of destinations (Settina & Kaufman, 2001). In addition, recreational water trails include access roads, day and/or overnight camping sites, and incorporates lakes, rivers and/or oceans used by boaters; and most often, the importance of minimal impact practices and stewardship are stressed (Gretchell, 2000).

Whether on salt water, lakes, or rivers, water trails are diverse in character, represent the natural and cultural significance of the surrounding area, and speak for the values of their developers and users (Gretchell, 2006). Several examples include the Maine Island Trail, Florida Everglades Wilderness Water Way, Cascadia Marine Trail/Washington Water Trail Association, Boundary Waters Canoe Area, SEA Trails, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, and the B.C Marine Trail. Furthermore, using maps, trail guides, and signs, water trails offer resource managers

opportunities to interpret natural and historical information, increase public safety, and protect natural areas (Settina & Kaufman, 2001).

A variety of water trails and water route systems have evolved to preserve public access to water ways and landing sites for a growing number of recreational boaters. Settina & Kaufman (2001) cite a 1996 United States Forest Service survey that found 24.9 million people went paddling each year in a canoe, kayak or raft. The same Forest Service study projected canoe and recreational kayaking to see a 73 percent growth in activity day participation of paddlers by 2050. Recreation managers see developing water trails as a way to meet this growing demand (Settina & Kaufman, 2001).

Likewise, research conducted by the Outdoor Industry Association (2005) shows that the number of kayakers, in any capacity, more than doubled between 1998-2004, with 5.8 million people currently participating in sea/touring kayaking alone. Power boating had the highest rate of growth in 2006, up 6.2% to 29.3 million power boaters, according to the new Sports Participation studies published annually by the National Sporting Goods Association (Outdoor Recreation, 2008).

According to Bowker (2001), Alaskans rates of participation and intensity of participation in outdoor recreation are higher than comparable data for residents of other states. Citing SCORP97, Bowker (2001) shows the five activities with the highest participation rates among Alaskan adults are: driving for pleasure (86 percent), picnicking (76 percent), fishing (75 percent), bird/wildlife viewing (74 percent), and hiking (68 percent); biking (67 percent) and berry picking (61 percent) are also very popular. He also notes that activities such as rock climbing (11 percent),

backcountry skiing (11 percent), and sea kayaking (5 percent) that have a higher cost and require more technical skill are far less popular.

Likewise, Elder and Gorman (2008) show evidence of user demographics and trip attributes that indicate that although many people do recreate in Alaska's Prince William Sound and Resurrection Bay State Parks, users tend to be predominantly from Southcentral Alaska (42% of survey respondents), visits average 3.5 days per visit (median of 3 visits, and a mean of 13 indicates most trips are locals frequenting the area), and that most visits average 4.42 people. Furthermore, of the State Parks visited, the most use occurs at parks that are easily accessible and near supporting towns. Finally, of the reported respondent activities, rented cabins, photography, hiking, wildlife/plant/landscape viewing, and walking accounted for 50-72% of responses, with kayaking and boating each representing less than 40% of visitor's preferences (Elder & Gorman (2008).

Prince William Sound has seen increased recreational boating activity in recent years as well. According to a National Wildlife Federation report, the traditional human uses in PWS (i.e. subsistence, commercial fishing, oil transportation, recreation and tourism, and mining and logging) are all present, but it is recreation and tourism showing the only significant growth; "Due to its spectacular attributes, visitation is now the fastest-growing and most widespread human impact on the Sound" (National Wildlife Federation, 2003).

Whittier, in particular, saw visitation spike 250% in 2000, corresponding with the completion of a road allowing visitors to drive from Anchorage to Whittier, thus connecting a major population center to Prince William Sound. While, pleasure boats, cruise ships, and tour boats increasingly arrive and depart from Whittier's docks, kayaking traffic is also growing

(National Wildlife Federation, 2003). Twardock & Monz (2000) shows that recreational visitor use in northwestern Prince William Sound has increased 7.5% per year, from 6,646 visitor-days in 1987, to approximately 12,786 visitor-days per season in 1998.

As the tourism and recreation sectors grow, the surrounding access communities of PWS (i.e. Whittier, Valdez, Cordova, Chenega, and Tatitlek) stand to benefit economically from increased traffic; but unrestricted development may lead to the degradation of the very resources that draw visitors to Prince William Sound (Twardock & Monz, 2000). Elder and Gorman (2008) report that visitors spent \$12.2 million in 2006 to enjoy the Prince William Sound and Resurrection Bay state parks; \$4.3 million directly affected Cordova, Seward, Valdez, and Whittier with \$3.1 million in additional spending for a true increase of \$7.4 million in economic output and 103 local jobs. Elder and Gorman conclude that the state parks boost visitor spending, and suggest that local chamber of commerce take proactive approaches in marketing their communities in relation to nearby state parks. Twardock & Monz (2000) note:

Development attracts use and encourages more use by those who want the amenities provided. The same development, however, changes the nature of the area and may have unforeseen side effects...With the increase in recreational use and related economic value, Prince William Sound needs careful management of its wilderness characteristics. The value and extent of wilderness recreation is significant in the Sound and arguably justifies management of the Sound to this end.

With the major trends indicating that Prince William Sound is inevitably changing, this change creates impacts (both positive and negative). The communities of Prince William Sound need a unified voice for planning for the future, and a water trail may be one way to proactively

react to this change. To many the Sound is a wonderfully unique place worthy of preserving and sharing responsibly. Due to the 1989 Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, PWS has been researched as extensively as any marine region in the world, but much of that knowledge and research may be limited to the public. Likewise, the communities themselves have stories to share about the natural and cultural history. A well planned marine trail linking the remote communities of PWS may help residents share their stories with each other, and visitors alike, while capturing some of the economic benefits associated with tourism and recreation.

But there are both cost and benefits associated with water trails in rural communities (Johnson,2002). If planned properly, many of the drawbacks of a water trail can be mitigated if the community is supportive of tourism and there is a dedicated management partnership for the trail. Some advantages of a water trail may include: an enhanced community vitality and sense of local identity as a water trail develops more stewardship, recreational, and educational opportunities for visitors and locals alike. Water trails are relatively less costly than traditional tourism facilities to develop, and provide prime locations for hosting seasonal festivals or gatherings that promote the area and its unique resources. The promotion of a non-consumptive use of public waterways brings additional income to local businesses such as outfitters, motels, restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, and shops, and as a destination community develops, opportunities for a more diverse tourism market can be created (Johnson, 2002).

Some drawbacks of a water trail may include the risk of commodifying the waterway by drawing competition for resources between locals and visitors wishing to “consume” the area in terms of buying seasonal homes or seizing niche business opportunities. Also, environmental impacts from overuse or mismanagement of the resource may occur (Johnson, 2002). Boats can

pollute the waters they navigate in terms of exhaust, or disposal of waste, but they also impact the land. Camping, hunting, etc. result in traditional recreation impact problems such as soil erosion and compaction, vegetation loss, disturbance of wildlife, introduction of invasive species and improper disposal of trash and human waste that pose a threat to the very resource that draws visitors (Uunila & Currie, 1999). In terms of private property, trespassing, vandalism, littering, and disturbance of cultural sites are also major concerns. Finally, water trails require regular maintenance and dedicated support in order to protect the resources they provide access to. Volunteer opportunities, "friends of" associations, and public land management organizations need to all work together to minimize the impacts and promote responsible behavior of the trail's users (Johnson, 2002; Settina & Kaufman, 2001).

Although there is a vast amount of cultural, historic, and scientific information known about Prince William Sound, currently, there are few principle sources of information for recreationalists. Twardock (2009) notes that many books and maps contribute to the user's knowledge and trip planning, but none specifically outline a trail with designated camps such as other marine trails.

Interestingly enough, an international boating network was in mind when the first state marine park was established in 1983 near Juneau. The system provided boat owners and water enthusiasts access to coastal environments with protected anchorages extending from Washington through British Columbia, to Alaska, and expanded in 1990 to include parks in the Prince William Sound and Resurrection Bay area (Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, 1995). With the addition of known primitive camping sites, and protected beaches throughout the rest of Prince William Sound an informal water trail currently exists.

To realize the full potential of a formal water trail in Prince William Sound, a central organization such as a “friends of” or non-profit trail association have shown to be quite useful. With a group dedicated to uniting communities, sharing information, and preserving the natural quality of an area, a water trail can assist in many ways. Creating resources, such as websites and/or guidebooks, that present a diversity of information in an easy to use and easily accessible manner can be beneficial to potential users. It can promote the area as a travel destination, and help guide visitor expectations by providing pertinent safety information, minimum-impact ethics, and expanding awareness of current issues in the area. Centered on a single organization, stewardship and volunteer opportunities may also be easier to coordinate between communities and stakeholders, with membership dues contributing to some of the operating costs of such programs.

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