Denali National Park Aircraft Overflights Advisory Council
Compilation of Recommendations to Date

March 24, 2011

Denali Air Tour Operators Best Practices to Minimize Sound Impacts

Last modified by the Denali Overflights Council on December 3, 2010
Reaffirmed on March 24, 2011

Introduction

Objective: The Denali National Park Aircraft Overflights Advisory Council has identified several sound sensitive areas in Denali National Park, where competing uses among park visitors engaging in ground activities (hiking, camping, climbing, etc.) are in conflict with visitors who are experiencing the park via air tours. To minimize these conflicts, the Council recommends a set of "best practices" to adjust flight patterns, when safety permits, to reduce the sound impact in these key areas. Where practical, the goal is to separate aircraft from park visitors on the ground and to reduce sound impacts in key areas of Denali National Park.

Safety First: Aviation safety is identified as the top priority when conducting flight operations by air tour operators. While the voluntary procedures described below are recommended, they are subject to the influence of weather, and local operator and transient traffic operations which may require that aircraft and helicopters deviate from these procedures to preserve safety for pilots and passenger safety.

Work in Progress: These Recommendations and Best Practices remain subject to change based on continued data gathering, monitoring, and the practicalities of implementation. They are subject to refinement and revision as operational experience is gained. Additional recommendations may be made for other areas as the Council's work progresses.

Area 1) Triple Lakes Departures and Arrivals

Nature of surface activity: The Triple Lakes trail is heavily used by day hikers during the summer months between the Parks Highway and Triple Lakes.

Air Tour Operator Procedure: Operators departing from the Denali (Private) Airstrip to the north will extend their climb beyond the Triple Lakes when practical before turning west. Aircraft arriving from the west will plan their approach to use minimum power settings to reduce sound impacts on this area. Helicopters departing from the ERA Heliport proceed upriver in a maximum allowed performance climb to Crisscross, before turning west to cross the Triple Lakes Trail.

Area 2) Park Road Corridor and Entrance

Nature of surface activity: During the summer season, June 1 through mid September, Park Road Visitors and backpackers may be subject to aircraft noise from air taxi and flightseeing operations.

Air Tour Operator Procedure: Operators conducting air taxi and flightseeing operations in the Park will avoid flying over the Park Road when conditions allow. Operators will shift flights to the North of the Park Road Corridor as conditions allow. Arrival and departure procedures will make use of Healy Canyon when feasible. The goal is to minimize sound impact for those in the backcountry and traveling by bus into the Park.

Area 3) Mt. McKinley Summit Flights

Nature of surface activity: During climbing season (late April to early July) climbers at the high camps, 14,000 and 17,000 foot camps and enroute to the summit are subject to aircraft sound from summit flights.

Air Tour Operator Procedure: Operators conducting summit flights are requested to avoid the 17,000 and the 14,000 foot camps and make approaches east of the south summit and north of the north summit. The goal is to minimize sound impact on the high camps and along the summit route by not flying close to these areas.

Area 4) Kahiltna Pass Crossings

Nature of surface activity: During climbing season (late April to early July) climbers traveling up the Kahiltna Glacier and located at the 11,000 foot camp are subject to sound from aircraft crossing Kahiltna Pass.

Air Tour Operator Procedure: Operators planning to fly through Kahiltna Pass are asked climb to a safe crossing altitude well before arriving at the pass and avoid orbiting at climb power in or south of the pass to minimize sound impact for climbers.

Area 5) Ruth Gorge

Nature of surface activity: During the climbing season (late April to mid-June) climbers may be utilizing the Ruth Gorge. The gorge can channel aircraft sound, which may disturb climbers who are camping, traveling and climbing in this area.

Air Tour Operator Procedure: Operators who are conducting scenic flight tours and Ruth
Mountain House glacier landings can minimize overflights of this area when weather allows by using Pittock Pass or Buckskin Gap when accessing the Ruth Amphitheater from the south.

Flight tours transitioning across the gorge are encouraged to fly north or south of the Ruth Gorge, or above 10,000', when able.

When leaving the Ruth Amphitheater via the Ruth Gorge, operators are requested to fly directly through the gorge at low RPM settings, and to fly on the right side to minimize sound impacts at the camping areas in the middle of the gorge and to avoid possible conflicting traffic.

Summary
These procedures are designed to reduce sound impact in these key areas of Denali National Park. They are subject to refinement and revision as operational experience is gained.

December 3, 2010

Triple Lakes Hiker Education Recommendation

Background
The Aviation Working Group has reviewed flight patterns in the vicinity of Triple Lakes Trail, and made adjustments to air tour flight operations to reduce conflicts with hikers that use the trail. Nonetheless, considerable air traffic remains in the area due to:
(a) the Denali Private airstrip, which is a commercial air tour operator base;
(b) the helicopter base located on the Nenana River;
(c) air traffic, including NPS aircraft, arriving/departing from the McKinley Park airstrip, and;
(d) proximity to the Alaska Range mountain pass that defines a major airway between Anchorage and Fairbanks, as well as other destinations on either side of the mountains.

Given the conditions described above, there will be seasonal air traffic in the vicinity of the Triple Lakes Trail. To help create accurate understandings and expectations of hikers using the trail, information related to the presence of aircraft should be included in briefings, trail brochures or other materials that describe the experience hikers may encounter when using this trail, along with aircraft operator efforts to mitigate aircraft noise.

As appropriate, educational materials should recognize that aircraft are used by NPS and others to manage the park, monitor wildlife populations and perform search and rescue. Aircraft are also used for access to mountaineering activities and to provide visitors with an aerial perspective of the treasures the park has to offer. It is also noteworthy that aviation activity levels vary with weather, and that early morning and late evening are generally quieter times to experience the trail.

Recommendation
Based on the above, the Denali National Park and Preserve Overflights Advisory Council recommends that the National Park Service and other groups who use and promote this trail provide constructively worded explanations of the nature of aircraft operations and the functions that aircraft perform in this area as an important tool to set a realistic expectation for visitors that use this portion of Denali National Park.

May 6, 2010

Recommendations to the National Park Service
The Council requests that the NPS provide a level of feedback and attempt to quantify the success of the Best Practices implementation. For example:

Unusual Event Feedback:
The Council requests that NPS rangers be briefed on the aviation "Best Practices" defined in cooperation with the aviation community, and are asked to report specific events that are significant departures of the industry defined "best practices", or incidents that disrupt activities at the time. If such events occur, rangers are requested to document the incident. For example: provide as much of the following information as practicable: date, time, location, aircraft type and N number, weather, and a description of the situation. We request these reports be communicated as soon as practically possible to a central location (such as the Talkeetna Ranger Station on the south side) to be passed on to aviation operators in a timely fashion.

Journaling:
Rangers are asked to document the effects of the 2010 Best Practices. For example: record a routine set of observations or impressions on a daily basis that provides a basis to evaluate longer term trends regarding the presence of aircraft. Consider documenting the location, along with a categorical impression of the number of motorized events heard that day, along with an estimate of percent of time they were audible.

Fact Sheet:
The Council requests that the NPS create a Fact Sheet to share information regarding the work of Council to help mitigate soundscape issues associated with aircraft.

Sharing Best Practices:
The Council will be responsible for sharing the Best Practices information with the aviation community and requests that the NPS be responsible for sharing the information internally.

April 7, 2009

Working Assumptions of the Denali Aircraft Overflights Advisory Council

1. Maintaining and enhancing public safety is an essential goal in all of our deliberations and eventual recommendations.

2. The Overflights Council recognizes the intrinsic values of the Denali National Park and Preserve. These values include habitat and wildlife, scenic mountain landscapes, wilderness recreational opportunities, and wilderness values, including natural soundscapes.

3. The Denali Backcountry Management Plan acknowledges that overflights and backcountry landings are an important and necessary part of the range of Denali National Park and Preserve experiences.

4. Human-caused sound, including the sound of aircraft, can diminish the experience of park visitors, including the experience of those visitors who rely on aircraft to get to the park. These park experiences, ranging from highly accessible to remote, include wildlife viewing, climbing, hiking, camping and other opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.

Thus our challenge on the Overflights Council is to recommend ways to balance the needs of public safety, public use and access, and protection of natural resources and values in a way that is fair to all parties. Our timeframe is 20 years – the projected lifespan of the existing Backcountry Management Plan.