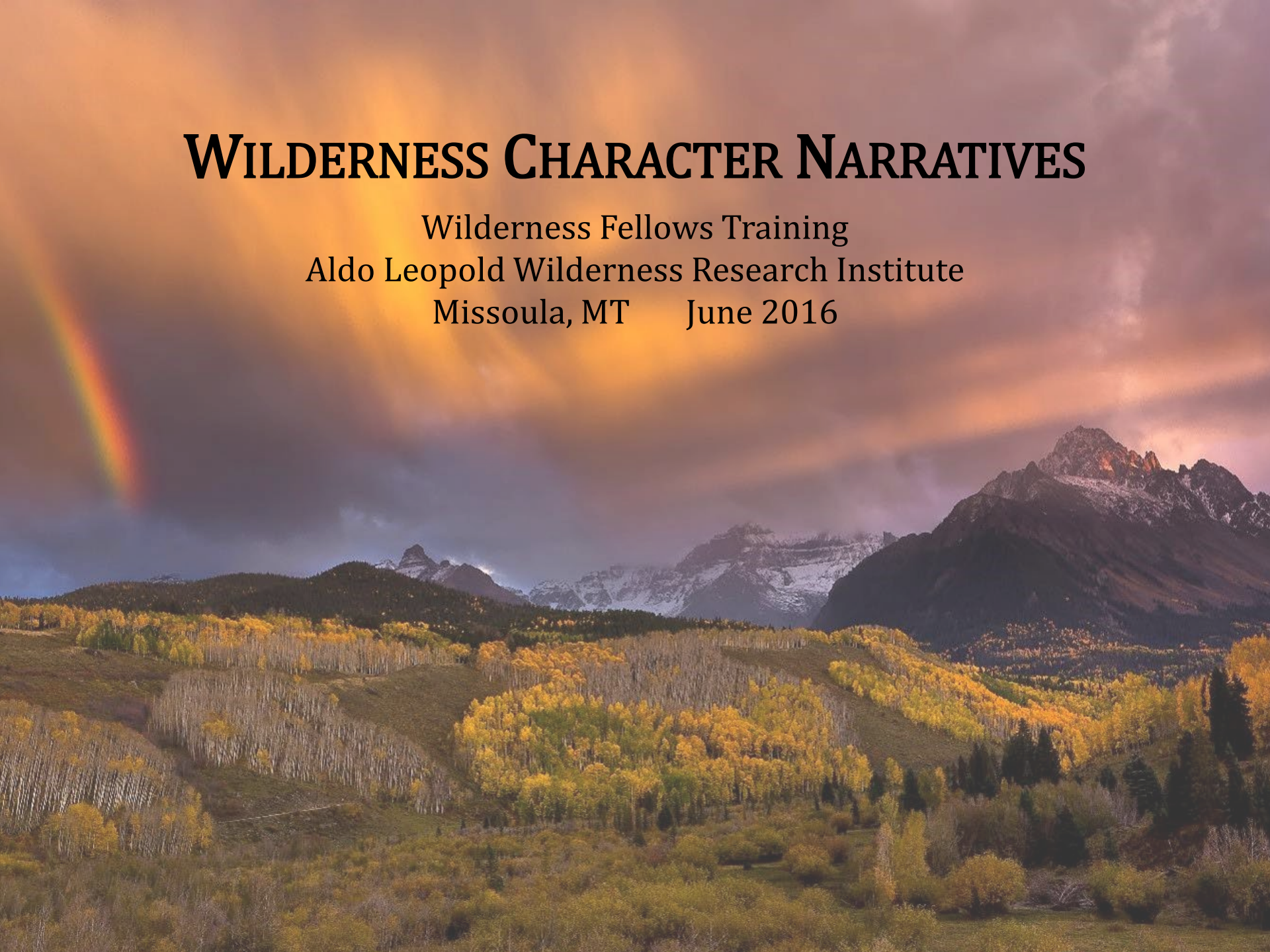
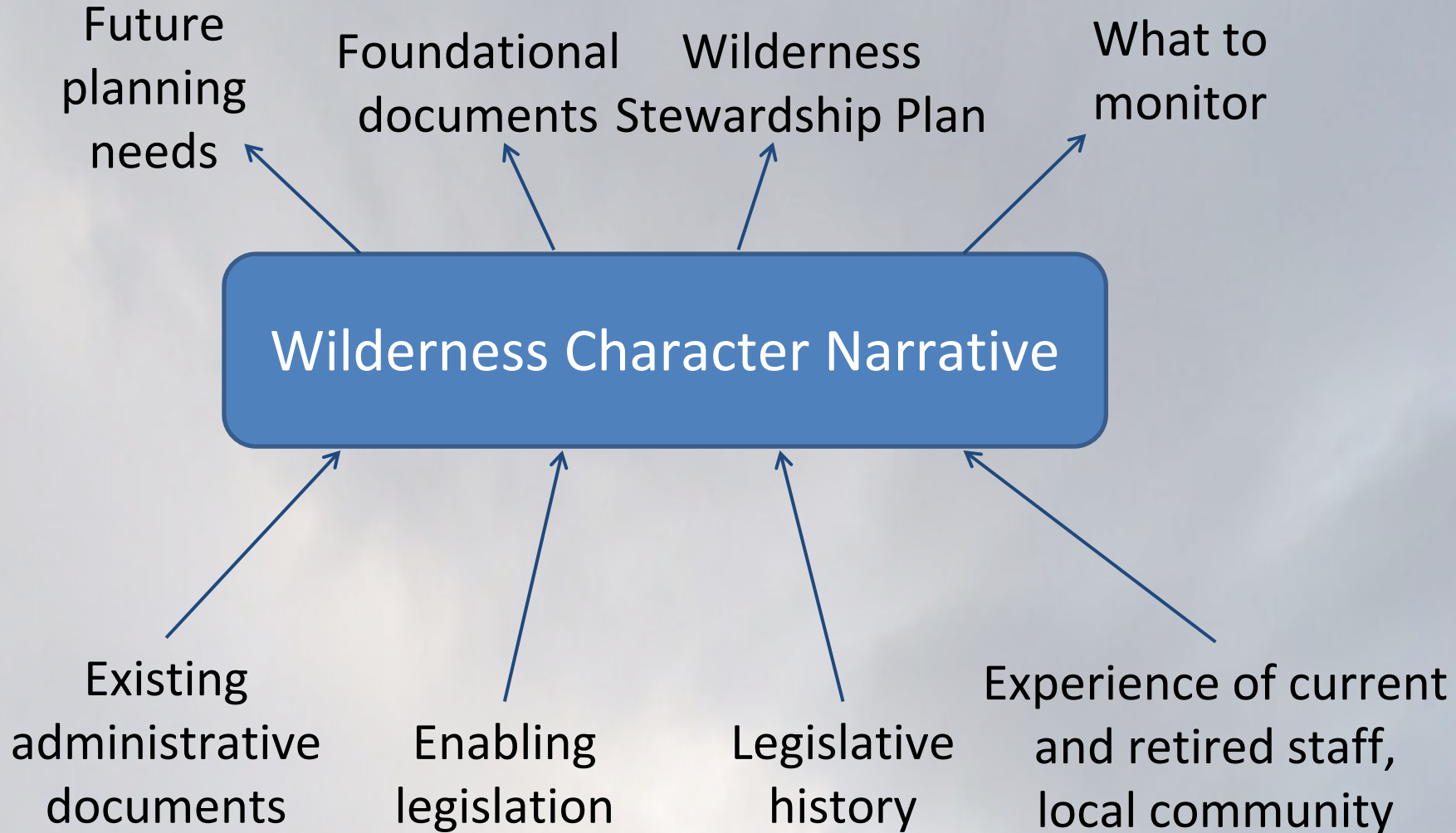


# WILDERNESS CHARACTER NARRATIVES

Wilderness Fellows Training  
Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute  
Missoula, MT      June 2016



# Wilderness character narrative: what goes into it and how it is used



# Wilderness character narrative: what goes into it and how it is used

Relatively Standard Format:

- Overview to set the legislative and geographic scope
- About 1-2 pages on each of the five qualities

For each quality describe

- What exemplifies that quality
- What degrades that quality
- What are the likely future challenges for preserving that quality

# Wilderness character narrative: what goes into it and how it is used

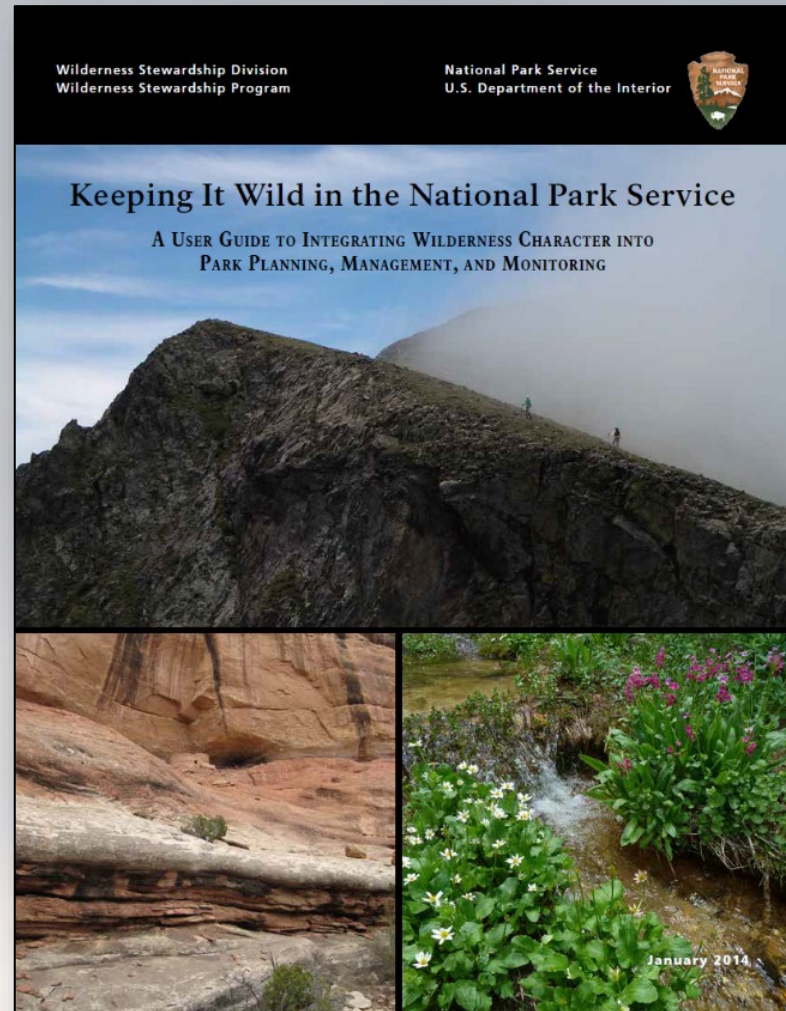
Relatively Standard Format:

- Tone should be affirmative and convey a sense of place
- Content should be factual, not too technical and not too flowery
- Incorporate intangible, symbolic, and spiritual values and meanings
- Sets the stage for planning, management, and monitoring, and serves as a touchstone for decisions

# Wilderness character narrative: what goes into it and how it is used

## Resources:

- Narratives by 2014 and 2015 NPS Wilderness Fellows
- Keeping it Wild in the NPS (chapter 2 is all about narratives)



## Kobuk Valley Wilderness Character Narrative

*A wilderness character narrative is a positive and affirming description of what is unique and special about this wilderness.*

Note: This narrative describes the wilderness character of all lands in Kobuk Valley National Park designated and eligible as wilderness. This approach is in accordance with NPS policy to manage lands eligible for wilderness designation, as wilderness, and with the mandate to preserve their wilderness character.

Located in the heart of Northwest Alaska, the landscape of the Kobuk Valley Wilderness and National Park (Kobuk Valley) is constantly in flux. Rivers flow in meandering curves, carving deep channels into glacial and alluvial deposits. Sand dunes reshape their silhouettes as wind undulates across their ridges. In this landscape, cycles of change span the scale of minutes to millennia – salmon return to their spawning grounds after years at sea; tendrils of black spruce roots reach down into the crystalline sand, stabilizing ancient dunes; and in the arctic summer, the sun skims the horizon but never sets, until ice and snow freeze the land in an icy grip of winter darkness each year. As a display of these cycles, Kobuk Valley is a sanctuary for wilderness values and wildlife; a place for life in the arctic to play out as it has for millennia.

The Iñupiat have lived here for thousands of years and are an indelible part of this landscape. Kobuk Valley is a rich homeland with the biannual migration of caribou, profusion of salmon and whitefish in the rivers, and an abundance of plant life growing on the river terraces. The Iñupiat Ilitqusiat – that which makes us who we are – defines values of humility, respect for nature, and cooperation; values which live on in this landscape as the law of the land. Here, wilderness helps bridge the values and land ethic of Native Alaskans and those of people from around the world.

Kobuk Valley straddles the Kobuk River midway in its descent from the Western Brooks Range. Lively clearwater tributaries, including the Salmon, Akillik, Hunt, Kaliguricheark, Tutuksuk, and Kallarichuk rivers, flow from the Baird Mountains which enclose the north side of the park and wilderness. The Baird's jagged peaks are acutely remote with few visitors besides Dall's sheep and migrating caribou. In the south, the Kobuk River slowly meanders across the lowlands and acts as a primary travel route between local villages, and provides access to



traditional fishing and hunting camps. Sand dunes tower above the surrounding river terraces, some standing 100 feet tall, in stark contrast to the surrounding riparian environment. The southern portion of Kobuk Valley is comparatively accessible – a gentler landscape with rolling hills and wide river deltas, and the Waring Mountains resting on the southern horizon. Seamlessly flowing into one another, the diverse terrains of Kobuk Valley encapsulate the rich variety of ecological communities present across the Western Brooks Range Mountains.

Kobuk Valley is part of a 17 million acre contiguous expanse of arctic and subarctic wildlands preserved as wilderness, bordered by the Noatak and Gates of the Arctic Wildernesses to the north and the Selawik Wilderness to the south. Still, the future of Kobuk Valley is uncertain. Imminent threats from climate change, developing technologies, changing use patterns, and potential regional developments make preserving the wilderness character of Kobuk Valley challenging; effective stewardship requires coordination between land managers and local users, and a land ethic of respect and humility by all.

### Untrammeled

*Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human actions that intentionally control or manipulate the community of life.*

The boundaries of Kobuk Valley are natural features made by watersheds and ridgelines. Encircled by mountains, Kobuk Valley is bordered by the Baird Mountains to the north, Jade Mountains to the east, Waring Mountains to the south, and Kallarichuk Hills to the west. Yet without a map, it is impossible to tell where the Kobuk Valley Wilderness and National Park end and where the surrounding forest and mountains begin. As wildlife move through the landscape as they have for centuries, their paths are unobstructed by roads or trails. No human-made barriers, roads, or trails, confine these lands.

Rivers flow freely through Kobuk Valley with no human-made diversions and no bridges spanning the rivers. The entire Kobuk River watershed is unfettered, meandering freely across its floodplain. Oxbow lakes, sloughs, and meandering scrolls, assert that the Kobuk has defined its own course over thousands of years. The Salmon River is the longest tributary to the Kobuk River within the park. Designated as a Wild and Scenic River, the



Salmon River flows 70 miles from the limestone cirques of the highest peak in the park, Mt. Angayukaqraq, to the Kobuk River. Over its course, the Salmon River flows through the ecotone of tundra-covered highlands and forested lowlands – a river and landscape essentially unmodified from human intentions.

Forested slopes of black and white spruce, and expanses of tundra provide ample fuel for wildfires across Kobuk Valley. Fires can burn thousands of acres, spilling into adjacent wilderness areas and continuing their

blazing path until they burn out of their own accord. Fire has maintained its natural regime here for thousands of years, often ignited by lightning strikes. Recent fire history is etched in black onto hillsides and barren tree trunks. Occasional fuels reduction projects around allotments and cabins are the only exceptions to the natural fire cycle here.

Kobuk Valley is virtually unaffected from the intentional manipulation of modern technologies and civilization, defying these forces through the sheer size, diversity, and severity of its environment. Still, some authorized trampling actions take place, including permitted research activities such as wildlife collaring and the regulated harvest of natural resources via hunting, fishing, and trapping. Unauthorized actions may occur on rare occasions, where the size and remoteness of the park can make it difficult for managers to monitor everything that occurs within the boundaries of Kobuk Valley.

Effects of climate change may also influence the untrammelled quality in the future, for instance, by prompting park managers to increase fuel management as wildfire regimes change, or to contain invasive or non-native plant species arriving in the region. Likewise, as environmental niches shift with climate change, managers may feel the need to support wildlife transplanting and relocation activities. Any such proposed activity would need to be evaluated within the untrammelled quality and all qualities of wilderness character.

#### Natural

*Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.*

Kobuk Valley is epitomized by diverse and contrasting seasons. Summers are a colorful flourish of activity. Plants send new shoots towards the sun, black and brown bears emerge from their winter dens, and the land hurries to make the most of the long days and abundant light. Deep winters shroud the land in snow and ice. Life or movement appear absent until a closer look reveals a tessellation of activity; perhaps tracks from marten or lynx, or the brush of wingtips from an owl or ptarmigan.

Each year, the Western Arctic Caribou Herd travels through Kobuk Valley during the herd's spring and fall migrations; hundreds of thousands of caribou swim across the Kobuk River and traverse high mountain passes in the Baird Mountains. Their hooves carve sinuous trails across Kobuk Valley – trails aggregated over thousands of years. Other iconic species including wolves and wolverines, Dall's sheep and moose, brown bears and red foxes, beaver and marten, golden eagles, bald eagles and peregrine falcons, rove throughout Kobuk Valley. Black bears can also be found in the forests of Kobuk Valley, which form the northwestern most corner of their range. Interactions between these species as predator and prey are intact – the same cycles of survival and resilience that have played out in this harsh environment for millennia.



Sand dunes are perhaps the most recognized symbol of Kobuk Valley with dunes arcing high above the verdant river terrace. These sand dunes are the largest and most active in the Alaskan arctic and provide habitat for regionally notable species, including the sandy tiger beetle and wood frog. The Kobuk pea plant, *Oxytropis kobukensis*, is endemic to the Kobuk sand dunes and is found nowhere else in the world.



The Kobuk Valley arctic-subarctic ecotone where boreal forest transitions to tundra, creates a natural laboratory for climate change where the northern and southern regions of the wilderness are differentiated by biome. Forests of white and black spruce cover large expanses of lowlands and along streams, with pockets of birch and balsam poplar, willow, alders and blueberries tucked in among the spiny forest. Moving northward and

upward in elevation, the forest becomes interspersed with tundra. A mosaic is created by the alternating pattern of tundra and forest. In some areas, open stands of spruce grow above a thick groundcover of yellow-colored lichens, creating a bright and easily traversed woodland. In contrast, impenetrable thickets of willow and alder often grow along the rivers and streams.

The Kobuk River spans the lifecycles of two types of fish; both salmon and whitefish species spend most of their adult life in saltwater, before returning to spawn in the freshwater rivers of Kobuk Valley. Salmon species that spawn in Kobuk Valley die – a one way trip bringing ocean nutrients back to terrestrial landscapes. Conversely, whitefish can breed repeatedly, returning to same sites to spawn over many years. Whitefish are an important staple for the subsistence of local communities as whitefish are abundant in the Kobuk River all year long.

Climate change will significantly affect Kobuk Valley. With longer summers and warmer winters, trees and shrubs migrating northward into tundra, and thawing permafrost causing areas to slump and change shape, the effects of climate change are already being felt. Regional wildlife habitats may shift poleward, bringing novel wildlife species to the region. The natural quality of Kobuk Valley is also threatened by proposed development and its effects on natural systems, including air and water quality. At the seams of development, increased visitation and climate change threaten to bring non-native plant species to the region, such as quackgrass and elodea, an aquatic invasive plant.



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## Undeveloped

*Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvements or modern human occupation.*

With few improvements on the landscape, Kobuk Valley has retained its natural character and remained without permanent developments over the millennia. Without roads, trails, or signs, Kobuk Valley is a remnant of an earlier era when wayfinding was passed down through generations.

Heavily forested in the south, the Kobuk Valley hides its few human-made developments well. Tucked among trees and along brushy stream banks, physical developments in Kobuk Valley are rarely visible from afar and Kobuk Valley retains a feeling of freedom from modern influences. Still, visitors may round a bend in the river or crest a remote ridge while hiking to find unexpected scientific instrumentation or debris from historic mining or military training exercises – appearing today as piles of rusting 55-gallon drums and glimmering, metallic 15-foot fuel pods. These reminders of modernity are an unexpected vestige of modernity in a landscape that appears otherwise wild.



Established to “...maintain the environmental integrity of the natural features of the Kobuk River Valley... in an undeveloped state” the undeveloped quality of Kobuk Valley is paramount. Modern technologies threaten this undeveloped quality as motorized use and mechanization increase, and industrial developments are proposed nearby. Changing technologies also have the potential to increase pressure for development as possibilities for mining, access, and infrastructure expand.

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) allows use of motorboats, airplanes and snowmachines in Alaskan wilderness. Still, these uses represent one of the primary impacts to the undeveloped quality of Kobuk Valley. As the main travel route between local villages, the Kobuk River transports goods and people inland from the Chukchi Sea via motorboats in the summer and snowmachines in the winter. The majority of motorboat and snowmachine use is localized along the Kobuk River and southern portion of the wilderness. In addition, the Kobuk River is important for subsistence caribou hunting, a tradition going back millennia; in the fall, motorized use levels can rise significantly along the river corridor.

Motorized uses are also changing with new technologies. For instance, more powerful, fuel-efficient snowmachines allow users to travel farther into the snowy, steeper foothills of the Baird Mountains and other previously difficult to access terrain. Helicopters, used periodically for law enforcement and scientific activities, allow increased accessibility to the northern portion of Kobuk Valley, traditionally only accessible via a 5-day backpacking trip. Fixed-wing aircraft are also frequently used to access Kobuk Valley, though landing sites are limited in the northern part of the wilderness and park.

Inholdings are prevalent along the Kobuk River – places local families have used for generations as fish camps are still used in the same way today. Some inholdings represent a potential threat to the undeveloped quality of Kobuk Valley as new commercial uses of these private lands may bring increasing impacts to wilderness character.

Research activities may also impact the undeveloped quality of wilderness. While opportunities for scientific research in Kobuk Valley are extensive, research activities are often accompanied by temporary or permanent, developments and impacts to wilderness character. Extended research camps may leave behind social trails, bear attractants, and trampled vegetation long after the research itself has been completed and the camp disassembled. Likewise, sub-surface resource markers are often used to mark long-term research monitoring sites. While these markers are not visible, they affect the undeveloped quality of Kobuk Valley. Science is a fundamental value of Kobuk Valley and wilderness, but each project must be balanced for its impacts to wilderness character and benefits to stewardship and society.

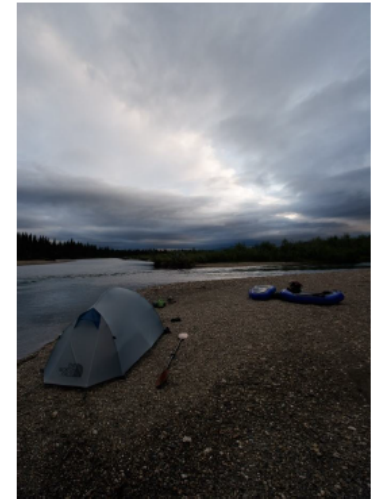
## Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

*Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.*

Time has little meaning in Kobuk Valley. Witness to the prolonged sunsets and sunrises that graze the arctic horizon, awareness grows to the slow movements of the arctic sun and moon which govern the days, nights, and seasons here.

Visitors must move at the pace of this landscape. Immersed in the rivers that weave through the valleys as visitors float downstream, or traversing through miles of tangled alders, where travel is similar to hiking through a jungle-gym, visitors find their travels orchestrated by Kobuk Valley. Unable to escape harsh weather or hordes of insects and disconnected from modern technologies, self-reliance is imperative and consequences for mistakes are high. Immense and severe, the environments of Kobuk Valley are not easy and they are not kind. But with this rigor comes humility, as well as discovery, challenge, exploration, and revitalization. There are no trails, permits, or fees, and no cell phone service to connect visitors with the outside world. From this freedom emerges simplicity, where the flow of the landscape governs day-to-day life by weather, wildlife, and whims of exploration.

A continuum of solitude extends between the northern and southern regions of the park. In the south, the sand dunes act as islands of accessibility in comparison with the rest of the wilderness. In addition, use of the Kobuk River and motorized uses there significantly affect the remoteness of the area. The Baird Mountains in the northern portion of the wilderness however, are a rugged testament to Alaskan wilderness – isolated, severe, and expensive to access. Across this landscape, visitors’ experiences are likely to be quite different. Still, in comparison to the range of experiences and solitude across wilderness nationwide, the entirety of Kobuk Valley offers incredible opportunities for solitude and connection with the land.





Most visitors find this land fosters a deep sense of connection. With every footstep, visitors follow the paths of ancient peoples and ancestors; shards of chert and depressions of house pits provide a glimpse into traditions of use from countless generations. Visitors may also come across local peoples subsisting on the land – gathering berries, hunting, fishing, or tending to racks of drying salmon. For most visitors, this encounter



forges an appreciation and respect for the lifeways that continue here today.

Natural sounds and vistas prevail across Kobuk Valley. Wolves howl in the distance and perhaps, the snorts and clicking hooves of caribou from just outside of the tent. In the summer, the land hums with mosquitoes and life hurrying to prepare for another winter. Panoramas of successive mountain ranges recede into the distance. In

the winter, silence lies thick over Kobuk Valley with the snow; pierced only by the thrum of a snowmachine or plane until the sound is swallowed in the frozen forests. In the darkness of winter, visitors can see the northern lights dancing in brilliant greens, purples, and yellows.

Access to Kobuk Valley is ephemeral and unpredictable – dependent on weather, water, and snow and ice conditions. The presence of viable aircraft landing sites also directs access, with sites often changing year-to-year as rivers redistribute gravel bars and lakes dry out or form anew. All trips to Kobuk Valley by commercial users, individuals, and the National Park Service, must allow days of leeway for the countless factors that influence when access, or egress, is feasible. Access is one of the greatest influences on opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation in Kobuk Valley. Limited to sporadic sites, access into and out of the wilderness is determined by aircraft landing sites, navigable waterways, and often, the high cost of travel and gasoline. These portals of access can concentrate campfire rings, social trails, litter, and human waste, which detract from the solitude Kobuk Valley otherwise imparts. Likewise, the high cost of travel and access can be prohibitive to many visitors.

In the future, opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation in Kobuk Valley face a number of changes and potential threats. Soundscapes currently pervaded by natural sounds may change from motorized transport and nearby development, and night sky illumination may increase with regional mineral developments. Regional developments also have the potential to dramatically affect the accessibility of Kobuk Valley. Even on a smaller scale, changing technologies, such as increased use of GPS navigation and satellite phones affect how visitors interact with this landscape.



#### Other Features of Value

*Wilderness may contain other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.*

The history of Kobuk Valley forms a rich current within the wilderness, underlying all activities that take place today and spanning cultural, ethnographic, archeological, paleontological, and historical resources. Kobuk Valley has supported continuous human use for thousands of years. Over the millennia, human behavior and actions here have maintained a remarkable continuity, where the same hills, ridges, and streams that draw visitors today are often the same features that attracted the Iñupiat in years past.



Onion Portage, a National Historic Landmark, epitomizes this continuity of use. For thousands of years and continuing to this day, Iñupiat hunters have waited here for caribou to cross the Kobuk River in their biannual migration. Where the Iñupiat waited, they left behind a rich history of artifacts that now constitute one of the most significant cultural resource sites in the region. The archeological stratigraphy where these artifacts were found has helped establish region-wide cultural chronology – vital to deciphering the cultural and archeological history that pervades the region. Throughout the

entirety of Kobuk Valley, important cultural and archeological sites assert the intricate and unending Iñupiat homeland here. Today, the Native communities of Kiana, Kobuk, Noorvik, Shugnak, Ambler, and Kotzebue maintain a strong connection to Kobuk Valley – continuing traditions begun thousands of years ago.

Subsistence uses of the land live on in Kobuk Valley, showing the sociocultural traditions and values of those who continue to thrive in this challenging environment. Hunting, trapping, and gathering berries and other resources are common and allow many local people to subsist off the land as they have since time immemorial. Each year, caribou, moose, salmon, whitefish, and other animals are taken from this wilderness and the meat is cached to help families survive through the winter. Into the future however, ongoing cultural uses in Kobuk Valley may change with societal norms and as technologies influence subsistence lifeways.

A diverse geologic history also underlies Kobuk Valley. Limestone caves, glacial drift and alluvial deposits, ancient moraines, mineral terranes that can cause rivers to run red with silt rich in iron oxides contribute to the character of Kobuk Valley. The rich minerals beneath Kobuk Valley have made parts of the region attractive for mineral extraction, the development of which threaten the area's wilderness character. Still, many of the geologic and other resources of Kobuk Valley remain relatively unknown and are only coarsely understood. This "unknown" is vital to the wilderness character of Kobuk Valley where exploration, novelty, and discovery are real.

#### Iñupiat Homeland

Native Alaskans have lived in the landscapes of Kobuk Valley since time immemorial. These lands provide cultural identity, sustenance, and a way of life. Kobuk Valley and the surrounding river valleys are the ancestral

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home of the Iñupiat people. They know the intricate cycles of seasons and life that are needed to survive here – when the caribou will cross the Kobuk River at *Paatitaaq*, also known as Onion Portage; how to read the frozen rivers for thin or hollow ice; and which eddies to seine for whitefish in the summer. The people know this land; it is their livelihood and it is their home. In years past, Iñupiat men would hike north into the Baird Mountains in the late summer to harvest caribou. If the caribou were scarce, the men hunted bear and sheep for the sustenance and fat while in the mountains. In the final days before the rivers froze for the winter, the men would build *Umiaks*, skin kayaks, and float home along the rivers flowing from the Baird Mountains before winter set in.

The Iñupiat understand the connectivity in this land. Here, the weather, seasons, river currents, animal tracks and movements, ice patterns, time of day, and countless other factors combine to create a holistic understanding of this landscape. The Iñupiat use all of this to know where and when to safely and successfully harvest natural resources. Knowledge of these subtle interactions defines Iñupiat lifeways, where personal knowledge is combined with knowledge of past generations to create a dynamic and holistic view of the land that is necessary to survive here.

Knowledge of this land and its resources has been passed down through generations and Iñupiat elders, families, and traditions are the bearers of this knowledge. When elders speak, telling stories of places, hunting, and survival, everyone listens and learns. For example, *Iglukisaaq* is where a boulder at the river edge is said to be a stone juggled by a giant; *Kapuqaqvik* is the “fish spearing place.” Yet this information is larger than words on a page and cannot be fully captured in a book; it lives on in the people with more detail and nuance than can be described – it must be lived. This is the only way to truly know the Kobuk Valley landscape by name and use. Intricate knowledge is associated with every inch of this wilderness, asserting that local people with their history and culture are indelibly linked to the landscape and its character.



Many changes have come in recent centuries, brought by the arrival of new peoples and cultures. And the local villages have adapted; change and adaptation are constant for the Iñupiat. When caribou herds declined or snow fell earlier than normal, the people adapted. When modern technologies arrived in villages bringing firearms, diesel fuel, snowmobiles, and powerboats, the people adapted. Through these changes the land remains vital to Iñupiat culture and a deep respect is maintained for this wilderness and its inhabitants.

Though Kobuk Valley Wilderness and National Park crosses their homeland, the Iñupiat see no boundaries as they look across this landscape – there is no line where wilderness begins or ends. Yet people see that change and development are coming to the region. Protected areas and wilderness are seen as places where traditional ways of life can continue, assuring that a way of life in which humans are part of the natural world lives on.

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