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Huts Update

Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association



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Forest Service EIS In Progress!

The public comment “scoping” period for the hut to hut proposal ended June 13. That was the ‘end of the beginning’ of an environmental impact statement (EIS) process. Many thanks to all who submitted comments to help the Forest Service understand the issues as they begin crafting the EIS. Knowing there is support is important to the Huts Association and the Forest Service, as is knowing what problems may need to be resolved.

The EIS process is a long one. A draft EIS will come out for public review and comment—probably in early winter 2006, after Forest Service specialists have walked the ground, studied the literature, examined the comments, and written their findings this summer and fall. A final EIS and Record of Decision is expected next spring. If all goes well, there is chance we will be able to start some trail and site preparation work in summer 2006, but most work will probably begin in 2007.

As a first step in the Forest Service field work, two Forest Service personnel—soils specialist Ricardo Velarde and recreation specialist Pat O’Leary—spent two days flying by helicopter to the four proposed hut sites in the first two days of June. Alaska Huts volunteer Randy Steen and executive director John Wolfe joined them to show the four sites. No major red flags were noted, and the Forest Service is expected to continue evaluating those sites.

As part of the scoping process that ran five weeks, the Forest Service held information sessions in Seward, Moose Pass, Cooper Landing, Anchorage, Girdwood, and Soldotna. All were sparsely attended, but both support and opposition were expressed. A raft of questions came principally from the mining community in Soldotna, and the Forest Service therefore held a second, special meeting there, attended by Forest Supervisor Joe Meade as well as Seward District Ranger Deb Cooper and her staff.

Concerns expressed at these meetings ran the gamut from “the huts are too large” to “good idea, wrong location” to concern about liability or damage of equipment at mining claims to “huts will spoil experiences I have had.” These are similar to concerns we have heard at other locations and will need to be worked through with the Forest Service.

At the same time, letters of support were submitted to the Forest Service with enthusiasm for the educational opportunities the huts will provide; the ability for folks normally unable or unwilling to adventure into the backcountry to have a valuable outdoor experience due to the presence of the huts; and the minimization of environmental impacts by concentrating use in four distinct areas. We are committed to finding the best route to avoid impact to existing mining uses and to creating huts as small as reasonably possible, but still able to accommodate an education group.

National Park Service Grant Funds Conceptual Design

Alaska Huts has contracted with Livingston-Slone Architects for conceptual hut design with the help of two donations: a National Park Service Cooperative Cost Share Agreement worth \$16,600, matched by a partial donation of services from Livingston-Slone (with further match by many volunteers who helped to map hut sites this spring, as explained elsewhere in this newsletter). Alaska Huts had worked closely with Grant Crosby, an interested Anchorage architect, to develop the architectural “program” (a bubble diagram of the desired spaces and their features). *(continued on page 4)*

Polaris K-12 School Field Report for Alaska Huts

Note: Alaska Huts received the following, here somewhat edited, from the Polaris K-12 School group, along with GPS waypoints, mapping, and a diorama regarding plants and animals in the area.

Transcribed by Brian Lyke for the Polaris Huts Intensive, 6/8/05

During the spring of 2005, a group of students from Polaris K-12 School embarked on a 6-day surveying adventure into Chugach National Forest. Our mission was to discover and plot the best possible route running southeast, parallel with Mills Creek, to the confluence of Mills and Stormy Creek. There, we would investigate the two proposed hut sites and report our findings.

Here is that report...

Our trail begins on the miners' four-wheeler road. Until reaching Juneau creek, the only problems we faced were water drainage. Several streams crossing the road, and several more in the road, created mud and will possibly destroy the road over time. Other than that, good trail: let's use it.

Juneau Creek offered at least one good site for a bridge, upstream at coordinates N 60 40' 28.9" -- W149 26' 03.8". It was narrow, and an animal trail on the south side provides a foundation for access to the crossing. The four-wheeler road had its own crossing, about 20' wide. The recommendation of Polaris is to build upstream; not only is it a smaller bridge to build, but four-wheeler access will not be altered.

We do not recommend crossing Mills Creek. We found a good place to do it (not flagged) on the other side of Timberline Creek, but the east side's bench (we flagged very decent access to it) gives a straight shot to Timberline Creek. Your only obstacles are alder patches and four avalanche chutes. The chutes were not overly difficult to travel across, but in winter an avalanche might fall on you. The alder patches can be avoided except for one that we've labeled the Forest of Death. A few animal trails run through, one of which we followed.

At Timberline Creek, a 30-degree slope (flagged, and about 100 meters high) is your enemy. Crush it with stair or switchback! There are a couple of good bridge sites along the creek; our favorite had a large boulder (about a quarter mile in and flagged) on the southeast side, which would make a great support for the bridge. On the other side, the hump awaits. We skirted this hill, and followed Mills Creek south. We have not found the best access up to the bench. We stayed to the east of Mills up to the aforementioned possible Mills Creek crossing. It was a bushwack up from there. The eroded slump was a bad choice to try to traverse. Once up over the top you can expect to see flatlands, crowberry patches, and, as you near Stormy Creek, a length of drainage fields. Be prepared for it. Then there's a bit of a drop-off down to Stormy, clear of brush.

Stormy Creek should be an easy crossing. In some places you can jump to a boulder to the other side, but we've got a couple of points for you nonetheless. The one closest to Hut Site B, our recommended hut site, is best. Nice and narrow crossing, but the far bank is a steep rise. The hikers are almost to the cabin, so they probably won't mind.

We much preferred hut site B to A. The path to A was steep and snow-covered (as of early June 2005), which is a little treacherous to the kiddies. Site B is closer and lower. Water for A is far below in Stormy Creek, which means another tall drop-off a child could fly off. Site B has a gravel-bottomed pond that could provide water, along with Stormy Creek, which is much closer than at A. The view from site A is restricted to about a 90-degree arc facing northwest; you have about triple that at site B. Site A does win on providing much more shelter from wind, and being generally less conspicuous. But Site B has much more sunshine and space to lie down, which is exactly what we did when we got there. Build on Site B, and find out how by checking our diagrams.

So that's it. We crossed Juneau Creek and stayed on the east side of Mills Creek the whole trip. It requires only three small bridges, and most of the trail travels on a reasonably flat bench. Staying on the east side almost means leaving the mining equipment (mostly found on the west banks) alone. If you really wish to cross Mills Creek we have some points available in our field note books.

Reconnaissance and Avalanche Assessment Completed May 16

Most people would not believe the destructive potential of avalanches. While outdoor-oriented Alaskans are familiar with assessing avalanche hazard on any given day of skiing, it is somewhat different to analyze terrain for protection of a permanent building. When you build a hut to house the trekkers of the 22nd Century (great-great-great-grandkids of today's hikers), you want your hut to be truly permanent. With that long look to the future, it is necessary to think of the "big one" that surpasses all normal avalanches. Bill Glude, an avalanche expert from Juneau, came to Anchorage and flew with Alaska Huts volunteers to the four proposed hut sites May 16 with that in mind. *(continued on page 3)*

(Avalanche. continued from page 2) A potential hut site lies across a deeply incised stream channel from an avalanche slope. It is 40 feet above the creek with mature trees on the slope between the creek and the hut site. Safe, right? Bill was not convinced that the big one couldn't fill the gully and climb the slope, particularly when considering the potential 100+ mph powderblast that can extend far beyond snow rubble and blow trees and buildings flat. He suggested any hut should be placed farther up the hillside or farther away.

As Bill measured slope angles and examined the surrounding peaks to define areas that appeared safe, other volunteers made the most of his helicopter time. The helicopter set teams on three sites simultaneously, and they scrambled over newly exposed grass and punchy leftover snow patches to make the first concrete decisions that a hut should be placed *HERE*, the outbuilding *THERE*, the water source *200 YARDS THATAWAY*, etc. They also made site sketches and took bearings on the peaks, notches, and treetops that define the horizon, so that they could map the sun potential throughout the seasons. Thanks to Bob Butera, a civil engineer for HDR Alaska Inc., who volunteered to arrange and oversee the contract with Bill and to assess sites on May 16. Thanks to Bill for his expertise.



Kevin Lynch, West High biology teacher, is President of Alaska Huts.

What Brought You On Board?

Kevin Lynch grew up north of New York City in the suburban setting of Yonkers, N.Y. He left N.Y. in 1973 and traveled the world. He moved to Alaska in 1977 and lived in the wilderness for three years, running a NOAA weather station near Lake Clark Pass, assistant guiding, and caretaking some land. He built log cabins, caught and smoked salmon, and was attacked by a brown bear sow protecting her cubs. Throughout the 1980s he was a General Contractor in Anchorage. He kept up his interest in adventure by summiting Denali (Mt. McKinley), learning to scuba dive in Prince William Sound, and white water rafting and kayaking. In 1989, he spent one year in the Yukon River village of Galena, and it was substitute teaching in the school there that raised his interest in pursuing a teaching career. Upon returning to Anchorage he entered UAA and went through the Education and Science programs and began teaching biology and other sciences at West High School in 1997.

By serving on the board of the Huts Assoc. for over three years, and now as president, he has met many wonderful folks both within and outside of the organization. He has become more knowledgeable of the different user groups of the Chugach National Forest and issues concerning the incredible resource in our backyard. He has seen many nooks and crannies of the Forest that he might not have otherwise seen.

The huts mission is to cultivate stewards of the environment by educating them about proper trail use and maintenance, safe travel in the outdoors, relationships between flora and fauna, leave-no-trace outdoor ethics, sweat equity as a way to have a stake in something, and the joys of shared experiences in a wilderness setting. To Kevin, a hut-to-hut system can provide all of these.

Office Space Needed

The Huts Association is in need of a small office to work out of and to store our growing set of equipment and supplies. If you have a small office that can be donated to the Huts Association, please call John Wolfe at 279-4663.

Volunteer Coordinator Needed

Are you an outgoing person who likes to motivate people to be involved? If so, Huts needs you to coordinate volunteers. Call John Wolfe at 279-4663 if you are interested in helping.

As Always, Thanks!

A big thanks to the following:

- ❖ **Our Members**, and others who provided comments during the scoping period for the EIS.
- ❖ **Ray Burger**, for coordinating field reconnaissance of proposed hut locations.
- ❖ **Tom Livingston**, Livingston-Slone Architects, for agreeing to approximately half price on professional architectural services for conceptual hut design.
- ❖ **Bernie Kikta**, of Livingston-Slone, who donated his own time to prepare a building code analysis for FS submittal.
- ❖ **Marion Vicary and Siri Khalsa**, Polaris K-12 School teachers, who led a group of 9th-12th grade students in Mills Creek for six days to scout routes and the Mills Creek hut site.
- ❖ **Mia Devine, Dennis Boyles, Travis Taylor, Beth Silverberg, Randy Steen, Alan Colter, Ian Moore, Bob Butera, and Jen Jollif**, who joined board members for multiple trips to solidify hut sites in the field.

Our Mission:

Include Alaska's backcountry in a worldwide tradition of places in which hikers and skiers can travel hut to hut, and provide warm comfortable huts in inspiring settings to foster camaraderie and promote wilderness education and stewardship.

**Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association
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**Haven't Joined or Renewed?
Please do!**

Clip out the form below and send it in. If you have questions, please use the contact information in this newsletter, and we will do our best to answer them. Your membership is crucial to our mission – thank you!

(DESIGN. continued from page 1) Volunteers have located the hut sites on the ground this spring, narrowing an area of about 1/2 mile diameter to a specific spot with a specific view, slope, and relationship to the sun. The design thinking generated with Grant Crosby's help, along with information from the sites, has gone to Livingston-Slone for actual architectural drawings of one example hut, and a cost estimate for its construction.

Design discussions are still in early stages. It appears, however, that the potential for extreme snow loads leads to a likely building form: a sturdy frame, such as a timber-frame (or post and beam construction), and a very steep roof. These combine to minimize the snow load, by shedding snow, while ensuring the building is strong enough to hold up before snow sheds. This quickly leads to a form many find pleasing: large timbers and a story-and-a-half of living space, making good living space out of the "attic" under the steeply sloped upstairs ceiling. Details remain to be worked out, but that is the direction the design is leading.

The cooperative cost share program is administered by the Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program of the National Park Service. This is an arm of NPS that works outside of actual parks and helps non-profit groups like ours with hiking and float-trip trails and community conservation efforts nationwide. This was the first grant received by Alaska Huts, nearly five years ago, and it has been awaiting a location in which it could be used. Many thanks to the RTCA program for the funds, and to Livingston-Slone for donating approximately half of their normal fee.

Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association

3039 Alder Circle, Anchorage, Alaska 99508

Please join us! Your membership is critical for building the Association... *and the huts!*

\$25* \$40 \$75 \$100 you name it! \$ _____

Member name: _____ Today's date: _____ new renewal

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Profession: _____ Hut Interests: huts & trails/outdoor work board member
 education hut operations/planning social functions or mailings fundraising or finance

Please make check payable to AK Huts

Thank you!

**We will gladly accept less than \$25 from members for whom another amount is more appropriate.*

We couldn't do it without you.