

Prince William Sound Marine Trail Community Meeting – Valdez

Thursday, May 7, 2009
Meeting Notes

7 people attended the workshop held at the City Council Chambers in Valdez. The workshop was facilitated by Chris Beck of Agnew::Beck Consulting, LLC, as part of the Prince William Sound Marine Trail Project.

Topic:

Introduction, Background + Overview – Why this Project?

- Jack Blackwell from Alaska State Parks led a PowerPoint presentation describing the Project.
- PWS Marine Trail has the following goals:
 - Manage tourism (respond to the changing and increasing use of PWS)
 - Provide an infrastructure for sustainable tourism by creating a niche for smaller, locally-owned tourism businesses
 - Attract the small groups and independent travelers who spend the most money locally with the fewest impacts
 - Educate & increase awareness by visitors to protect Sound resources, promote safe use, address trespass issues

Group Discussion

The Meeting attendees offered feedback on the Marine Trail concept and goals in general, thoughts about what makes PWS special, were curious how trail implementation and improvements will occur, shared ideas about sustainable tourism and discussed specific locations to direct users and improvements that would be required for a Marine Trail in PWS.

Marine Trail Concept – The meeting attendees discussed the merit of a Marine Trail as a response to increased use and tourism growth in PWS. A wide range of ideas, concerns and questions were raised.

- Be accurate about statements of growth – not likely to see growth in Prince William Sound tourism in next several years (due to national economic issues, fuel costs, changed weather) – growth will be longer term.
- Focus on outreach and education rather than an increase in infrastructure.
- Look at the Seatrails website and experience – learn more about all of the services available in communities, for instance hikes are a great way to guide visitors to community services.
- Hunters and trappers will likely be users of improved camp sites, not just lower impact kayakers.
- Concern about jet skis - State has regulatory authority, e.g. Shoup Bay closed to jet skis.
- Presentation suggests this is a foregone conclusion; there will be a marine trail with hardened campsites.
- Advertising PWS as a wilderness leads to more use and a lessening sense of solitude, of wilderness.

PWS is a Special Place

- PWS is unique because it is wilderness – it's different from other places inland waterways in the US (e.g. Puget Sound SE AK, Maine).
- It's expensive to visit Prince William Sound; Reason to, people are willing to spend money because of the wilderness experience
- Last wild, unspoiled coastal area in the United States.
- Don't degrade existing wilderness market niche – that's what makes PWS special.

- Prince William Sound able to offer diverse experiences – some places wild, other areas less so, e.g. Ellamar area.

Trail Implementation – How will the physical trail get developed, what on-shore facilities would be built? Meeting participants wanted to better understand how the trail would be funded, constructed, by whom, on what land, etc. and had many questions and offered suggestions for moving forward.

- Will proposed new campsites and cabins be the only places for kayakers to go? (no)
- Will increased use conflict with current use? Because of steep slopes, wet areas, etc, there is a real scarcity of places to camp today. Supply of sites is limited; if there is going to be growth in demand, need to create new capacity (new sites, e.g. through putting in tent platforms where camping is currently not possible). Without new facilities, Marine trail concept could displace existing users, existing kayak businesses.
- Need to consider full range of users – locals, independent travelers, not just commercial business.
- Who will maintain/build facilities? (state of AK; USFS, possibly native corporation, if they wish to on their property)
- Any existing on-water USFS presence in PWS? – yes, work staff and law enforcement boat.
- Would these sites be open to commercial groups – not yet decided, but likely yes in some instances, but also some facilities not open to commercial use. For example, today, public use cabins not for commercial use (although as some meeting participants noted, some “unofficial” groups are essentially un-permitted commercial operations).
- One original goal of state marine park system was to set stage for international trail system up west coast of B.C. through southeast Alaska.
- Need more, better management – e.g. mandate means to deal with human waste
- Consider use of “USFS timber receipt money” for tourism.
- Option for phased approach, e.g. start with areas near communities, places like Whittier where there are a number of established camping areas already; consider partnering with state marine highway system.

Sustainable Tourism – What is it? In this section the group paused to clarify the project’s underlying goals. Different definitions were discussed.

- “Sustainable Tourism” is tourism with more local benefits, fewer impacts on natural environment; tourism that offers lasting quality of recreational experience, and benefits communities
- Marine trails concept raises basic philosophical issue – is best way to reduce impacts as use grows to disperse people to a wider range of destinations? Marine trail proposes concentration of use.
- Reason for Lethco trail guide was to spread use, spread impacts

Specific Trail Routes and Infrastructure Improvements – After discussion of a range of issues the group generally agreed that Marine Trail programs to educate and increase awareness of users would be good, that establishing loop and shorter marine trail routes in areas relatively close to communities was a decent idea (if accompanied by commensurate expansion of capacity for camping). Trail connections between communities was also discussed; see ideas below:

- Generally less users, less user impact on east side of Sound than west side (except for NOLS, APU trips).
- Link to USFS Plan – e.g. stay away from wilderness areas, e.g. west sound wilderness study area.
- Possibility of loop from Whittier rather than crossing all the way to Valdez. Options for onshore improvements in Passage Canal, on state lands such as at Esther Island.

- Jack Bay – might be only used by a few locals who camp out for the summer, need state parks oversight.
- Are you thinking of buoys? – adamantly opposed.
- Concept of mooring buoys good – reduces impacts; but incredibly hard to maintain.
- Nellie Juan Wilderness concerns – concentrate on-shore improvements on state lands.
- Capacity of existing state infrastructure can still accommodate more users
- *What to about lands in the middle – wilder areas midway between Whittier and Valdez?*
 - Should have different “zones” of trail mapping/development; detailed near Whittier & Valdez, but vague in wilderness (hard line vs. dotted line)
 - Zone concept is good – less detail in the middle – Unakwik – wilderness
 - Is it good to have map indicating potential camps or does it decrease wilderness experience? Different views – “the experience of wilderness is best without a clear guide” vs. “I think we ought to show people a couple of places to camp”
 - Views mixed: “People don’t want tent platforms if they are coming for wilderness”; others said “if I really wanted experience of certain area, I’d rather have the option for platform than not”.
 - Areas closer to communities have more state lands, private lands – these areas are more appropriate for on-shore development of campsites, other facilities.
 - Offer limited map – let folks know key sites but not as many as shown in the closer in areas.
 - Different issues between Valdez and Cordova vs. Valdez and Whittier
 - Fidalgo – Gravina potential portage – needs to be cleared yearly; fill in muddy – slack tide only, whitewater on tides. Lots of bears. Interesting idea, but needs more investigation
 - Interesting potential for point to point trips, more private development from Jack Bay through Ellamar to Fidalgo
 - Valdez – Cordova currently a route people take and ferry one way; every year a handful of groups
 - Need to work with Tatitlek
 - Importance of safety and emphasis on patience and preparation – “areas in the middle” should be presented in very different light. Don’t lure unskilled, unprepared people into any part of the sound, especially these wilder areas.

Next Steps + Wrap Up

- More work is needed with Valdez and other user groups to understand local concerns and to shape the project to respond to these concerns.

PWS Marine Trail Project Steering Committee

Tony Turrini	National Wildlife Federation
Jack Blackwell	Alaska State Parks
Heather Rice	National Park Service; Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program
Deborah Daisy	Chenega Corp.
Angeline Sawden	Chugach Alaska Corp.
John Johnson	Chugach Alaska Corp.
Kristin Smith	Copper River Watershed Project
Martin Moe	Cordova Chamber of Commerce
Harold Blehmh	Valdez
Dean Rand	Whittier
Ricky Kompkoff	Tatitlek
J. Wright	Tatitlek
T. Valsoff	Tatitlek
Sue Cogswell	PWS Economic Development District
Aaron Poe	USFS Chugach National Forest
Sara Boario	USFS Chugach National Forest
Heather Gott	USFS Chugach National Forest
Ann Mayo-Kiely	AK Geographic
Rebecca Talbott	Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council
Vince Kelly	Valdez State Parks Citizen Advisory Board
Paul Twardock	APU