Charles Sheldon stood out among Boone and Crockett Club leaders in expressing interest in Alaska. His experiences on the slopes of Mt. McKinley culminated in Alaska’s second (after the 1910 Sitka National Historical Park) and most prominent national park. Originally intended to protect game species, the park evolved into a standard for ecosystem preservation in Alaska and the nation.

A fortuitous combination of circumstances made possible the preeminent Alaskan national park. Albeit the territory embraced numerous sites worth saving, any attempt to do so sparked resistance from Alaskan politicians, business interests, and other boosters. They interpreted such restrictions as unfair impediments to their birthright to use the land for immediate profit and rapidly growing prosperity, as had been done in the States. To them, a group of incompetent Washington bureaucracies, unconcerned about the welfare of local citizens, ruled the territory. Boosters wanted the national government to build the infrastructure for them and then get out of the way, letting them exploit the resources. They suspected, to some extent justifiably, that elites from the States fashioned the rules to suit their own narrow interests.
The seating of a legislature in 1913, and verbal commitments from Washington to develop Alaska, increased the difficulty of land withdrawals. Setting aside a large park, especially if near a populated area or a mining zone, would require just the right conditions. The land would have to be extraordinary in some way, Congress would have to feel a sense of urgency, Alaskans would have to see value for themselves, and astute leadership would be needed to orchestrate the process. No Alaskan would likely take the initiative. But a leader from outside would need qualities of manliness, humility, diplomacy, and knowledge of the North country to win the respect of Alaskans. One of the few such men in existence, Charles Sheldon, stepped forth.

MT. MCKINLEY

Sheldon’s studies of wildlife near Mt. McKinley had convinced him it should be preserved. He may have been unaware that the Denali area would eventually be world-famous as the site of 20,320-foot-high Mt. McKinley, the tallest peak in North America, but he appreciated its extraordinary presence and radiance. As he topped a foothill above Wonder Lake in the Alaska Range on a clear day in July 1906, Sheldon beheld a scene that would thrill millions, even those never to visit Alaska:

Three miles below lay the Muldrow Branch of McKinley Fork, fringed on both sides by narrow lines of timber, its swift torrents rushing through many channels. Beyond, along the north side of the main Alaska Range, is a belt of bare rolling hills ten or twelve miles wide, forming a vast piedmont plateau dotted with exquisite little lakes. The foothill mountains, 6,000 or 7,000 feet in altitude and now free from snow, extend in a series of five or six ranges parallel to the main snow-covered range on the south. Carved by glaciers, eroded by the elements, furrowed by canyons and ravines, hollowed by cirques, and rich in contrasting colors, they form an appropriate foreground to the main range.

Denali—a majestic dome which from some points of view seems to present an unbroken skyline—rises to an altitude of 20,300 feet, with a mantle of snow and ice reaching down for 14,000 feet. Towering above all others, in its stupendous immensity it dominates the picture. Nearby on the west stands Mt. Foraker, more than 17,000 feet in altitude, flanked on both sides by peaks of 10,000 to 13,000 feet that extend in a ragged snowy line as far as the eye can see.¹

The centerpiece of the region is Mt. McKinley (or Denali, a Tanana Athabaskan word for “The Big One” or “The High One”).² In its first recorded reference, Captain George Vancouver saw “distant stupendous mountains” from Cook Inlet. Russian explorer Andrei Glazunov adopted the Native name
Charles Sheldon and Mt. McKinley National Park

Tenada, but the mountain did not appear on the map employed in the transfer to U.S. jurisdiction, and the name Tenada lost its opportunity for permanent recognition.\(^3\) Prospector Frank Densmore wrote of it after an 1889 trip, leading to local usage of the term “Densmore’s Mountain.” Mt. McKinley acquired its enduring name in 1896 from prospector William A. Dickey, a Princeton graduate. He and his partner, he said, tired of a free silver harangue from a pair of mining colleagues and retaliated by naming the mountain for presidential nominee and gold standard advocate William McKinley. Dickey related his adventures to the New York \textit{Sun} and, despite protests from the U.S. Geological Survey, the name stuck.\(^4\)

The great mountain had been noticed because it could be seen for 200 miles in clear weather. But its distance from the coast and from easily traveled rivers, added to the ruggedness of the terrain, kept traders and prospectors away until the early 20th Century. The Klondike Gold Rush precipitated efforts to find access from the southern coast into the interior, to avoid the difficult routes through Canada and up the Yukon River. In 1898 Congress assigned the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) the responsibility of mapping routes to the interior. Later that year a USGS expedition led by Josiah Edward Spurr made the first known traversal by explorers of the Alaska Range in the environs of Mt. McKinley. Also that summer another USGS team, George Eldridge and Robert Muldrow, crossed the range to the headwaters of the Tanana River. Muldrow measured the height of Mt. McKinley as more than 20,000 feet.\(^5\)

The U.S. Army continued explorations begun earlier in the territory and sent teams up the Susitna River Valley in 1898 and 1899. Under the command of Captain Edwin F. Glenn, William Yanert and George Vanschoonoven passed through the Alaska Range at Broad Pass in 1898. A year later Lieutenant Joseph Herron and his group crossed the range, but they ran out of food as fall approached. Athabaskans, whose ancestors had hunted in the region since the last Ice Age, rescued the party and outfitted them for travel by dog team. Herron’s group became the first Euro-Americans to reach the Yukon River from Cook Inlet. A 1902 expedition led by USGS geologist Alfred Hulse Brooks mapped the northeast end of the Alaska Range, approaching the base of Mt. McKinley. All of the USGS and Army explorations between Cook Inlet and the interior prepared the way for the railroad and auto road that eventually followed.\(^6\)

Publicity about the mountain inspired attempts to climb it. Federal Judge James Wickersham launched the first sortie from the new gold strike boomtown of Fairbanks in 1903. Wickersham’s party attained about 11,000 feet. A few weeks later a team directed by noted polar explorer Frederick A. Cook, approaching from Cook Inlet, gained a similar height. Cook’s 1906 expedition catapulted Mt. McKinley into an international controversy. Unable to find a route to the top in an exploration of the mountain’s south side, the party returned
Charles sheldon and Mt. McKinley National Park

to Cook Inlet and disbanded. Cook and a companion then set out again for the mountain. Returning, he announced that he had reached the mountain and climbed to the summit in a period of twelve days. Original team members Belmore Browne and Dr. Herschel C. Parker disputed the sensational story, but debate among adherents clouded the issue until 1908 when it merged with Cook’s claim to have been first at the North Pole. Evidence mounted against Cook; two investigatory expeditions in 1910 rendered judgments that he had not climbed Mt. McKinley. Browne and Parker discovered and photographed the “fake peak” Cook had represented as the summit, a foothill twenty miles from the top. Ed Barrill, Cook’s 1906 partner, concurred, adding that Cook had dictated fraudulent journal entries. Shorn of nearly all credibility, Cook held to his contentions until his death in 1940.7

Sheldon played two small parts in the Cook affair. Believing at first that Cook had conquered the mountain, he agreed to contribute a chapter on Alaskan Indians to Cook’s forthcoming book *To the Top of the Continent*. By the time the truth became clear, the book had already been published. Years later when Amundsen visited his friend Cook in Leavenworth prison, newspapers published the false impression that Amundsen supported Cook’s claim to the North Pole. The National Geographic Society withdrew an invitation to Amundsen to address its meeting. Sheldon tried to defend Amundsen, to no avail, and resigned his society membership in protest.8

Listening to the claims and counterclaims and convinced that Alaskans could do the job themselves, Fairbanks prospector Tom Lloyd raised funds and handpicked a team of miner acquaintances—Pete Anderson, Billy Taylor, and Charley McGonagall—for an attempt in 1910. A surveyor, the only scientifically trained member, soon left the expedition in the wake of a dispute. At the end of the climb the three prospectors went straight to their mining sites. Lloyd returned to Fairbanks, declaring that all four men had surmounted both the north and south peaks. Without proof, the “Sourdough Expedition” met disbelief.

Parker and Browne made a bid in 1912 by a northeast route first suggested by Charles Sheldon and Harry Karstens in 1906. Karstens had tried unsuccessfully to interest Sheldon in attempting the route, but the sourdoughs had followed it in 1910. Browne, Parker, and Merl LaVoy got to within 300 vertical feet of the top when, despite the gentle final slope, a storm forced them back.

Archdeacon Hudson Stuck’s expedition reached the top on June 7, 1913. Walter Harper, son of a trader-prospector-explorer and an Athabaskan woman, led the first climb to the summit. Stuck, Robert Tatum of Tennessee, and Harry Karstens joined Harper at the top. On the north peak, 2 miles distant and 850 feet lower, they could see the flagpole left by the sourdoughs in 1910. Pete Anderson and Billy Taylor, wearing shoepacs and without ropes, had carried
the 14-foot spruce pole from 11,000 feet to the top and returned in eighteen hours—one of the great feats of mountaineering.⁹

**ALASKA’S PREMIER NATIONAL PARK**

During his 1906 visit, Sheldon had conveyed to Karstens his idea of national park status for the Mt. McKinley environs. His main motivation lay in the desire to save the magnificent populations of large mammals: Dall sheep, the prime focus of his study, as well as caribou, moose, and grizzly bears. Gold mining in the Fairbanks vicinity had proliferated after 1902, and a 1905 boomlet in the Kantishna country attracted thousands of miners to the Alaska Range. Mining activity meant increased consumption of game.¹⁰ Sheldon presented the park idea to his Boone and Crockett game preservation committee colleagues in 1908. But resentment in Alaska over the 1908 game law and lack of urgency in Congress made it an inopportune time to appeal for an Alaskan park. Circumstances changed, however, over the next few years. Alaska became a territory, and the Taft and Wilson administrations initiated efforts to develop it economically. The 1912 territorial act contained a rider calling for a railroad commission to determine routes into the interior. Congress authorized
Charles Sheldon and Madison Grant took the initiative. In an October 1915 letter to Edward W. Nelson, soon to be promoted to director of the Bureau of Biological Survey, Sheldon laid out his strategy. First he would contact Alaska’s congressional delegate and Mt. McKinley climber James Wickersham, whose acquaintance he and the Boone and Crockett Club had made. Without Wickersham’s support no park would be possible, and Wickersham could nominally lead the effort by introducing the bill in Congress. Sheldon would contact Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane and a few key members of Congress, then kick off the campaign officially at a club dinner. Sheldon persuaded Stephen T. Mather, newly in charge of national parks, to secure Lane’s backing, and he succeeded in less than a month.11

Boone and Crockett’s election of Mather to club membership at its December 1915 meeting did nothing to discourage his cooperation. Mather asked Thomas Riggs Jr., then in charge of the railroad planning survey, to lay out boundaries similar to Sheldon’s proposal. Satisfied that mining could continue unhampered, Wickersham introduced one of several bills. All incorporated Sheldon’s boundaries, but none adopted his proposed name of “Denali National Park.”12

One of the Mt. McKinley climbers, Belmore Browne, had begun in 1912 to work for a park in the Alaska Range through the Camp Fire Club of America. Browne (1880–1954), a hunter-painter-author-naturalist, belonged to a privileged New York family funded by his father’s work as a stockbroker. Several years of residence in Europe cultivated young Belmore’s appreciation of art and mountains. After a vacation trip to Southeast Alaska in the late 1880s, the family settled in Tacoma, Washington, to engage in the lumber business. Belmore attended private schools in the East and roamed the wilderness of the Cascades during the summers. A financial downturn prevented his attending Harvard, and he chose the New York School of Art.

In 1902, 1903, and 1904–1905 Browne served as a hunter and artist in collecting expeditions of Andrew J. Stone and others on the Alaska and Kenai peninsulas and in the Yukon and Southeast Alaska. Author of several books and articles on hunting, mountain climbing, and other outdoor subjects, Browne painted on similar themes and composed natural history dioramas for museums. He directed the Santa Clara School of Fine Arts for several years. During World War II he operated out of Ladd Field in Alaska as a consultant on Arctic survival training.13
Upon hearing of Sheldon’s efforts in late 1915, Browne offered his assistance. Sheldon called a meeting of the Boone and Crockett game preservation committee, attended by representatives of the Camp Fire Club and John B. Burnham’s American Game Protective and Propagation Association. Those present selected Burnham to head the congressional lobbying campaign. The three groups controlled the private-sector effort for the park. They employed as their strongest argument the impending threat to the game mammals.\textsuperscript{14} In the Camp Fire Club pamphlet Browne warned,

\textit{While the Mt. McKinley region is the fountainhead from which come the herds of game that supply the huge expanse of south-central Alaska, that fountainhead is menaced. Slowly but surely the white man’s civilization is closing in, and already sled loads of dead animals from the McKinley region have reached the Fairbanks market. Unless a refuge is set aside, in which the animals can breed and rear their young unmolested, they will soon “follow the buffalo.”}\textsuperscript{15}
Public lands committees of both congressional houses held hearings in the spring of 1916. Burnham, Browne, Grinnell, and Sheldon testified before a sympathetic House Subcommittee on Public Lands in May. Browne and Sheldon extolled the beauty and wildlife of the region and, accepting the inevitability of the railroad, emphasized the park's potential for tourism and economic development in Alaska. They reiterated the necessity of protecting the land from commercial meat and headhunters but insisted that miners be allowed to take game from the park, in part because regulations prohibiting it would be unenforceable. They pointed out the lack of evidence that the proposed park held any significant mineral reserves.16
U.S. Geological Survey officer Stephen R. Capps, detailed to investigate the matter of sheep killing in the proposed park, made an inspection trip in the summer of 1916. His report appeared in National Geographic in January 1917, shortly before the new Congress voted on the park bill. Capps related that in the early days Fairbanks hunters found sheep in “the mountains just south of Fairbanks and east of the Nenana River.” When they had cleaned out that source, hunters went to the Alaska Range: “I talked with several men who take sheep meat to Fairbanks for sale, and one of them estimated that each winter for the last three years from 1,500 to 2,000 sheep have been taken from the basin of Toklat and Teklanika Rivers. Only a part of these reaches Fairbanks, for the sled dogs must be fed during the hunt and on the trail, and some hunters leave behind all but the choicest hind quarters.” Growth of the town of Nenana and the projected Alaska Railroad, to pass within fifteen miles of the park boundary, also bode ill for wildlife.

Sheldon spoke before the National Parks Conference in Washington shortly before the final congressional vote on the park bill. Recalling his first view of Mt. McKinley, he declared, “I felt just exactly the same impression that I had when I was alone in the Grand Canyon, that feeling of reverence and awe produced by grandeur.” But he placed the most emphasis on the wildlife, the “principal reason” for the park. He wondered why the enthusiastic descriptions of beauty in the parklands so seldom mentioned animals. He invoked the traditional scenery of Europe for comparison:

In more civilized countries, on mountains and hills that have been more stamped with civilization for centuries, the adornments, the little castle with its spires, the Moorish castles in Spain—they enhance the landscape. . . . Well, it’s exactly the same in the wilderness. Does not . . . a wild animal, the product of that environment, so adorn it that we feel that it is complete? That feeling, that completeness of all your feelings that is aroused by such wild scenery will in this region be constantly gratified to the utmost.

No one disputed the danger to game populations, and no powerful opposition to the bill materialized. The measure passed and President Woodrow Wilson signed the McKinley Park bill on February 21, 1917.

MANAGEMENT OF THE PARK

Sheldon, who had personally delivered the bill to President Wilson for signature, continued to lobby for management funds for the park. He had promised to support Harry Karstens for the position of superintendent, and Karstens occupied that position until 1928. Karstens energetically built what facilities he could, given minimal appropriations, and he made an earnest effort to enforce
the law protecting game animals. But his aggressive manner in relating to local citizens and subordinates led to his forced resignation.20

The enabling bill drew Mt. McKinley Park to extend about 100 miles along the Alaska Range, totaling 2,200 square miles. Miners retained the right to hunt so as to feed themselves. Congress provided no money for protection or construction of facilities until 1920–1921 when the National Park Service acquired jurisdiction. Sheldon organized an effort to extend the park boundary 10 miles eastward to protect it from disruptive influences related to the railroad. As a result, in 1922 Congress added 445 square miles to the park, and Karstens

moved the headquarters from Nenana to McKinley Park station on the Alaska Railroad east of the park boundary. A quarter-million-acre addition in 1932 took in Wonder Lake and wildlife habitat bordering on the Nenana River, increasing the park’s size to nearly two million acres.21
As in the case of other parks and reservations, no one consulted Alaska Natives about the establishment or management of McKinley Park. Tanana Indians had traditionally lived along the region’s main rivers and hunted and fished in what eventually became the park. Although relatively isolated, they eventually succumbed to the influences of the Euro-American invasion: disease, alcoholism, and cultural change. Some worked for wages in mining or otherwise served miners and travelers. Some trapped for the fur trade but lost their territories to the more aggressive white men. By the time the park materialized, very few Indians hunted within its boundaries.22

Wildlife Protection

Dedicated by law both to the preservation of unspoiled Nature for future generations and to access for tourism and other recreation, the National Park Service faced a dilemma. Virtually none of the parks in the States contained enough acreage to be an intact ecosystem for large mammals, and as tourists multiplied, wilderness declined. Mt. McKinley National Park embodied ad-
Charles Sheldon and Mt. McKinley National Park

vantages and disadvantages in relation to the Park Service's mission. In addition to scenic splendor, it featured a community of wildlife unprecedented for a national park and offered a chance of retaining it. Wildlife protection had motivated the conservation clubs to push for park status, but Alaskan politicians and other boosters valued the park more for its economic development potential. They wanted to maximize mining and tourism, and they tolerated game preservation as a benefit to local hunters. In evolving forms, the tension between development and preservation dogged the park throughout its existence.

Wildlife continued to be central to park affairs. Imminent danger from commercial hunting had helped create the park, and instances of excess killing of game prompted a 1928 ban on hunting. The small number of miners involved could acquire game outside park boundaries. Appreciation of the value of protecting game stocks enabled Alaskan support for park boundary extensions, which otherwise would have been opposed. But Alaskan opinion erupted in virulent form over the alleged depletion of Dall sheep by wolves (Chapter 13). This episode, lasting more than two decades, forced the Park Service to partially abandon ecological principles in park management. Research by Adolph “Ade” Murie, added to work by his brother Olaus and biologists George M. Wright and Joseph S. Dixon, helped turn public opinion toward an understanding of the park’s ecological function and reinforced the Park Service commitment to maintenance of ecological integrity as a core goal. National Park Service historian William E. Brown described Ade Murie as probably “the single most influential person in shaping the geography and the wilderness-wildlife policies of the modern [Denali] park.”

Mining, permitted by the enabling bill, jeopardized the park’s scenery, wildlife, and wilderness quality. Kantishna, the most active district, lay just outside the northern boundary, and boosters wanted a road through the park to connect the district to the Alaska Railroad for ore hauling. The road, adopted as a goal by the Park Service, would also ease tourist access to the north side of Mt. McKinley. Miners found modest deposits of gold and copper in the 1920s but not enough to overcome the costs of operation. Fewer than twenty miners remained year-round in the Kantishna vicinity in the early 1930s. Governmental setting of gold at $35 per ounce, and the completion of the park road in 1938, revived gold mining during 1937–1942. An antimony deposit proved valuable for wartime needs. Then the government shut down gold mines as nonessential to the war effort. No significant resurgence of mining took place in the region until the United States abandoned the gold standard in 1971 and the value of gold escalated. But in 1965 the Park Service and Bureau of Land Management arranged a withdrawal of the region surrounding Kantishna to protect wildlife habitat. In 1976 legislation ended new mining claims in the park, and after 1980, no mining could be conducted in the park.
Tourism

As soon as the park came into existence, Stephen Capps declared in *Travel* magazine that “the area on the north flank of the Alaska range is of unrivaled value as a national playground not only because of its abundant big game, but because it contains America’s most stupendous mountain scenery.” Tourism commenced in 1922, by which time the park could be reached via the Alaska Railroad. Sixty-two tourists appeared in 1924 and 206 in 1925. Cars and buses took them 12 miles into the park to Savage River camp, and they could go farther on horseback. The 90-mile road reached its terminus at Kantishna in 1938. Tourism declined during the early Depression years but peaked at 2,900 in 1939. The park’s visibility had been stimulated by the first climb of both peaks of Mt. McKinley in 1932 by superintendent Harry Liek and ranger Grant Pearson, accompanied by Minneapolis lawyer Alfred Lindley and Norwegian skier Erling Strom. Unlike later expeditions that flew to glaciers at high altitudes, the Liek expedition traveled to its base camp by dog team.

In 1942 the U.S. Army requisitioned the park as a recreation area for service men and women, hosting as many as 8,000 per month. The army relinquished the park after the war, but the Alaska Highway opening in 1948 guaranteed a steep upswing in visitors to the park. Plans called for a hotel by Wonder Lake at the far western end of the park road. It would supplement campgrounds along the road and the hotel built in 1939 at McKinley Park near the entrance. A 1951–1952 recreation survey report by the Interior Department exuded unrestrained enthusiasm for tourism potential. It recommended that comfortable accommodations and facilities for eating and sleeping should be developed somewhere in the park where there is a good view of Mt. McKinley. The Wonder Lake vicinity has excellent possibilities as a site for a lodge.

. . . The accommodations and facilities that will be needed when the park is connected with the Richardson Highway should be constructed as soon as possible. Roads and bridges should be added and improved. In addition to the campgrounds and lodge mentioned above, there will be a need for a store, gas station, automobile repair facilities, restaurants, and more housing. Once the park is readily accessible by automobile, it is reasonable to assume the attendance figures will skyrocket. . . . Facilities should be constructed that would enable a visitor to participate in summertime activities such as tennis, golf, and swimming [and] winter sports activities. . . . Means should be found to improve the park program so that visitors will be encouraged to stay in the park for a few days, rather than to treat it as a target for “quickie” sightseeing trips.

This scenario apparently did not trouble the writers as undermining the values for which visitors came to the park, especially if numbers continued to escalate. Rather, the writers worried that “it will take years to overcome the bad publicity
that will reach potential tourists in the States if the first group of motorists brings back word that facilities are lacking.28

Park officials realized that such infrastructure would severely diminish the park’s wild character. A 170-mile road, the Denali Highway, connected the entrance eastward to the Richardson Highway in 1957, giving auto-borne tourists their first direct access to the park. The expected Parks Highway from Fairbanks to Anchorage, completed in 1972, would pass by the entrance and again multiply the number of visitors.

Slow funding during the 1950s and the emergence of wilderness advocacy groups tipped the balance toward keeping the park more natural. Olaus and Adolph Murie, Aldo Leopold, Sigurd F. Olson, and others had lent their voices, and the Fairbanks chapter of the Pioneers endorsed further park expansion to protect wildlife. Park planners, prompted by a survey conducted by Olson, pushed for an expansion that ultimately more than doubled the size of the park to 5.7 million acres in 1980. Renamed Denali National Park and Preserve, it retained the name Mt. McKinley for its famous centerpiece. Planners did not build the recommended hotel at Wonder Lake and arranged for buses rather than private automobiles to take visitors through the park.29 But the ongoing
growth of traffic near and into the park, and the conversion of mining claims at Kantishna to tourist facilities, left the future of Denali’s wilderness quality in doubt.

Mt. McKinley (later Denali) National Park won renown as the central focal point of Alaska’s wilderness image, one of the nation’s flagship parklands, and a unique national treasure. In mounting numbers people came from around the world to take in its dramatic scenery, to climb the mountain, to view its wildlife, to be touched by Nature on a grand scale. In no small part, their interest had been generated by the photography of Charles J. “Charlie” Ott. Raised on a farm in Wisconsin, Ott visited the park in the late 1940s following military service during the war. Superintendent Pearson offered him a job as a maintenance man and mechanic. Ott spent his spare time exploring the wildlands with his friend Ade Murie, eventually becoming one of the park’s leading naturalists. Honing his skills as a photographer, Ott produced many of the images that made the park famous. A committed conservationist, he joined numerous environmental groups and donated his photographic slides to them. After retirement in 1974 he studied birds in the Southwest and spent summers at his cabin near McKinley Park. The University of Alaska awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1989.

Park visitors might encounter any of 37 species of mammals—including black and grizzly bears, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves, wolverines, and lynx—and 137 species of birds. Perhaps unknowingly, they would glimpse Mt. Sheldon and Browne Tower near Mt. McKinley, named for the park’s two founders. They would not soon forget their adventure in the shining land of the North, and they told the story to anyone who would listen. Almost certainly, the excitement and wonder experienced by American visitors to the park swelled the outpouring of approval for the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act that expanded Denali and preserved tens of millions more acres in Alaska.

The formation and management of McKinley Park reflected significant changes in environmental values. Before 1917 and, in effect, before the assignment of rangers in 1921, only the weakly enforced game law of 1908 safeguarded wildlife. Mining operations had free rein under the dominant paradigm of free-enterprise exploitation of natural resources as the presumed basis for economic progress. Absence of scientific information and effective regulation cast doubt on the long-term viability of a unique ecological asset. But ownership of the land by the federal government, and the vigilance of conservationists in the States, made possible a reversal of the downward trend. Boone and Crockett and the Bureau of Biological Survey insisted on a minimal goal of selected species protection and, by their advocacy of a large game reserve, moved the goal toward habitat, if not ecosystem, preservation. Based on their mandate to retain
Adolph Murie at McKinley Park, November 1939. Denali National Park Archives. Dr. Murie made notable contributions to the science of predator-prey relationships and to the preservation of wilderness values in the park.
unspoiled Nature, National Park Service officials aspired to ecosystem protection as an explicit goal for the park. Yet all had to accommodate Alaskans and tourism entrepreneurs, who showed little interest in ecosystem protection as such. Park management objectives included elements—the road to Kantishna, hotel-building, and temporary wolf control—that fell short of nonconsumptive human use or even sustainable use of the land and wildlife.
Charles Sheldon had initiated the effort to provide the science necessary to validate ecologically oriented goals and management objectives. Stephen Capps produced timely and telling evidence of the need for legislation to conserve the Dall sheep. Prompted by the wolf control controversy, Adolph Murie and other biologists promoted a more explicit ecological perspective and agenda. Delays caused by the Depression, World War II, and the Korean War kept McKinley Park relatively unspoiled. Then the growing environmental community, increasingly backed by public opinion, lent its weight to ecosystem preservation and nonconsumptive uses of the park.

In terms of decision-making power, the enabling act forced the Park Service to accommodate miners and Alaska Railroad supporters, who stood to benefit from mining and tourism. The 1928 hunting ban and the gradual phasing out of mining left management more firmly in the hands of government experts. But pressure to increase tourist access to the detriment of Denali’s ecosystem continued to rise. Not until after statehood would there be Alaskan environmental organizations ready to participate in management deliberations in support of ecological values. They, their stateside environmentalist colleagues, and the Park Service fought against repeated efforts by the state and some federal administrators to increase commercial exploitation of the environs of McKinley/Denali Park.