

## Updated: Possible Increase In Climbing Fees at Denali, Mount Rainier National Parks Condemned by Climbers

Submitted by [Kurt Repanshek \(/users/repanshek\)](#) on September 24, 2010 - 1:29am



*Talk of possibly raising climbing fees for those attempting to summit Mount McKinley, top, or Mount Rainier, is being condemned by climbing groups. Top photo NPS, bottom photo by Kurt Repanshek.*

<http://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/registrationinfo.htm>) to climb Mount McKinley or Mount Foraker in Denali, and \$30 for a permit to head up Mount Rainier (<http://www.nps.gov/mora/planyourvisit/climbing-reservations-and-fees.htm>). That Rainier permit is good for one year.

While no formal proposals have been issued by either park, there has been talk about boosting the McKinley/Foraker fee to \$500 and the Rainier fee to about \$50.

Some might think such increases for a sport in which a [single cam can cost \\$120](#) (<http://www.blackdiamondequipment.com/en-us/shop/climb/protection/camalottm>) and a [rope upwards of \\$300](#) (<http://www.justropes.com/rope/climbingropes/shop/custom.aspx?recid=1>) and in which a guided McKinley expedition can cost [thousands of dollars](#) (<http://www.alpineascents.com/denali-price-date.asp>) are not entirely unreasonable, especially in light of the costs to the Park Service for maintaining climbing programs. But in writing Director Jarvis to

Worries that it might get more expensive to climb Mount McKinley in [Denali National Park](#)

(<http://www.nps.gov/dena/>) or

Mount Rainier in its namesake park have prompted three climbing groups to ask National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis to stave off any increases.

It currently costs [\\$200 per person](#)



"protest these unnecessary and unfair mountaineering fee increases," The Access Fund, American Alpine Club, and American Mountain Guides Association maintain climbers can ill-afford an increase in fees.

"In these tough economic times, these large fee increases will price Americans out of their own parks," [maintain the groups \(http://www.americanalpineclub.org/pt/denalinatparkfeeincrease\)](http://www.americanalpineclub.org/pt/denalinatparkfeeincrease).

Talk of a permit increase of some amount at the two parks has surfaced due to the growing costs of maintaining properly trained, educated, and equipped teams of climbing rangers in those parks. These programs are not cheap, and the existing fees don't come close to covering their costs, according to Park Service personnel.

At Denali, the fee goes toward "the cost of the mountaineering program that provides support/assistance to the 1,200 climbers that attempt Denali annually," park spokeswoman Kris Fister said. "The current fee covers about 15 percent of the cost of the program, so the rest comes from the park's annual base budget. The fee offsets the cost of the mandatory 60 day pre-registration program, preventative search and rescue education, training for the mountaineering rangers, staffing of acclimatized rescue personnel (including volunteers) at three camps on the mountain, and the *Clean Mountain Can* program (the solid human waste removal program required above 14,000 feet)."

In the park, where climbers make up less than half of 1 percent of the park's annual visitation, about 7 percent of the park's annual base budget goes to support them, she added.

At [Mount Rainier National Park \(http://www.nps.gov/mora/\)](http://www.nps.gov/mora/), Superintendent Dave Uberuaga said Friday that the revenues from the \$30 permit fees covers roughly 75-80 percent of his park's \$428,000 climbing program. Almost one-third of the program's cost, \$150,000, comes out of the park's base budget, he said.

Denali officials have been discussing the costs of their mountaineering program and the fee schedule for the past four years with representatives from the American Alpine Club and other interested parties, but no solution has materialized yet.

"The figure \$500 has been floated, but we need to review the program and look at its costs over the winter so that we can put forth the most accurate figure that will ensure the integrity of the mountaineering program and not degrade other essential park programs," said Ms. Fister. "So the final figure hasn't been set yet. As this isn't a new fee, we don't have to have a formal public comment period. We have been receiving comments from the public since we first started looking at an increase."

In their letter to Director Jarvis, the climbing organizations requested a breakdown of what climbing services cost the Park Service. Specifically, they requested:

- \* Any costs, expenses, and budgeting documentation, correspondence or related information (including years) concerning the mountaineering programs (or other park operations affecting climbing management) at Denali and Rainier, specifically:
- \* Search and rescue and any emergency medical services
- \* Visitor use statistics (numbers, categories and attributes of park users)
- \* General park operations and law enforcement
- \* Interpretation
- \* Visitor and resource protection
- \* Any National Park Service records or correspondence related to the establishment and maintenance of the current mountaineering fee at Denali and Rainier national parks.

"Denali's plan to raise mountaineering fees from \$200 to \$500 reflects an unprecedented increase, is not based on need, and unfairly targets climbers. Moreover, simply raising fees 150 percent without public input during these tough economic times is shocking and is likely to result in lower numbers of Americans able to afford the unique mountaineering experiences found at Denali," the groups wrote. "This extraordinary mountaineering fee increase is a national issue and we believe that Denali managers may simply be unfairly shifting more of the burden of the park's budget onto climbers. We're also skeptical that the current fee level for mountaineering is warranted.

"Rainier's fee increase appears similarly unjustified. We fear that these added costs will make the unique mountaineering opportunities available at Denali and Rainier too expensive for many Americans."

The letter was copied to the following:

- \* The Honorable Patty Murray, US Senate
- \* The Honorable Maria Cantwell, US Senate
- \* The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, US Senate

- \* The Honorable Mark Begich, US Senate
- \* The Honorable Don Young, US House of Representatives
- \* The Honorable Dave Reichert, US House of Representatives
- \* US Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
- \* US Senate National Parks Subcommittee
- \* US House of Representatives Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
- \* US House of Representatives National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee
- \* Will Shafroth, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, US Interior Department
- \* Garry Oye, Chief of Wilderness Stewardship & Recreation Management, National Park Service
- \* Rick Potts, Chief of Conservation & Outdoor Recreation Division, National Park Service
- \* Paul Anderson, Superintendent, Denali National Park
- \* Dave Uberuaga, Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park
- \* Mike Gauthier, Liaison to the National Park Service, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, US Interior Department

The climbing groups' letter, and its tone, caught Superintendent Uberuaga by surprise, as his staff had met with the park's climbing concessionaires and mentioned the possibility of a higher permit fee and that there would be public meetings to seek input on the proposal. The Access Fund also was apprised, he said.

Mount Rainier last raised its climbing permit fee in 2003, when it went from \$25 to \$30.

While the Park Service is preparing a formal response to the groups, Superintendent Uberuaga said he and Denali Superintendent Paul Anderson plan to meet with the executive directors from The Access Fund, the American Alpine Club, and the American Mountain Guides Association in mid-October to discuss permit fees.

The Mount Rainier superintendent was optimistic the tensions could be resolved. The three groups, he said, have been vital partners for Mount Rainier, Denali, and other parks with climbing resources as they help out with education, training, and lobbying in Washington, D.C., for the parks.

"We consider them really critical partners in our relationship," Superintendent Uberuaga said. "It'll all work out in the end, I'm confident of that."

## Comments

Submitted by [tahoma \(/users/tahoma\)](#) on September 25, 2010 - 8:05am.

This fee increase to support safety programs may have unintended consequences at Mount Rainier. Denali climbers often spend many thousands of dollars on specialized gear and transportation, but Rainier is accessible to a much less affluent and often less experienced crowd.

Some well-respected local mountaineers feel the percentage of unregistered Rainier climbers may already be as high as 25%, and fear fee increases might double that number. A Traveler story from June tells of an avalanche started by a climber avoiding the fee that caused lost response time, plus extra work & risk for Rangers and volunteers:

<http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2010/06/avalanche-hits-11-climbers-mount-rainier-one-still-missing5981> (<http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2010/06/avalanche-hits-11-climbers-mount-rainier-one-still-missing5981>)

The climbing rangers have a tough enough job without management creating more outlaws trying to avoid advice and updated condition forecasts. That \$150,000 a year from the base budget seems money well-spent in the context of Rainier's annual operations budget of well over 11 million. A single SAR for an unregistered climber can easily burn that much cash.

Submitted by [toothdoctor](#) (not verified) on September 26, 2010 - 11:30am.

Are the costs of the mountaineering program in Denali for providing support/assistance a fixed cost, no matter the number of climbers, or are they currently set up to account for the 1,200 climbers that attempt the climbs annually?

As I see it, if the cost of the program is the latter and predicated on the actual number of climbers that utilize it, and said climbers do not want to pay for their privilege to climb in the Park, then the number of permits should simply be lowered. Assuming that the current fee covers about 15 percent of the cost of the program, simple math tells us that 1,200 climbers at \$200 a permit amounts to two hundred forty thousand dollars out of

a 1.6 million dollar budget. That amounts to a budget shortfall of 1.36 million dollars that is taken out of the Park's operating budget, which, if Denali holds true to the rest of the NPS, it can probably ill afford to do without sacrificing other programs.

If Denali were to, say, drop the number of permits to 900 annually still at \$200 a permit (to appease the climbing community's collective wallet), that would then drop the program budget to 1.2 million dollars, of which the climbers would be responsible for one hundred eighty thousand dollars, in turn lowering the shortfall to just over one million dollars. That would, in essence, achieve the same result of raising the permit fee to \$500. Either way, the operating deficit is around one million dollars.

If it is the former point, and it program will cost the same no matter how many climbers use it, then there is no if's, and's, or but's, the climbers need to shoulder more of the cost burden to reduce the operating deficit. Yes, mountain climbers pay the same taxes as you and me, and that allows them the same access to the Parks as you and me. But that is where it should end. If they want to take on the additional risk and additional cost inherent in such activities as high alititude mountian climbing, then they need to shoulder the burden of the cost for that activity. If they do not want to pay it, or cannot afford it, then they should not do it. You cannot have your cake and eat it too.

Or if you can, as my wife and I would like to take a week's vacation to Virgin Islands National Park, could someone please tell us where we can petition the government to help pay for this?

Submitted by [Lee Dalton \(/users/lee-dalton\)](/users/lee-dalton) on September 28, 2010 - 2:30pm.

An excellent comment, Toothdoctor.

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