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EDITOR'S PICK

ALERT

FEATURED

A Concert in the Park? Bad Idea, if the Locale Is Wilderness

City Wilds by Bill Sherwonit Jun 11, 2019



The front-page headline in Monday's Anchorage Daily News did its job, making me curious to learn more: "Can Chugach State Park be a music venue?" Being a frequent visitor to the park, a longtime advocate for its wild values, and a member of the group Friends of Chugach State Park, I immediately wanted to know more. And what I learned has alarmed me.

The gist of the story, as I understand the reporting, is that a Seward-based folk band named Blackwater Railroad Company decided it would be a great idea to stage a solstice concert at one of Chugach State Park's most popular backcountry destinations, Williwaw Lakes (about 6 miles by foot from the park's main parking area and trailhead, at Glen Alps). The story further states that the band originally envisioned an "intimate" audience of 200 people.

I'm not sure when a crowd of 200 people became "intimate," but there's absolutely no way that a gathering of 200, or 100—or two dozen—people is intimate when it occurs in wilderness. It simply ain't possible. And that's where Williwaw Lakes is located — in the wilderness. In fact, if I read my park map correctly, it's within Chugach's officially designated wilderness zone.

That should have been a showstopper, right there. But the story suggests that superintendent Kurt Hensel gave his go-ahead. And the only reason the show was canceled is that more than a thousand people—a thousand!—clicked "interested" on the band's Facebook event page.

The story also implies that the Chugach State Park Citizens' Advisory Board wasn't involved in the discussion of whether to allow the proposed concert.





Blackwater Railroad Company

As a former member of the advisory board, I find that hard to believe. I also find it hard to believe that Hensel would permit such a concert in designated wilderness. I've tried to get some answers, but it turns out he's on personal leave this week. In fact, the administrative assistant who answered the park headquarters phone told me there was no park staff around to give me an explanation until the end of the week. That, too, is rather troubling.

I don't find it so hard to believe that the Friends of Chugach State Park weren't alerted to the concert proposal, because we've become something of a dormant group. It's on us to more fully reconnect to what's happening in the park, especially when something like this is proposed, something completely unacceptable.

I can't emphasize enough that where the band proposed to perform is in designated wilderness (though its members likely didn't know that).

The park's management plan makes it clear that one of Chugach's primary objectives is to "Minimize the impact of human presence and promote 'leave no trace' principles, particularly in fragile and wilderness areas." And in a section devoted to land-use designations, the plan makes clear, "Wilderness zones are established to promote, perpetuate and, where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land and its specific values of solitude, physical and mental challenge, scientific study, inspiration, and primitive recreational opportunities."

Given the fact that Friends of Chugach State Park have been out of the loop, I'm especially thankful to people like Mat Brunton for raising their voices in protest. According to the ADN article, Brunton is an outdoor environmental educator and founder of the Anchorage Avalanche

Project. In protesting the concert, Brunton argued, “There is absolutely no way that they can have an event with that many people in the area without having any sort of impact.” Brunton then goes on to list the many possible impacts, from trampled tundra, trail degradation, and human waste of various kinds.

I say “Amen!” to all of that (and wonder if Mat would like to bring his energy to Friends of Chugach State Park).

Can you imagine the waste left behind by hundreds of people gathered for a concert?

And what about that wilderness value of solitude? And the fragile tundra landscape?

Here’s another curious thing about the story: it suggests that two of the venues where Blackwater Railroad Company has previously played—Mount Marathon and Caines Head State Recreation Area, both near Seward—are somehow comparable to Williwaw Lakes. That’s a ridiculous assertion. Mount Marathon, as we all know, is right along the edge of Seward; and as its name suggests, Caines Head is a recreation area, not wilderness, and the site of an abandoned World War II Army fort. Neither place comes close to backcountry wilderness.

I can agree with Hensel, who is quoted in the ADN article to say, “We’re changing. Society is changing. Chugach State Park and other parks have a great opportunity to provide different experiences for people.”

Absolutely. But concerts and similar social events belong along its edges, in the park’s recreational development zone. That’s one of the reasons the park has different zones, to accommodate a wide variety of activities. The wilderness should be left to those of us who desire wild and largely pristine landscapes, places where it’s still possible to find solitude and “natural quiet” away from the din and busyness of cities.

If you want to have a party or stage a concert, consider Glen Alps, or maybe even Blueberry Hill, which rises gently above the Glen Alps parking lot. (Even there, you'd have to get a permit.) But leave Williwaw Lakes and places like it to the hikers, backpackers, and campers among us — people who appreciate not only solitude and the challenge of “primitive recreational opportunities,” but the inspiration and joy to be found in wild landscapes and the wild creatures who make their homes in such places.

I should emphasize here that while I'm a member of Friends of Chugach State Park, these are my personal views and I'm not representing the group. But I'll add that one of the positive spinoffs of learning about this proposed wilderness concert is that it has stirred up Friends, gotten us re-energized and recommitted to paying more attention to what goes on inside the park and the decisions that affect its wilderness, wildlife, other wild values. I—we—agree that there are many different ways that people can enjoy and celebrate Chugach State Park, but activities need to be appropriate to the places where they occur. And if anyone is interested in learning more about our group or bringing fresh energy to it, please let me know.

Anchorage nature writer Bill Sherwonit is a widely published essayist and the author of more than a dozen books, including “Living with Wildness: An Alaskan Odyssey” and “Animal Stories: Encounters with Alaska’s Wildlife.” Readers wishing to send comments or questions directly to Bill may do so at akgriz@hotmail.com.