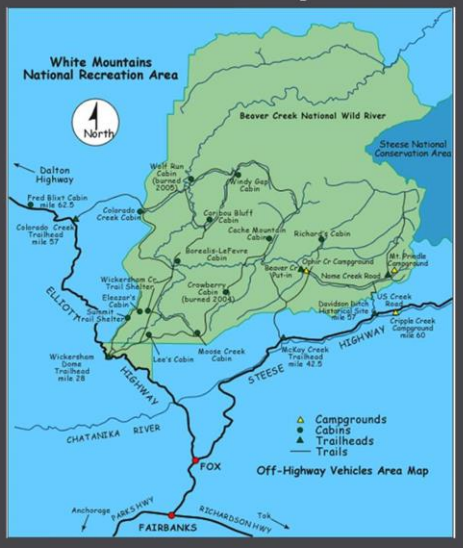
Introduction:
Today's presentation focuses not on some great success story but really on the struggles to get an organized partner group in an atmosphere of relative complacency. It is also a conversation- a chance for the academy to look at a case study and offer ideas, solutions and thoughts.

Context

White Mountains National Recreation Area
BLM's only National Recreation Area



- Nationally known, regionally popular
- Young by BLM standards (designated by ANILCA, developed in the 1990s)
- Increasing popularity and a change in demographics
- No where near capacity but you can see it from here (and, no, it's not Russia)

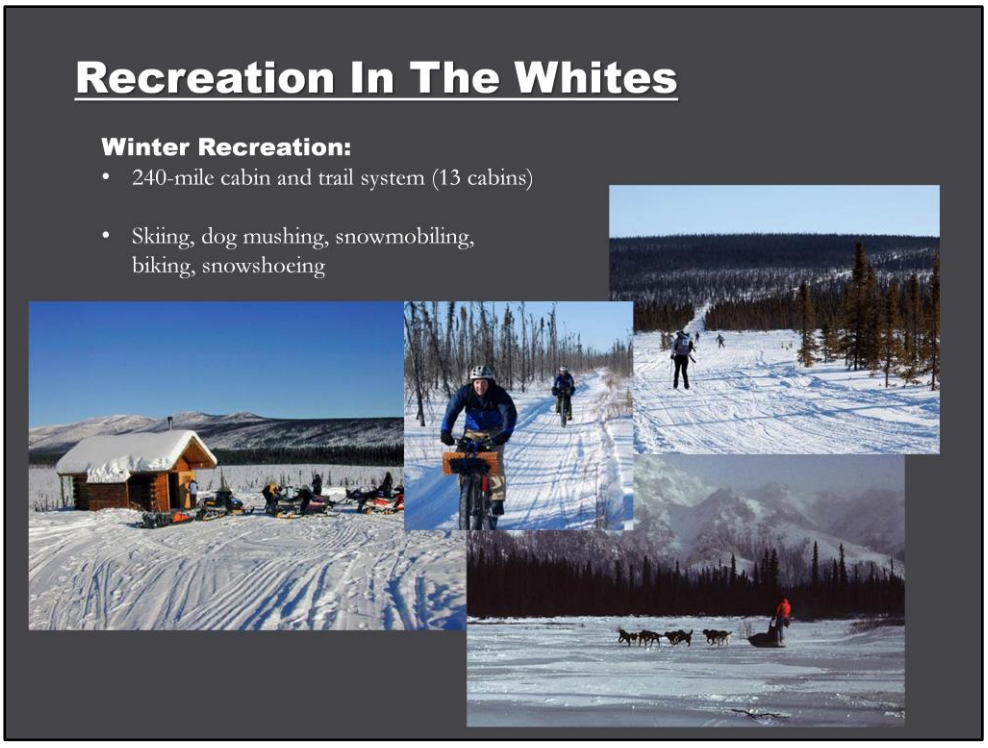
First some context:
Let's start with the presenter. I am the Assistant Field Manager for EIFO/branch chief for Visitor Services. I was hired to this position nearly 5 years ago for my strengths in civic engagement and, of all things, partnerships. I spent nearly 12 years prior working with the National Scenic Byways program developing multi-juristictional partnerships and programs from mission/vision workshops to MOUs to Friends Groups.

When handed BLM's only National Recreation Area, I thought "piece of cake".
I clearly had some lessons to learn.

The Whites:
The WMNRA was established through ANILCA (another long and very interesting study of public land partnership/exchange in AK). There is not a great deal of documentation on why the, then Senator Ted Stevens pulled this 1.2 million acre area out of the proposed Yukon Flats NWR and called it a National Recreation Area but the proximity to Fairbanks and access via old mining trails provided the blank slate for a rugged, multiple use rec area.

BLM developed a winter cabin-trail system in the late 1980s and 1990s and later developed a summer recreation program in Nome Creek Valley in the later 1990s. Really the development is new by BLM standards.

Use has nearly quadrupled since the development but is primarily Interior AK residents. It requires skill, wilderness knowledge and the ability to deal with AK backcountry conditions. We are not a park and do not do S&R's or patrol so users need to be reliable. The cabin system and trails present a wonderful opportunity to experience winter and the northern lights with some creature comforts so more and more users are coming with less and less knowledge. In addition, the presence of Ft. Waignwright has a constant flow of military families with a desire to recreate on the closest public lands.



As mentioned before, the primary recreation in the Whites in winter recreation.
240-mile cabin and trail system.
100 mile ski/bike/run race
Skiing, dog mushing, snowmachining are the primary activities.
It's "a Fairbanks thing"

The summer program is concentrated in Nome Creek Valley.
3 campgrounds, gold panning, climbing and Beaver Creek.
Getting more popular each year.
ATVs are a huge management issue as is keeping up with any sustainable trails in a semi-contiguous permafrost soil and tundra.
User conflicts during hunting season- too many people/not enough cabins and campgrounds. Fist fights in the parking lot.

The White Mountains….Remarkably Remote, Surprisingly Close!

Fairbanks playground

- One hour's drive from Fairbanks
- Fairbanks Northstar Borough is the 2nd largest population base in Alaska

Other adjacent public lands:

- Alaska State Parks
- Yukon Flats NWR
- Steese National Conservation Area
- Denali National Park and Preserve
- Gates of the Artic National Park
- Yukon Charley National Preserve
- Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

As mentioned early, the Whites are close. The title is what we use on the our web page and interpretative plans.
There are other "glory" spots in Interior Alaska that get the tourist visits. The Whites have remained a step sister to those places.
Point out locations of other public lands.
Point out location of Fairbanks/Interior Alaska to Anchorage

Hello Out There……Is Anyone Really Interested?

Local interest by groups
Small volunteer projects but only when initiated by BLM
Everyone seems happy and content..

BREAKING NEWS: EIFO Draft RMP introduces the possibility of Hard Rock Mineral Leasing in the Whites.

Home Run!!!

Public Comments:
"We like it just how it is"
"Keep it the same"
"The Whites are the best thing BLM ever did"

BLM has worked with various groups to do projects in the past:
SCA, AmeriCorps, Alaska Trails, Interior Sportsman's Club, Interior Hiking club, BSA, UAF
But all of these were project based and initiated by BLM

In 2006 BLM started an RMP. The Whites were withdrawn from mineral entry via ANILCA. During the course of public comment period it was pointed out that BLM failed to address hard rock mineral leasing. BLM developed an addendum and released this for public comment in 2012 (which was not included in the preferred alternative).

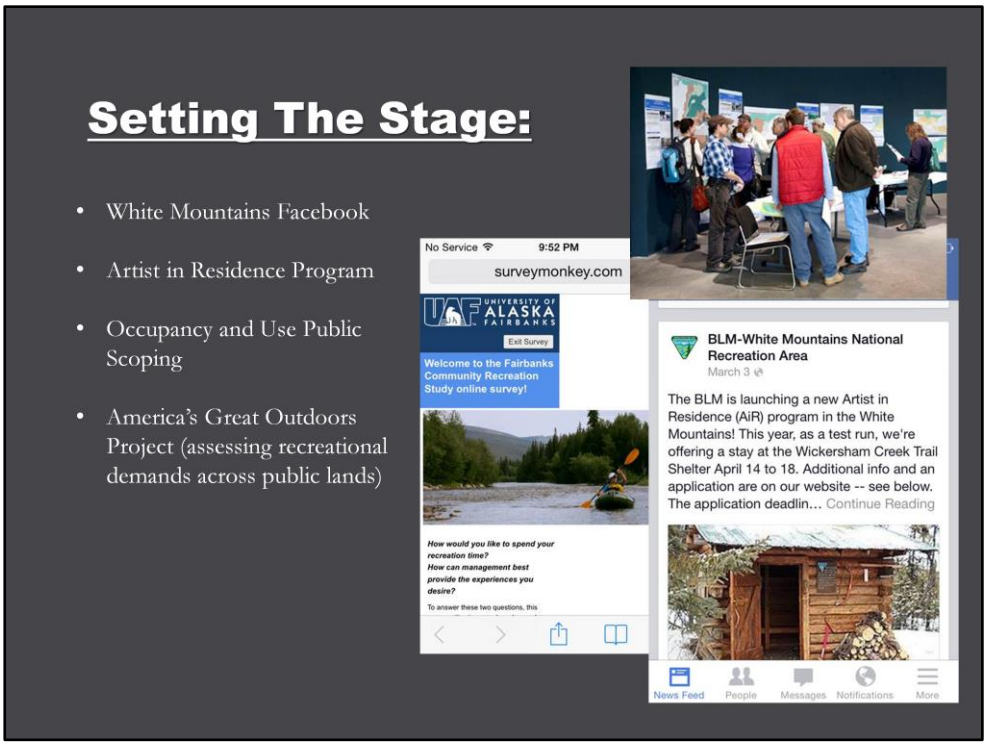
The public stood up and took notice. Bumper stickers started to be seen around the Interior: I Love the White Mountains.

Finally, it seemed we had a window of opportunity.

Statements at the public comment meetings focused on how poorly BLM was managing everything EXCEPT the Whites. It was a love fest.

It's Not As If Alaskan's Like The Federal Government…

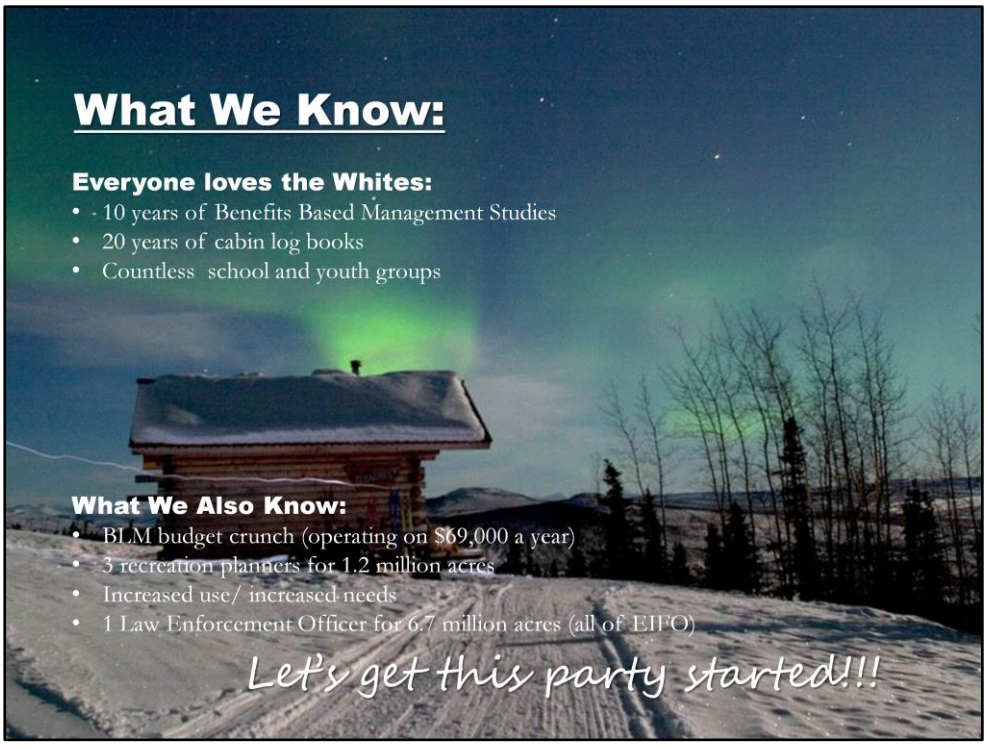
Sorry to my NPS friends. BLM could just as easily be on this sign too. Liking how the feds do something is not a very Alaskan thing to do.



We took advantage of the public interest and quickly (or as quickly as you can move through layers of bureaucracy) set up a WMNRA Facebook page, launched an Artist in Residence program (locally focused for the first round) and moved forward on scoping for occupancy and use issues (remember the fist fights in the parking lot…).

My philosophy is that we had an ear with the public, they felt invested with the RMP and were given a way to celebrate their love of the Whites through FB and AiR but we were missing one thing- -what did they really want from us and how do they want to continue to be involved.

Many of my colleagues at State Parks, the Borough, NPS and USFWS felt the same pain. We worked with our CESU partner, UAF, to develop a survey that was provided to identified recreational user groups to assess what their "ideal recreational experience" is regardless of boundary. The questions dealt with what type of recreation, duration, preference for level of facility development and finally, level of desire to be involved formally or informally in the future of recreation on public lands. BLM can't outright ask for a friends group so we opted for a soft sell.



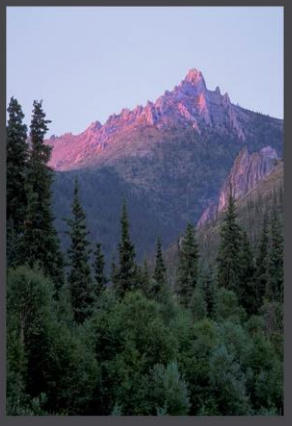
What we know:
Discuss the increased interest and continued cost.
Local users love the area and have a perception that everything is great.

What We Didn't Expect:

"We love the Whites. Great job"
"Thanks, I love the Whites"
"Sure, count me in for a volunteer weekend, just tell me when"
"Glad, it's the one Fed Agency that is doing it right"

Wait a minute…what about Northern.org and all those "I Love the White Mountains" bumper stickers?

"We aren't worried about the Whites, BLM has done a great job"



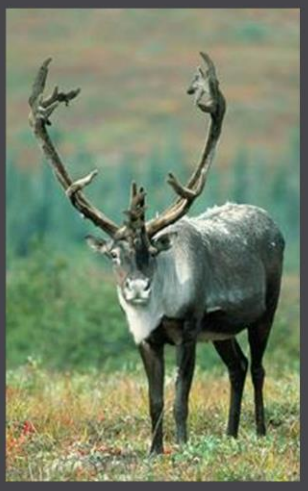
We expected a great surge of "Yes, we want to help, thanks for asking"

What we got was "You guys are doing great- keep up the good work"

The bumper sticker crowd was relieved when the mining issue was not part of the preferred alternative and still have a small mention on their web page but has fizzled once the threat was over.

What Did We Miss?

We Really Just Want Some Friends.



Does there always have to be a crisis to get a Friends Group?

How can we engage a complacent audience?

Where do we go from here?

Discussion:

What did we miss?

Does it have to be a crisis?