

**From:** [Alton Smith](#)  
**To:** [Alekka Fullerton](#)  
**Subject:** Alaska Excursions Tour Permits  
**Date:** Monday, February 26, 2018 8:47:00 AM

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Dear Haines Borough Assembly, City Manger, and City Clerks,

My name is Alton Smith and I was a three summer employee for Alaska Excursions, starting the summer of 2013 working as a Zip line guide in Skagway, and then moving to spend the 2016 and 2017 summers working at Glacier Point as a Glacier Guide. I recently discovered that Alaska Excursions had a public hearing scheduled for February 27th to determine whether or not they will receive a permit to run a new ATV tour and renew their existing permit for their Glacier hiking/motor boat tour. After my experiences working for this company, I firmly believe that Alaska Excursions is unfit to run safe tours at Glacier Point and I felt obligated to give you some more information on their practices to aid in making a decision that is good for the Haines Borough.

I come from a construction background, an industry that maintains an extremely high level of safety and tightly controlled by OSHA safety standards, so when I first arrived in Skagway in 2013, I was shocked to see what I found when I started on the zip line. On my first day of training, I found out that all of the returning senior guides had only been taught the most basic zip lining skills for simply running a tour but had no training from Alaska Excursions whatsoever on how to rescue or remove someone from a zipline when the equipment malfunctions. I would never have learned the proper skills that I ended up needing on a weekly basis if they had not hired one guide with rock climbing experience who took it upon himself to teach all of the guides knots, rope skills, and how to safely rescue someone from a zipline. Next, another strict OSHA rule that we had to ignore had to do with lightning storms. Lightning storms are not a very common in SE Alaska, but I have experienced two while living here. One of them was while working on the zip line, towards the end of our work day with one tour to go. With huge crashing lighting every 10-15 seconds, we did not find that it was safe to run our final tour of the day, since we are suspended from trees 50ft up in the air. Our manager on the zipline then told us that he did not have the authority to cancel a tour, and if it shows up then we have to run it. Alaska Excursions ultimately does not delegate enough power to its managers on site to make the proper safety decisions that benefit the guests and even the employees. Lastly, Alaska Excursions is always understaffed so they will move employees around in order to run more guests on a single tour, and that is when the lack of training can really affect the outcome of a tour. We had an Adventure Guide (shuttle driver) get cross trained into zip lining and in the end only received a couple days of training while the rest of the full time guides had two weeks of training. Early on after training, she clipped herself onto the zip line incorrectly and would have fallen about 50ft to the ground if she had not been tied to a 10 year old guest who was luckily clipped to the cable. Two lives were put severely at risk that day in order to add six more people onto a tour. Unnecessary risks are taken frequently in order to maximize the number of guests going on tours during the short summer operating season.

Unfortunately, the zip line was only a minor part of the safety issues I witnessed while working for Alaska Excursions. Due to the remoteness of Glacier Point and the difficulty of logistics, more risks are taken and there are less resources given to the guides out there if things were to go wrong. The first big issue with Glacier Point safety is that the guests have to

take a hour boat ride in order to get out for the tour, crossing through one of the most exposed wind areas in the Lynn Canal. Similar to the experiences on the zip line, the upper management of Alaska Excursions refuses to cancel tours based on wind speeds, completely ignoring gale warnings and small craft advisories. Pushing the limits for these tours has led to some pretty serious outcomes: shattering the large window in front of the captains seat with a full boat of guests, breaking the boat's exit door off from a large wave, and actually having guests leave with broken bones just from the impact of driving too fast in big waves. On three separate occasions in the two summers of working at a Glacier Point we had upwards of 30 people stranded at our camp at once because the tour boats were unable to pick the guests back up in the storm they brought them out in. It is easy to ignore the weather conditions for the Glacier Point tour when the entirety of the Alaska Excursions upper management staff remains completely disconnected from the operation out there. In the first 5 years of owning Glacier Point, the owner and CEO of Alaska Excursions has stepped foot on Glacier Point two separate times. The general manager of Glacier Point came out one time for a single glacier tour in the two summers that I was out there and never once inquired about how operations were going or the status of the tour. There needs to be a stronger consideration for guest and even employee safety when it comes to running a tour in a remote environment, especially one that is completely foreign to Alaska Excursions.

What worries me the most about the safety of the new ATV tour is that the one thing Alaska Excursions really ignored at Glacier Point was the maintenance on all of their tour related vehicles and outboard canoe motors. First off, all of the school buses used to shuttle guests from the beach to the gear pavilion have been at Glacier Point for 20 years. In that time period the most minimal of maintenance has been done on them, meaning the only time a bus would get worked on is after a major breakdown that affected a tour. We had the brakes fail on multiple occasions, ranging from going completely out to seizing up and blocking the only access road in if we were to have an emergency. Next, the most important part of the tour that is often overlooked due to the legality of non-licensed boat captains motoring 11 guests through glacial runoff, are the outboard motors on the back of the canoes. In my opinion, the most dangerous part of the tour involves an outboard motor failing right above the start of the Class II Davidson rapids. The tour is marketed as a paddling canoe tour but that is not the case at all. The tour relies heavily on the use of the outboard motors to shuttle guests to the glacial delta on time and when you are running them at full throttle for 5 months straight in extremely silty water, they breakdown all the time. After too many attempts asking for help and parts, I took it upon myself to fix the outboards with a junk yard of parts from years of broken motors and the help of YouTube. I have no mechanical training whatsoever, and I was able to keep the outboard motors running for tours by teaching myself. If Alaska Excursions struggled so much to maintain the safety of their tour vehicles at Glacier Point for the past five years, I do not see how they can be trusted to maintain even more vehicles with an ATV tour.

On one final note, separate from the safety aspects of Glacier Point, I wanted to briefly touch on the letter written from the Lynn Canal Conservation about the affect of the Glacier Point tour on local wildlife. From my personal experience, there is absolutely no doubt that the tour has an affect on the wildlife and their habitat. Specifically, the ground nesting birds that spend a large part of the spring and early summer nesting all over the glacial delta. No matter where the tour is able to land the canoes and walk towards the glacier, at least one nesting bird pair will be bothered. Unfortunately, despite our strongest efforts, we have witnessed guests completely trample nests on the walk to the Glacier. It would be absolutely worthwhile to monitor the impact of the tour on the State of Alaska Recreation Land, as the wildlife continues to expand and diversify in that area.

As you can see from the examples above, Alaska Excursions is unfit to safely and effectively run commercial tours in the remote location of Glacier Point. Safety was not a priority for them in 2013 and that has not changed another 5 years down the road. I hope that after reading my letter and the letter of the many other concerned parties, that you can also see how Alaska Excursions lacks the proper experience and business practices to run tours at Glacier Point that will bring any benefit to the Haines Borough.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Alton Smith