

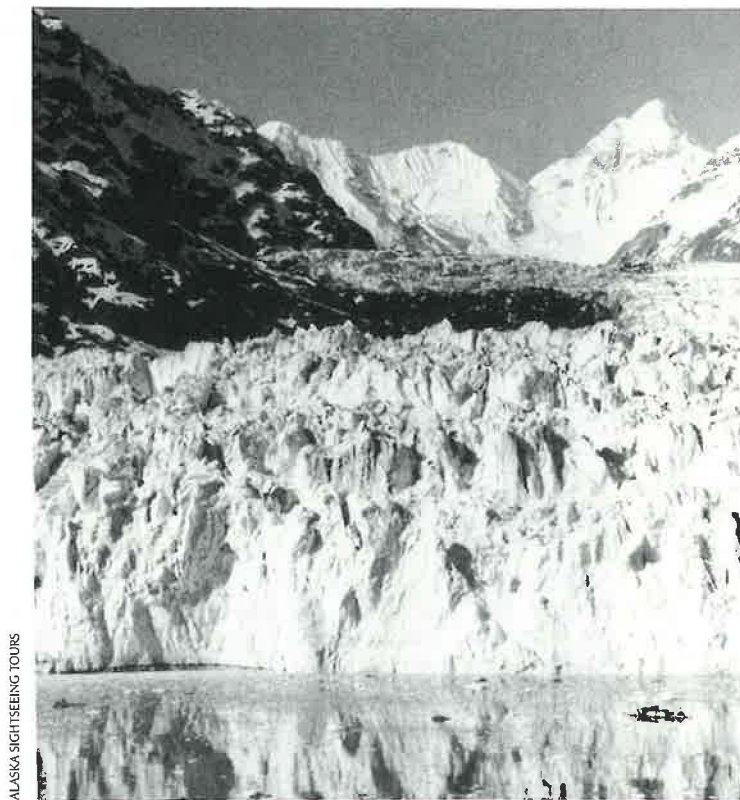
# alaska

## Marine Highway System

---

### *Vital to Travel Industry*

JOHN HALTERMAN



**W**orld trade, marine technology advances, environmental concerns, economic development, and growth in leisure time—all are increasing global demand for marine transportation. The spread of democracy and the economic growth of nations throughout the world are encouraging travel. Political

and physical barriers that have restricted travel in the past are rapidly crumbling. In addition the number of travelers is steadily increasing as world population grows and standards of living improve.

The demand for marine travel has fluctuated with the times. During the past century-and-a-half, American travelers have abandoned water travel for other modes of transportation. The expanded continental railroad system, the automobile, and jet airplane service have con-

tributed to the demise of marine transportation as the preferred mode of travel.



#### **New Interest in Water Travel**

Marine transportation is now undergoing renewed interest. Such factors as increasing transportation demand and the growing costs of building and maintaining roads and bridges, combined with mass transit cutbacks throughout the United States and

---

*John Halterman is assistant director, Alaska Marine Highway System.*

Canada, are contributing to the revival of marine transportation. In addition, major investments to improve marine technology are helping the industry regain its competitive advantage.

Many people today, frustrated with automobile travel and the hassles of modern air travel, are choosing marine transportation as the preferred mode. The travel industry continues to grow in value and importance, and communities and countries are taking advantage of their regions' natural or cultural attributes to attract visitors from throughout the world. It has been estimated that by 2000, tourism will become the world's largest business and will generate more than \$2 trillion in revenues.

Today's travelers want to experience new adventures. They are selecting vacations and destinations that bring them closer to the sea, to forests, and to coastal community life. The state of Alaska possesses an abundance of these attractions, both natural and developed. And because most Alaska communities lie on a coast and depend on air or water transportation, the Alaska Marine Highway System plays an important role in the state's travel industry.



### Service Capacity and Demand

Alaska's Marine Highway system is composed of the southeastern and southwestern portions. The system provides passenger and vehicle ferry service to communities along its southern coasts and connects the coasts with each other and with the continental road system in British Columbia and the lower 48 states. The Southeast System operates from Bellingham, Washington, and Prince Rupert, British Columbia, north to Skagway and Haines, Alaska. It has a fleet of six vessels that vary in length from 235 to 418 feet and is divided into mainline routes and secondary or feeder routes. In 1990 this system embarked 363,000 passengers and 95,000 vehicles. The Southwest System operates from Cordova, Alaska, west to the Aleutian Islands, using a 193-foot vessel in the Prince William Sound area and a 296-foot oceangoing vessel servicing Kodiak and the Aleutian Chain. In 1990 this system embarked 50,000 passengers and 16,000 vehicles.

Service demands from May 1 to September 15 are overwhelming. The system completely sells out cabin spaces in the first few days after reservations are opened in December. Car deck space is nearly full for each sailing, and many times travelers without reservations are turned away.

Vehicle loads have changed dramatically since the system was initiated, when typical loads included passengers with cars, light trucks, and freight vans. With the increased popularity of recreational travel in the early 1970s, vehicle loads changed to light trucks, truck-mounted campers, and passenger cars towing small travel trailers. Today a typical load includes travelers who range from senior citizens booked in state-rooms to backpackers sleeping in tents on the outside passenger decks, with their bicycles and kayaks stowed on the car deck. Passengers with subcompact cars, motor coaches, motor homes, and 40-foot freight vans complete the load.

Recently there has been a growing demand for off-season travel by retired persons. To accommodate these travelers, the marine transportation system has worked with the United States Forest Service, the University of Alaska, and the national Elderhostel Program to promote shipboard learning opportunities. Discount winter rates, educational credit opportunities from the university, and Forest Service tour guides are offered to retired travelers during the off season. This program has been a great success and has enabled the Marine Highway System to significantly increase its capacity utilization. Customer response has been positive.

Tourism ranks third to oil production and commercial fishing in gross dollar volume and is the largest private-sector employer in Alaska. More than the equivalent of 10,000 year-round jobs have been attributed to in-bound visitations and another 8,000 to resident travel. More than 750,000 visitors came to Alaska last year, 30 percent more people than reside in the state.

The preliminary results of a recent survey on tourist expenditures revealed that ferry passengers from outside Alaska spent the largest amount per person per trip of any mode of travel. It is estimated that ferry visitors spend more than \$960 per trip, including ferry transportation. Excluding

transportation costs, visitors spend \$665 per person per trip—more than air visitors, who spend \$647 per person per trip. The report further reveals that in various regions of Alaska, ferry users are the top spenders per person, not only in southeastern Alaska but also in south-central Alaska, where tourists purchase additional goods and services such as hotel accommodations.



### Roads or Vessels?

Along with its growing importance to state tourism, the marine transportation system plays an even greater role in providing a vital transportation link among Alaskan communities. As communities have grown, demand for service has increased. Several new technological options, such as wave-piercing vessels, are being considered to meet increased demand. However, because the system is a government agency, it must compete with other state needs for investment capital. Although the capital cost of building roads between coastal communities far exceeds that of building new vessels, the debate continues between the supporters of these two modes.

One of the issues being debated is the question of whether the government should construct and maintain a year-round highway linking the capital city, Juneau, with Haines and the Haines Highway, which connects to the roads of interior Alaska. The latest Department of Transportation and Public Facilities study estimated the cost for this construction at between \$200 million and \$400 million, excluding maintenance and repair costs. The cost is remarkable considering that it would be a 60-mile stretch of highway.



### Challenges Remain

The Alaska Marine Highway System could construct a feeder vessel to provide daily service between Juneau, Haines, and Skagway. The vessel could link passengers and vehicles to mainline ferries that service other ports as well as the land highways within Alaska, British Columbia, and the continental United States. Construction costs for the feeder vessel would be between \$15 million and \$20 million.





Alaska Marine Highway system's M/V Malaspina.

The goal of the Alaska Marine Highway System is to provide passenger and vehicle transportation to meet the social, educational, health, and economic needs of communities for which highway access is impossible or prohibitively expensive. As travel demand increases, mass transit through water transportation is increasingly seen as a viable alternative. Today's travelers to Alaska can enhance their adventure from the decks of ferries, experiencing the lull of the sea, the majesty of the lush terrain, and the varied cultures and life styles of the state. The Alaska Marine Highway

System has a great future, but challenges remain. Technology to deliver affordable ships is needed. Ships must be equipped for travel at necessary speeds, for safety, and to accommodate both passengers and vehicles. Alaska marine travel is growing along with world marine travel. The challenge is to be a leader in this changing world.

For further information contact Alaska Marine Highway, P.O. Box R, Juneau, Alaska 99811-2505 (telephone 1-800-642-0066 or 907-465-3941 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.—daily, Pacific time; fax 907-465-2476).

**M/V Matanuska.** Increased cost of building and maintaining infrastructure in United States and Canada has contributed to revival of marine transportation.

