

AN OPTIMISTIC WORD ABOUT ALASKA'S FUTURE

By Wayne E. Heimer

Alaskan wildlife management got a great start when Alaska-experienced biologists came to our fledgling Department of Fish & Game from the feds at statehood. At statehood, Alaska was basically untouched, and the wildlife managers of the day assumed that hunting by humans was the major effect on Alaska's wildlife. Coincidentally, it was the only thing they could manage, so the major effort was to control human harvests in the name of conservation. Nobody really gave a thought to predation as a major component of environmental resistance to game population growth. That has changed.

The last 25 years of ADF&G research has shown the original management assumption was wrong for Alaska. The original mistakes were typically human ones imported to Alaska via universities of the day, and reinforced by the federal management structure during territorial times. The romantic fantasy that predators are "good for prey populations because they cull the weak" was part of the package. This idealistic notion survived because it seemed to fit the evolutionary theory of the day. It's still here even though there are now more than enough humans in Alaska to have altered the situation significantly. Human hunting is regulated, other natural predation isn't. Still, it surprises many folks to hear that non-human predators, not regulated human hunting, remains the dominant manageable component of environmental resistance to game population growth and recovery.

Yes, recovery! You see, shortly after statehood, humans stopped competing with other predators for the prey we have always had in common as food for both groups. When we quit competing with other predators (wolves, bears, eagles, and coyotes) but increasing numbers of us continued to harvest our common prey with better technology, it wasn't too long till populations began to decline from the combined weight of both human and non-human predation. Throw in a few bad winters, which wipe out some year's productions of new prey and a little habitat degradation, and game abundance went way, way down.

Ever since modern wildlife science has shown we have to compete with other predators if we want food, there has been resistance to re-invigorating this ancestral competition. Frankly, those of us who want to compete have not been figuratively "handed our lunch," but have had it literally "taken from us" by those who are emotionally or philosophically against our participating in the age old contest with other predators for food. The emotional and intellectual inertia denying the obvious fact that we're going to have to compete if we want "our lunch back" has been significant. This is because those insisting man is not a legitimate natural predator have simply out-competed us socially (like, at the ballot box).

In Alaska, this has meant a succession of Governors who, for their personal reasons, have not supported our ancestral competition with other natural predators. For some it was fear of a threatened tourism boycott, for others it was a matter of personal emotional reaction. Some just didn't care. That changed with our election of Governor Sarah Palin.

Governor Palin has a modern approach to Alaska's Constitution and is committed to providing benefits for Alaskans from our wildlife resources. That is, she takes the Alaska Constitution seriously where it says wildlife should be managed for maximum sustained yield of human food. The Governor's position is evident through three recent key appointments in ADF&G.

Craig Fleener, a gwich'in Athabaskan Indian, was appointed Director of the Subsistence Division. Mr. Fleener is the first Subsistence Division Director to overtly embrace the Alaska Supreme Court ruling that all Alaskans are subsistence users. This means Mr. Fleener does not endorse pitting one group of Alaskans against another in a fight over who gets "the last moose." Of course, our Subsistence Division still has its traditional orientation, and changes he wishes to make could be slow. Nevertheless, he favors restoration of game populations to their former supportable abundance.

Pat Valkenburg (a respected ADF&G alumnus) is now Deputy Commissioner for Wildlife, and is a well-known proponent of active management. He has an established record of supporting applied science in advocating for wildlife restoration. Of course, our Wildlife Conservation Division also has its traditions, (which do not currently include vigorous competition with other natural predators), and changes may come slowly there also.

Corey Rossi's appointment may best reflect the Governor's refreshing perspective. Mr. Rossi was appointed "Assistant Commissioner for Wildlife Abundance." Mr. Rossi may be the most active Alaskan wildlife manager you've 'never heard of.' He definitely has an abundance-based scientific management philosophy, and is well-connected to rural Alaska having worked in federal predator management throughout Alaska for 13 years. Because I think these folks "have it right" according to Alaskan tradition, the Alaska Constitution, and the Alaska Statutes, I think the Governor and her Commissioner, Denby Lloyd, should be commended for driving this return to abundance-based, Constitutional management.

Simplistically, restoration and sustenance of human benefits from wildlife will require putting more hooves on the ground, primarily for human food. Whether everyone likes it or not, this means reactivating our natural competition with wolves, bears, and coyotes for food while we continue to regulate human harvests and maintain/rehabilitate habitats. In the past, socially-driven ballot initiatives stymied efforts to reestablish this ancestral competition. Last year, our legislature, again supported by Governor Palin, gave the Alaska Board of Game the sole authority to allocate wildlife populations (including predators) for harvest. This should stabilize Alaskan wildlife management. The Board of Game recently expanded opportunities for human competition with other natural predators for moose and caribou.

A bright new era? We'll see. Doubtless, "the devil is in the details." Still, modern wildlife management seems more likely to fulfill the promise of statehood now than ever before.

Wayne E. Heimer is widely recognized for his "big-picture" perspective on wild resource management in Alaska. He worked for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, primarily as Alaska's Dall sheep biologist, for 25 years.