

Wolves, Hunters Once Again--

Scientist and Plane Wolf Hunters in Sharp Disagreement

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Wolf-lovers vs. wolf-haters met in a confrontation at the Tanana Valley Sportsmen's Association clubhouse, Tuesday, Jan. 9.

Gordon Haber, biologist, presented a slide show and lecture on the habits of wolves to TVSA members and the general public. For eight years, Haber has

been researching wolves in Mt. McKinley Park, concentrating studies on two specific packs of wolves.

Haber and his team were able to identify and follow individual wolves in their hunting, breeding, and sleeping patterns over a continuous period of time. Some of Haber's data was challenged by listeners in the audience, including several aerial wolf hunters and trappers.

Emphasizing the social organization of wolves, Haber drew an analogy between the way wolves learn to cope with environmental conditions and man's need to learn how to cope with his environment.

"Man's behavior is complicated," Haber stated. "What we need to do is look at a simplified template."

He condemned aerial wolf
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hunting, but added that he is not against all hunting. "Man has evolved as a hunter right along with the wolf," he said.

"Thinning the herd indiscriminately takes away the wolves' social organization."

The statistics gathered by Haber indicated that indiscriminate thinning actually led to increased breeding by more members of the pack, rather than by the lead males and females only. Killing of these lead animals, he felt, led to social breakdown and consequently formation of new packs.

With colored slides Haber showed movements of the primary pack in the study within their 600 square mile territory which the wolves mark off by urinating on the boundaries, called "scent-post marking."

In eight years of study, Haber said he had never seen one incident of wolves attacking one another within the same pack, even during the intensive breeding period.

He identified in successive slides what he labeled the Alpha male and the Beta male, as well as the Alpha and Beta females. Then he proceeded to demonstrate how the leadership of these key animals directed all the actions of the group.

The pack consisted of approximately 19 wolves during most of the period studied and remained consistent at that level. Haber claims that wanton hunting would break up "the beautiful social orientation" and lead to increased numbers of wolves.

The scientist attributed much of the diet of the pack to "winter-kills," moose or caribou who were already dead when the pack came upon them. He estimated that as much as 60 per cent of the total food of the pack was derived from "winter-killed" animals.

Several slides demonstrated the ability of a lone moose to ward off attack by the pack of 19 wolves, illustrating Haber's theory that wolves kill primarily the weakened animals.

Hunters in the audience disputed this theory and several were offended by the idea of Haber's party circling in an airplane while the pack ripped apart moose and caribou.

One viewer said of Haber, "You have demonstrated that you have none of the instincts of a man who is close to nature. This was evident as you flew over that poor animal and watched while the wolves killed it."

Another trapper said he would place the value of a moose much higher than that of a wolf. "A wolf's hide is worth \$100," he said. "A moose is worth almost \$1000 in terms of hide, the meat, and the horns, if they're a good pair."

One man in the audience commented, "There should be a better way to manage game than to leave it to the bellies of wolves."

Haber was asked how many moose a pack of 13 to 19 wolves eat in a year. He answered that it was somewhere between 50 and 150, but that he did not have the exact figure with him.

In order to determine the total effect of wolf predation, one listener felt it was important to know the number of moose within the same 600 square mile range and what per cent of their population the wolf kills represented.

Tanana Valley Sportmen's Association has taken no united stand on wolf-hunting, aerial or otherwise. Their president said they presented the program in an effort to bring more data before the public.

Aerial hunting has long been an issue within the native movement. Native families who depend on moose and caribou for a large part of their diet have a special interest in accurate information on the effect of wolves on the game population.

Although Native trappers sometimes realize income from wolf-hunting, one Native observed, "It's pretty easy to see that we're not the ones with the airplanes."

Tempers flared last fall over aerial moose hunting around the village of Galena and it is almost certain that legislation will be introduced by bush delegates to protect Native interests.

One such bill is already in the making under the sponsorship of State Senator John Sackett.