

AROUND ALASKA

Wolf hunt brings strong support, opposition

By Paul Jenkins
Associated Press

Anchorage—They are spirits of the wind; the last wild shadows in a nation sanitized and tamed by concrete and street lights. They are among the last great symbols of American wilderness.

Wolves, while barely more than 1,200 remain in the Lower 48 states, as many as 10,000 have survived the years of bounties and uncontrolled slaughter to roam Alaska's rugged face.

The fate of some of those wolves now is locked in an increasingly strident debate as groups such as the Alaska Wildlife Alliance and the National Audubon Society fight Alaska's on-again, off-again practice of shooting the creatures with shotguns from planes to protect stocks of moose and caribou.

Former Gov. Jay Hammond, who took an estimated 250 wolves in eight years as a federal wolf hunter, once said: "This is one of those issues where people think with their hormones instead of their heads."

From test tubes, research and game counts, the complex fight increasingly is spilling into the political arena; where groups other than hunters and trappers clamor for a say in Alaska's wildlife management. The

Alaska Board of Game, which sets hunting and trapping rules, and the Division of Game, which enforces them, now are confronted by constituencies virtually unheard from in the past.

Ironically, the same state agencies that years ago battled lawmakers and hunters to curtail the indiscriminate killing of wolves now must fight to thin their ranks in areas where it's feared they will wreak havoc on game populations.

"I think the main reason it's such an issue is that the wolf is a symbol of wilderness in people's minds," says M. Lewis Pamplin, Division of Game director. "The Lower 48 has been burned and raped so that there's little wilderness left."

Game officials armed with biological data want to trim the packs by some 90 wolves in two of five game management areas scheduled for predator control in interior Alaska. They've done it successfully in the past in other areas where severe winters or other factors have combined to shrink game herds, they say.

The aerial hunting was halted recently by Superior Court Judge Brian Shortell. He said the temporary restraining order would remain in effect while he decided whether to grant a temporary injunction against

the practice sought by the Alaska Wildlife Alliance.

Division estimates show that one of the target areas, 20E, has 1,500 moose and 120 wolves, with an eventual goal of 4,500 moose. The other area, 20B, is supporting an estimated 3,500 moose and as many as 80 wolves, with a moose population goal of 4,500.

Bud Burris, regional game management coordinator for the Game Division in Fairbanks, says it's estimated that wolves in 20E are taking 15 percent to 20 percent of the moose annually, compared to 1 percent to 2 percent which fall to hunters.

In 20B, hunters account for 4 percent of the population annually, while an estimated 10 percent go to the wolves, he says.

The moose numbers in 20B definitely are increasing, mostly in areas of previous wolf control efforts, Burris says, and may be increasing in 20E.

Division biologists say that without predator control, moose in the target areas may not reach population goals, and in the end, the wolves could suffer.

"The efforts will continue until we achieve our objectives," Burris says. "When we reach the objectives, the control efforts will stop."

Opponents counter that game officials are too quick on the trigger and say they fear that what started as an emergency measure to respond to critical game situations is becoming a standard game management tool long after it's needed. They say if left alone things in the wilderness tend to even out in the long run.

But that's dismissed by some as a notion foisted on the public by Walt Disney films.

"There is no balance of nature," said Tom Bergerud, a researcher at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, who has spent years studying caribou in various parts of the world. "It fits our feeling of harmony to feel that systems are in balance, but there is no magic stability out there."

"We must manage our predator population if we are to manage our prey population. If the prey population declines, the predator population will decline."

When prey species are allowed to diminish, the results can be grim. Wolf "pups starve to death and adults kill each other," says Dave Mech, an internationally known wolf expert in Minnesota, where an estimated 1,200 wolves remain. Another 20 wolves survive in Wisconsin and perhaps as many as 10 roam the northern Rockies, the experts estimate.

The animals survive in other countries around the globe, but Alaska is the last refuge for great numbers of the creatures in the United States, a fact not lost on environmentalists.

They question the state's biological data and charge the control work is part of a "meat market mentality" that turns a blind eye to predator protection to ensure growing game populations for a burgeoning number of hunters.

A witness at a recent Game Board hearing accused the Game Division of suffering from a "Little Red Riding Hood syndrome" concerning wolves.

"There is no question that in the past years the division has been viewed in that light, as has the Board of Game," Pamplin says. "But the main constituency then was the hunters. There weren't a lot of conflicts."

But that's changed in the past few years with increasing population and land demands, he said.

Pressure from sight-seers and photographers "has increased dramatically and conflicts have skyrocketed since 1975," said Pamplin. "This is going to become more controversial, not less. But it must be made clear we're dedicated to protecting and managing wildlife for all the public."

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