

# Moose harvest below average

**By Jeffery R.  
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Helen Simpkin and her husband Richard traveled to the Salcha area recently for their annual moose hunt. They were surprised to find little or no moose signs where they have successfully hunted for many years. When they returned to North Pole, they called family and friends in Nenana and found hunters there were having similar results.

While severe weather appears to have substantially reduced this year's Interior moose harvest, some subsistence hunters fear there may be more than weather to blame.

"We're anticipating that the harvest is going to be down substantially, especially in the middle of the Tanana area," says Chris Smith, regional supervisor for the Division of Wildlife Conservation in Fairbanks. He notes many urban hunters did not even go out,

forced to stay home and thaw frozen pipes and otherwise cope with the sudden and early onslaught of winter.

Smith says "a lot of people who had planned hunting during that period spent time trying to keep their homes from freezing."

He fears this year's late spring and early cold may have effectively shortened the growing season "and may affect the overall health and strength of calves." He is concerned that conducting a moose census this winter may be complicated further because subzero temperatures hit before birch trees lost their leaves, which will reduce the visibility of moose from the air.

But Smith is confident that Interior moose populations remain healthy. He notes that 600-900 bull moose are taken from Game Manage-

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ment Units 20a and 20b and this year's harvest falls far short of the average.

"We know those levels are within the range of sustainable harvest," says Smith.

George Yaska, the director of wildlife and parks for Tanana Chiefs Conference, says some rural hunters also had difficulty getting out due to the presence of early ice on Interior rivers.

"In some communities there was a good harvest. In others there wasn't, partly dependent on weather," says Yaska. The other substantial factor in low success rates for rural hunters this year is much more sinister.

"Many areas have been thoroughly discovered by people who are non-local hunters," says Yaska. He notes that Athabascan families traditionally hunt certain areas and avoid territory hunted by other families. "Those families have been going back this year and sometimes finding as many as 10 non-local boats."

Because published information can expose traditional hunting areas to urban incursions, Yaska declines to name the communities that are experiencing increased non-local hunting pressure. But he tells the story of an Elder in the middle Yukon area who set out for the fall hunt last year. He passed literally hundreds of non-local boats traveling the river. Nearing his camp, he rounded a bend in the river and discovered about 15 boats on the beach where he usually unloads his gear.

"He turned around and went home. He was ashamed to hunt in his own country. That level of hunting pressure was immoral to him," recalls Yaska.

While such stories have become commonplace, Yaska says Tanana Chiefs Conference is undertaking an aggressive data collection project to determine actual

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subsistence harvest patterns. The project, based on a 12 month survey of every household in the community, is not solely promoted by this fall's moose concerns. Yaska says knowledge of rural hunters often conflicts with the data generated by state and federal agencies creating a substantial impediment to sound and equitable game

management policies.

Rural people have experienced conflicts with sport hunters before, but the numbers of sport hunters exploiting areas customarily relied on by rural communities appears to be unprecedented. Recent worries have been compounded by efforts of urban hunters to designate non-subsistence hunting areas on state lands and the frustrating complexities of dealing with

state and federal subsistence management rules.

As he drives the Steese Highway near Chatanika River, Yaska observes that moose are now only present along the road at night. Local hunting traffic keeps them holed up in nearby hills during the day.

"It's kind of scary. I'm wondering if they aren't being hunted out and pushing people into the rural areas," says Yaska.