

# Wolves: Prey of Misinformation

by Bob Stephenson

Always a subject that stirs strong feelings, the wolf makes good copy. Recent articles in the national press have indicated that Alaska's wolf management is based largely on emotion and that aerial hunting is rampant in the state. Neither concept is valid. As the Alaska Board of Game is once more turning its attention to wolves, during its fall meeting in Fairbanks, it is important to clarify the situation.

Some journalists, using unreliable methods, have claimed that the Alaska wolf population is half what it was ten years ago. In reality, systematic annual estimates of statewide wolf numbers, based on an area-by-area assessment of packs and populations, began only in 1984 when information from all sources (aerial surveys, telemetry studies, and compilations of sightings by the public) had reached the stage where such an effort could provide meaningful results. These annual estimates have ranged from 4,933-6,212 in winter 1984-85 to 5,917-7,230 in 1989-90. Our estimates suggest that the wolf population has not only increased slightly but has also expanded its range somewhat during this six-year period. While part of the apparent increase in numbers is real, part is a result of better information.

Although a few estimates of wolf numbers in Alaska appeared prior to the annual estimates that began in 1984, the methods and assumptions upon which they are based are unknown. The population was conservatively estimated at 5,000 in 1970 and at 10,000 or more in 1982, with figures ranging from 6,000 to 10,000 appearing in various popular publications. An estimate of 15,000 has been mentioned, but its origin is unknown.

What has happened, of course, is that some people have compared the highest figures, which have little or no methodological basis, with more recent figures, leading concerned but poorly informed people to conclude that Alaska's wolf population has declined substantially.

While the total number of wolves in the

state is of interest, this figure is of limited value in assessing the status of wolves and the success of wolf conservation efforts. Increases in numbers in one region can easily be offset by decreases in another. If we examine the status of wolves on a regional basis relative to habitat and prey availability, we find that wolves are regularly distributed over nearly all of their historic range and, in most parts of the state, are about as abundant as prey resources will allow. During the past two decades the trend in wolf numbers has been stable or increasing in all areas, and their range has actually expanded.

Some journalists have commented that it is hard to find a wolf along Alaska roads, implying that if wolves were managed differently people could expect to see them along roads. That wolves are not commonly seen along roads is presented as another indication that our wolf population is in trouble. But this is a poor standard by which to judge our success in wolf conservation. The vast majority of Alaska's limited road system occurs in densely wooded terrain where visibility is limited and wolves are not likely to be seen. In similar terrain in northern Minnesota, for example, where the habitat generally supports a considerably greater abundance of wolves, people are also "hard pressed" to see wolves along roads. The reason that people sometimes see wolves near the road in Denali National Park is not because wolves are more abundant than in adjacent areas (they are not). People see wolves in Denali because the park road is one of the few that crosses relatively open alpine and subalpine habitat and is traveled by large numbers of people to whom wolves have become habituated. Wolves are commonly seen in open terrain elsewhere in Alaska, especially by people traveling in the back country.

It has been charged that emotional hatred of wolves influences Alaska's wolf management. This comes as a shock to the people who live here, and the people in the

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and on the Alaska Board of Game whose policies and actions have allowed wolves to prosper. I suspect it would also surprise Stephen Kellert of Yale University, whose 1985 study of American attitudes towards predators is well known. Of the various demographic groups studied, Kellert commented, "Regional differences surprisingly revealed that Alaskan respondents had the most positive perceptions of the wolf" and showed the greatest knowledge of wolves. Kellert concludes that wolves... "are still not the object of widespread affection or concern *except* among particular groups including wildlife enthusiasts, persons of higher socioeconomic status, non-livestock producing westerners (*particularly Alaskans*), and those under 35 years of age" (emphasis added).

The issue of the use of aircraft in taking wolves is, indeed, a controversial one. Actually, the practice of shooting wolves from fixed-wing aircraft as a routine method of taking wolves was discontinued in 1972. It has been used in population control measures in only a few cases since then. The practice of land-and-shoot hunting, in which hunters are allowed to land near wolves before hunting, has continued to some degree. In recent years the areas where land and shoot hunting is allowed have been restricted. Land-and-shoot hunting is presently allowed by permit, in limited areas with various stipulations. The relationships of land-and-shoot hunting to state and federal laws is being reviewed and clarified by law enforcement agencies. In addition, an in-depth review of wolf management, including various hunting methods and means, has recently been conducted by a diverse group of Alaskans comprising the Alaska Wolf Management Planning Team. (See sidebar.)

People are sometimes given the impression that legal hunting and trapping and the use of airplanes threatens wolf

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populations. To place this in perspective, one must remember that over the past six years, hunting and trapping have removed about 12-20 percent of the estimated statewide population each year. This level of harvest is well below the levels that would be required to control or reduce the overall wolf population.

While there are valid concerns about the use of aircraft as a method of access in taking wolves, the idea that air transportation is contributing to the decimation of Alaska's wolf population is not one of them. In recent years aircraft have been the method of transportation used to take 30 to 40 percent of the total harvest, or about 200 to 300 wolves annually, out of a population now estimated at 5,900 to 7,200. (Air transportation as a method of access should not be confused with aerial hunting, or shooting out of a plane.)

One has to wonder about the reluctance of so many people, including experienced journalists, to accept that attitudes toward

wolves have changed for the better in wolf country as well as in areas to the south, and that hatred of wolves is not an issue in Alaska. Discussions about wolf management center around the relationship between wolves, other predators such as bears, and prey populations—not on whether wolves are “good” or “bad” animals. It is interesting to note that people seem to find it easy to accept that most Native Americans hold positive attitudes toward wolves but find it so difficult to accept that our own culture can do the same, even when the change in attitudes is as dramatic as this one has been. Personally, I have come to the conclusion that many people, particularly in the environmental community and in the media, do not want to believe that people in places such as Alaska have positive attitudes toward wolves. Without this belief, wolf management decisions become much more complicated for the public, make for less sensational articles for the press, and also lessen the fund-raising potential the issue

provides for some organizations.

Wolf populations are widespread and thriving in most of Alaska and Canada. They have actually expanded their range in these areas. One would think this would be welcome news to people concerned about the status of wolves. Instead, the fact that Alaskan and Canadian wolf populations are in such a secure position is rarely emphasized in popular articles or television documentaries.

Like most biologists, I sincerely appreciate the growing interest in wolves and the concern for their continued welfare. However, I am troubled that recently the focus of interest has stagnated, with misinformation a primary cause. I look forward to the day when we move past this self-righteous lament to focus on further improving the status of wolves, wild country, and man's relationship with both.

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## How Are Wolves Going to be Managed?

by Cathie Harms

Few challenges in wildlife are greater than answering the question, “How should wolves be managed?”

Wolf management in the past hasn't pleased many people and has cost a great deal of time and money. The Alaska Constitution requires the department to manage wildlife to benefit people. That doesn't mean just for hunters or photographers or just for any other use. Wolves are an important part of Alaska's ecosystems and their management is essential to successful management of other species.

We started working on a wolf management plan several years ago. In addition to wildlife research, we have talked to many people to learn the different values people hold for wolves. Because it is not possible to talk directly with every resident of the state, we established a citizen's advisory group to help us. We needed the group to reflect a wide range of interests, including hunters and trappers, environmentalists, conservationists, and educators as well as people from different parts of the state and different cultures. Twelve people were selected as members of the Alaska Wolf Management Planning Team. The team met six times during a six-month period and worked hard to arrive at a consensus on recommendations for wolf management, which are summarized in the Alaska Wolf Management Team's final report.

Our planning process involves three parts: 1) developing a zone concept (in a strategic management plan); 2) mapping

preliminary zone boundaries; and 3) writing area-specific management plans. We're in the first stage now.

Department staff have drafted a strategic wolf management plan which recommends a system of six zones ranging from total protection of wolves to intensive management of wolves. We're asking the public, agencies, groups, and individuals to review our draft plan and give us their comments, suggestions, ideas, or questions. We will be seeking comments until the Fall 1991 Board of Game meeting ends in Fairbanks on November 8.

After the Fall 1991 Board of Game meeting, we will finalize the zone concept, then work with the public to draft preliminary zone boundaries on a map of the state. We will also begin drafting some area-specific management plans which will detail what management activities will take place in specific areas. We hope to have drafts of the zone boundaries and the first area-specific management plans available for review by March 1992.

If you have any ideas, suggestions, or comments about how we can make progress on this project, we'd like to hear them. Informal input is needed at all stages, and opportunities for formal comments will be offered as well. For more information, please call, stop by, or write to an office of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

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