

# CHANGING COURSE: FISH & GAME MANAGEMENT IN ALASKA

by Bill Woolf  
Information Officer  
Juneau

**R**aising a ruckus is easy these days. Just walking into a crowded room and mentioning "d-2 lands" ought to do the trick, and if not, try "subsistence," or "fish and game management." These issues are closely related and they all provide plenty of room for different opinions. In fact, the whole face of fish and game management in Alaska is changing in response to the other two issues.

As Alaska's population grows, an increasing number of complexities develop in the business of fish and wildlife management. It used to be simple—with fewer people, there was plenty for everyone. Now, there are no easy decisions. Many questions must be answered before fishing and hunting can be allowed. For instance, what kind of use is most appropriate? Can the animal or fish population support an open season? For how long? What effect will it have on other species?

As the possibility of future scarcities becomes more apparent, further questions arise. Who has the right to hunt and fish when there is no longer enough to go around? Is the most valid use of fish and game for "subsistence?" What is subsistence? Does it include selling animals or parts of animals for the cash you need for other necessities, or is it only subsistence when you eat or wear what you catch? Should Alaskan Natives be granted special rights because of their traditional lifestyle? What about other people who hunt and fish? How long does it take to create a tradition?

## THE ANCSA EFFECT

In 1971 the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) complicated things even more. In section 17 (d)(2), it contained a provision requiring Congress to evaluate millions of acres of Federal land in Alaska for possible inclusion into four Federal systems: National Parks, Forests, Wildlife Refuges, and Wild and Scenic River System. The amount of land involved could be over 100 million acres.

When Congress acts on the d-2 issue, it will also be deciding how the wildlife on all that land will be managed, and by whom. Unless Congressional concerns (primarily related to providing rural people who depend on subsistence hunting and fishing with the assurance that their concerns are being considered) are allayed, the nation's lawmakers may very well decide that fish and game on Alaska's public lands should be managed under a system altogether separate from the system on other Alaskan lands and different from that used on other public lands throughout the nation. That, in the opinion of the State's wildlife experts, could be disastrous.

Many of Alaska's animals and fish are migratory to some degree. When these species cross man-made boundaries, conflicting systems of management could cause real problems. The relationship between wildlife and its environment is a delicate one. While man's influence cannot be eliminated, his management practices can and must be consistent. Clearly, the best answer from the standpoint of the resource would be to have one system for all of Alaska's lands.

## THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Fish and game management in

Alaska is now guided by one of the most democratic systems in the United States. By means of hearings, informational meetings, active solicitation of proposals and other methods, a determined effort is made to consult the State's citizens before decisions are made. Even so, problems sometimes arise.

**M**any people, especially in rural Alaska, feel that their concerns and desires are not really considered in the present regulatory systems. They feel as though they receive only lip service from the State government and the Boards of Fisheries and Game. Not all of this problem can be blamed on Alaska's huge size and poor communications. There may indeed be inequities built into the present system. The State government is worried about this communications problem, and about the subsistence question, too. Right now, it's doing something about it, and trying to do it in time to keep Congress from creating a separate management system. Congress, meanwhile, is keeping a close eye on the State's efforts.

## REORGANIZATION...

As a first step, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is working on a major reorganization which is intended to improve its operating efficiency and to enhance its responsiveness to all Alaskan citizens. One proposed change would be the addition of a new Deputy Commissioner for Program Management, who would then

handle many administrative details now falling on the shoulders of the Commissioner. Another part of the reorganization is a proposal to place all three of the fisheries related divisions—Sport Fish, Commercial Fisheries, and Fisheries Rehabilitation, Enhancement and Development—under the existing Deputy Commissioner, whose position would then be retitled to reflect the change. These changes, if approved, would allow the Commissioner to concentrate his efforts on major policy matters rather than day-to-day details, and would provide closer coordination among different elements of the Department.

## AND MORE REORGANIZATION

Late last summer, the Department of Fish and Game, Governor Jay Hammond and others began dusting off a proposal for regional fish and game councils, an idea which had surfaced years earlier as a bill introduced by then-Senator Hammond in 1971.

The people involved in the initial discussions considered a number of possibilities. Basically, there were two major ones: regional councils could be given full authority to make regulations, replacing the existing State Boards; or they could be made advisory only, with the Boards continuing to make the regulations. Unfortunately, something in-between was needed.

**I**f each regional council were given full authority, the system would be encouraging conflicting sectional attitudes and, quite likely, conflicting regulations which could cause as many problems as having separate State and Federal systems. If this occurred, many of the

regulations passed by the various regional bodies would become the objects of litigation in numerous long court battles. On the other hand, if regional councils were made advisory only, no real improvement would have been made on the present system, which already has 54 local committees advising the two State Boards.

After much work designing and redesigning proposals, a compromise was reached, one which the people involved felt would do the job. The proposal would be for the existing local advisory committees to be retained. Each of these would report to one of five regional councils. Each council would have to consider all of the proposals affecting its region, plus those affecting the State as a whole. After carefully considering all the evidence, the councils would make firm recommendations on each proposal to the State Boards, and the Boards would then either adopt or reject the various proposals. The councils would remain advisory only, but would have one real advantage: The Boards would have to act in accordance with the wishes of the regional councils, unless they could show, in writing, some overriding reason why they should do otherwise.

## THE PEOPLE REACT

Once the preliminary development work had been completed, it was time to present the idea to the public. In meetings in Juneau, Anchorage, Fairbanks and Petersburg, people representing many different points of view came together to discuss the situation. The reaction at these meetings split three ways. Some participants thought the proposal to add regional councils to the present system was a good one, while others felt

that simply making a few changes in the present system would be enough. Still others said it would be necessary to give regional councils the final say, eliminating the State Boards altogether.

## WHAT'S AHEAD

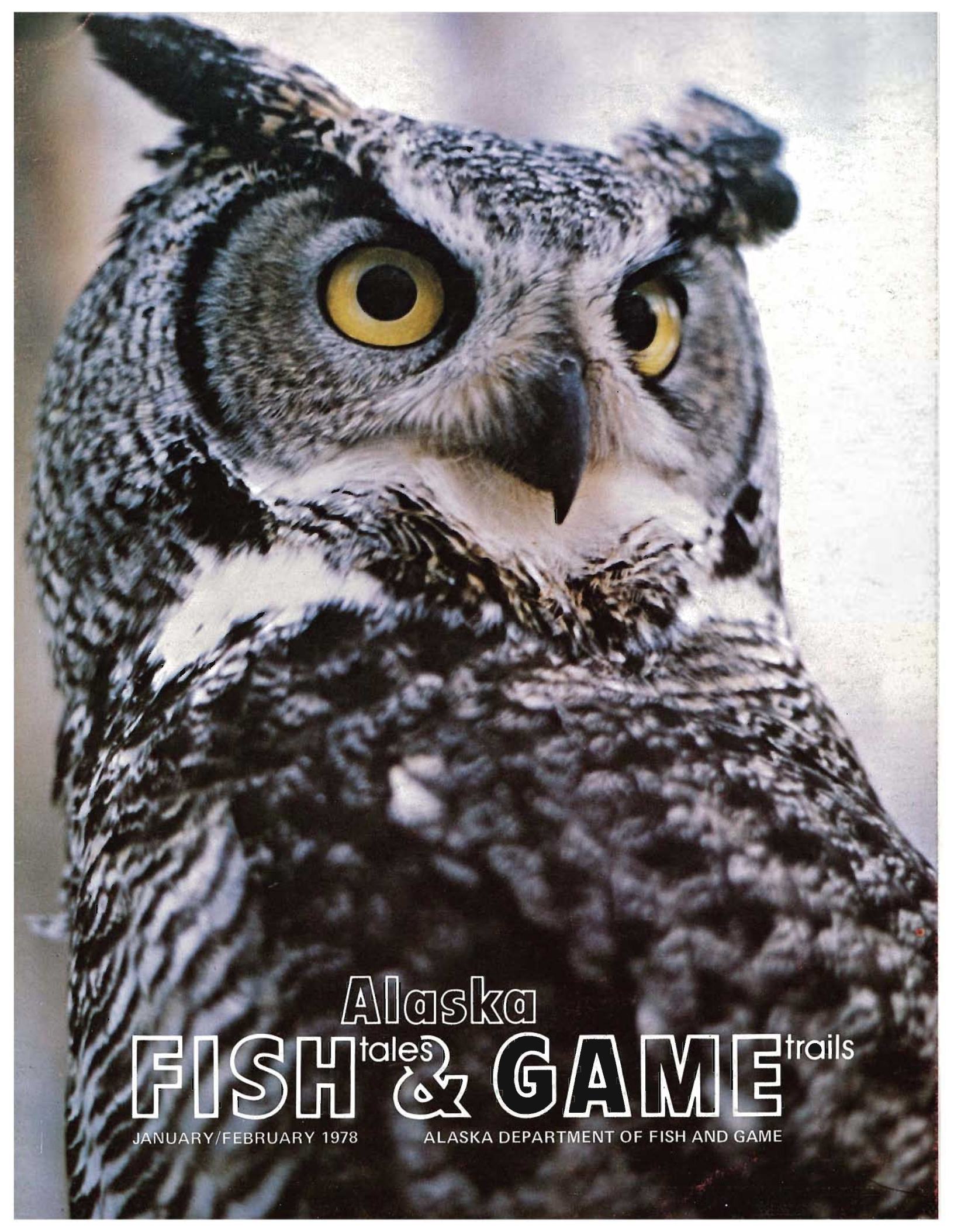
As of this writing, the State had decided to explore all three avenues more thoroughly. More workshops were planned to seek the opinions and suggestions of people throughout the State. The subject is far too important for anything less.

**T**he number of possibilities with regard to fish and game management in Alaska seems almost endless. Although the State is at this time pursuing only the three proposals mentioned here, new ones could be added or old ones deleted at any time. In addition, still other ideas are being considered in the Alaska Legislature, and of course, in Congress. Even more may still surface in the days to come.

Each meeting the State holds increases the body of available knowledge about what people in Alaska really want. Soon, the final decisions will have to be made. Whatever the result, one thing is sure: The new State management system will be the people's choice, not that of a few individuals.

*Bill Woolf has worked for the ADF&G since April 1977, as Southeastern's regional information officer. He has six years of varied journalism and broadcasting experience, and enjoys hunting and fishing in his free time.*





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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1978

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME