

McNeil River —



Where in the world would a photographer take 2200 pictures of one subject in a single 6 hour day? And where would people in their right mind willingly be flown into a wilderness setting to spend several days camping with 100 brown bears roaming within two miles? Only at McNeil River

State Game Sanctuary, Alaska's successful meeting ground of human being and bear.

In the past two years, more than 1800 people have applied for permits, available by lottery through the ADF&G, to visit

the Sanctuary. Once there, the successful ones have experienced a rare encounter with unspoiled wildlife.

Each summer, from July through early August, brown bears congregate at McNeil River falls to feed on migrating salmon. More significant than the sheer number of bears available to photographers, however, is the array of natural bear behavior and interactions that can safely be witnessed at close range. Many experienced naturalists and photographers have ranked the McNeil River experience as one of the best wildlife viewing opportunities available in the world today.

Located approximately 200 air miles southwest of Anchorage

Brown bears enjoy good fishing for chum salmon at the McNeil River falls from early July to mid-August.



- *It's for the Bears* by Richard Sellers

and 100 air miles west of Homer, McNeil River drains into Kamishak Bay in the shadow of an active volcano—Augustine Island. The area is roadless, undisturbed by human development. Access to the Sanctuary is primarily by light aircraft or small commercial fishing boat. The visitor to McNeil River must be entirely self-sufficient. There are no improvements of any kind, including cabins, boats, or stores. Hip boots, for wading the waters between the camp area and the falls, are recommended, as is clothing adequate to protect against cold, wind-driven rainstorms.

Permits to visit McNeil River between July 1 and August 25

are issued through a lottery held by ADF&G on May 15. Applications must be received at ADF&G offices by May 1 accompanied by a nonrefundable \$5.00 fee per name. A maximum of ten nontransferable permits is drawn for each day of the summer season. From August 26 to June 30, the number of permits is unlimited.

Despite the immense interest in viewing bears and the miles of film shot each summer, human use of the Sanctuary is recognized as a secondary management objective. The philosophy that people's interests (except personal safety) hold a lower priority than the needs of the bears is one of the uni-



que aspects of McNeil River. When the Sanctuary was established in 1967 by the State Legislature, the purpose was clearly defined as protecting the concentration of brown bears and their vital habitat. Since the Sanctuary's inception, every management decision needed to solve conflicts between people and bears has favored the bears.

The brown bear concentration at McNeil River was probably first noticed in the 1940s, but little attention was focused on the area until Cecil Rhodes published a photo story for *National Geographic* in 1954. The following year the territorial government closed McNeil River to bear hunting. Ten years later ADF&G biologists began an intensive tagging study to learn more about brown bear life history. During the early 1970s a series of graduate students from Utah State University made valuable observations on bear behavior and social organization.

Public awareness of the Sanctuary increased during the early 1970s. Visitors then were unsupervised, camping wherever they pleased and wandering around the river unrestricted. Conflicts were inevitable. Bears began causing problems around camps, but, more importantly, people began causing problems for bears. As the number of photographers at the falls increased, the number of bears there decreased. Some of the less tolerant bears abandoned the river while others resorted to fishing at night. Eventually two bears, both sows protecting their cubs, were killed by photographers who failed to exercise good judgment.

Given a clear mandate to protect the bears, ADF&G was faced with imposing strict regulations on visitors. In 1973 an innovative management program began, restricting to ten people per day the limit allowed at the falls. An ADF&G representative was stationed at the Sanctuary to administer the permit system and control visitors' activities. Since then, more restrictions have been instituted, such as limiting sport fishing to the intertidal lagoon, allowing fishermen to bring fish into camp only for immediate consumption, and severely limiting areas where visitors can roam when not accompanied by a member of the staff.

Although to some, such rules may seem repressive, they have accomplished much. Each year, about 200 people have safely mingled with the world's largest concentration of brown bears while causing minimal impact on the bears. Such interaction is possible because the bears have come to recognize humans in the Sanctuary as neutral entities. Because bears don't associate people with food, they are not attracted to camp; nor do they otherwise seek out people as a potential source of food. By following Sanctuary rules, visitors conduct their activities in a predictable and unobtrusive manner, allowing bears to act

naturally, without constantly reacting to human onlookers.

The McNeil system has worked for the past 13 years without any serious incidents. The most common comment recorded in the Sanctuary guest book is, "Don't change anything."

Change, however, is inevitable; and our challenge is to direct the change to ensure that the McNeil bears are not adversely affected.

Recently the small June run of sockeye salmon in Mikfik Creek has grown and has attracted more commercial fishermen. A conflict has arisen because bears have been successful in obtaining fish from nets and boats. We do not want bears to establish a connection between people and food, yet neither can we haze bears away from the mouth of Mikfik Creek where salmon and freshly sprouted sedges provide the first readily available nutrients of the season. Consequently, commercial fishing activity will be regulated to prevent confrontation with bears while allowing the harvest of surplus fish to continue.

All too often a rift between nonconsumptive and consumptive wildlife users prevents these groups from agreeing on projects that benefit the resource. A proposed land exchange between federal and state agencies will give both parties a rare chance to cooperate for the good of each other.

After the 1980 expansion of Katmai National Park, bears using Katmai and McNeil were protected over an area exceeding 4 million acres, with the exception of 75,000 acres of undesignated state land in Kamishak Bay. Visitors to McNeil River often ask why bear hunting is permitted in this small isolated tract of land which is completely surrounded by two world famous bear preserves. On the other hand, hunters who were disenfranchised from traditional uses on nearly 25 million acres in Alaska designated as National Park in 1980, ask why additional land should be closed to hunting—especially when it is clear that the bear population in the region is doing fine. The arguments can become emotional, but discord can be avoided with a balanced exchange.

The 75,000 acres of state land in Kamishak Bay would be added to Katmai National Park (providing added protection for both Katmai and McNeil bears); the state would receive federal land of equal value; and approximately 75,000 acres along the western expansion of Katmai would be reopened to hunting (except for bear) and trapping to compensate for the closing of Kamishak lands. Although still in the negotiating stage, this proposal has already received broad public support. If completed, the exchange would benefit hunters, visitors to both Katmai and McNeil, and, of course, the bears.

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All photos by J. Hyde

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