

McNeil River

In Alaska, the best known wildlife viewing site is McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, one of 30 special areas managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). McNeil River has received worldwide recognition for the opportunities it offers to view and photograph Alaska brown bears at close range. It has become a phenomenal success story: a place where 300 people come each summer to an area less than two square miles to safely watch more than a hundred brown bears fishing for salmon.

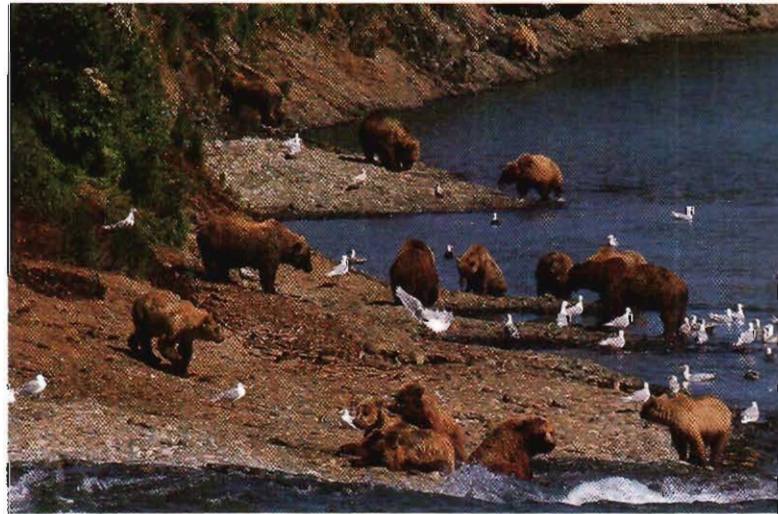
Over the years, management of the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary has evolved from primarily bear management to management of both people and bears to management which incorporates concerns for the entire ecosystem. Our 24 years of experience at McNeil provides valuable insights into managing wildlife viewing programs elsewhere in Alaska and serves as a model for managing sustainable wildlife viewing.

When McNeil River was first established as a state game sanctuary, wildlife managers recognized that the concentration of bears was a unique combination of several environmental factors which occurred nowhere else in the world. Managers also realized that any human use of the area would have some impact on the bears. Accordingly, specific management guidelines were established to achieve the primary goal of the sanctuary—to maintain the unique concentration of brown bears using the area. Some of the guidelines were designed specifically to protect the bears from eager wildlife watchers. All of these guidelines, however, are interrelated in purpose and all were based on our knowledge of bear ecology. At any wildlife viewing site, it is important to understand why animals are using the area and then design a program which ensures that management does not jeopardize the site's suitability for wildlife.

Monitoring trends of both wildlife populations and human use is an important tool for managing wildlife viewing. Trend data provide wildlife managers an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their management programs. If we can identify a particular human use or environmental condition that is causing an undesirable change in behavior or population status, we may be able to correct the problem through habitat alteration or modifying the quantity or pattern of human use.

A fundamental characteristic of all wildlife populations is their requirement for suitable habitat. Thus protection of the viewing site and its surrounding environment from incompatible land uses is paramount. ADF&G has long recognized that the home ranges of McNeil bears encompass areas far beyond the boundaries of the sanctuary. Because uncontrolled human activity in areas adjacent to the sanctuary would be incompati-

ble with the sanctuary goals, ADF&G is sponsoring efforts to develop public support for new legislation that would extend the sanctuary boundaries farther south and establish an adjacent refuge to the north. By developing management guidelines for these adjacent lands which are compatible with sanctuary goals, we will provide greater protection for this unique brown bear viewing site.



After site selection, one of the most important aspects of developing a successful wildlife viewing program is visitor management. Each has different goals and objectives and visitor management should reflect those differences. For example, some sites such as McNeil River and Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary (where, on Round Island, you can observe up to 8,000-12,000 male walrus and thousands of nesting seabirds) have developed a high-quality wilderness experience for relatively few people. At all three state game sanctuaries (McNeil, Walrus Islands, and Stan Price) overcrowding is minimized by allowing visitor access by permit only. Because McNeil River has become so popular, permits are selected by drawing and fewer than 10 percent of those who apply actually receive permits.

Some wildlife viewing sites with different management goals and environmental conditions can sustain much higher visitation. For example, the state's three large urban game refuges, Anchorage Coastal (which includes Potter Marsh), Creamer's Field in Fairbanks, and Mendenhall Wetlands in Juneau, offer unlimited access for wildlife watching throughout most of the year. A new parking lot and boardwalk have greatly increas-

Managing for Wildlife Viewing

by Larry Aumiller and John Schoen

Photos by Larry Aumiller

ed visitor access and use of Potter Marsh. All three sites sustain high levels of visitor use, particularly during waterfowl migrations.

Recreational wildlife viewing encompasses a wide range of public expectations and desires. Wildlife managers are beginning to assess those desires through the use of visitor surveys and interviews. Such surveys were begun at McNeil River last summer and ADF&G intends to conduct additional surveys on public desires for wildlife recreation in the future. Interpretation and education are an important part of a successful wildlife viewing program. Increasing public understanding of wildlife ecology not only enhances enjoyment of recreation but also motivates people to be responsible viewers and comply with conservation regulations and also encourages public support for wildlife conservation.

To ensure long-term sustainability, wildlife viewing programs require a regulatory framework designed to promote human activity which minimizes impacts to wildlife and their habitat. The safety of both the watchers and the watched must be a high priority in any management plan. And, once established, regulations must be fairly and consistently enforced.

Many of the rules established at McNeil River have been formulated specifically to minimize negative interaction between humans and bears. In the 18 years since the management plan was started, there have been no injuries to humans or bears. In addition, success could be measured by increased bear use. In 1990, there were over twice as many bears using the area as there were in 1973, the first year of active management. Bears have adapted and appear to be comfortable with our management of McNeil. This is important since the creation of a low stress environment is critical for ensuring safe co-existence between humans and bears. Human visitation to McNeil has increased three-fold over the same period of time. A better indication of human interest, however, is that the number of applications to visit the sanctuary has more than tripled to over 1,400 in 1990. Typical visitor comments remind us over and over that McNeil River is one of the world's best wildlife viewing sites, comparable to the African Savannah.

The administration of an outstanding wildlife viewing program includes planning, inventory, research, management, enforcement, and education. In addition, a knowledgeable and dedicated professional staff is essential for maintaining a successful program.

Establishing policies and guidelines are an essential first step for initiating a wildlife viewing program. Priority should be given to sustainable viewing programs in contrast to projects



designed for short-term economic gain. A rule of thumb is that the viewing activity should not jeopardize the wildlife resource either directly or through impacts to habitat.

The key to a successful wildlife viewing program is managing for sustainability. This is important both from a wildlife conservation and economic perspective. For example, if tourism is to grow and prosper in Alaska, we must provide a long-term, dependable supply of wildlife. To do that, we need to ensure the availability of suitable habitat and productive wildlife populations. This requires expertise in wildlife management and conservation.

Alaska offers an outstanding opportunity to develop a model conservation program emphasizing a diversified portfolio of wildlife recreation opportunities based on scientific knowledge of wildlife and their habitats. No other place in the world has the same abundance of wildlands, wildlife populations, and public interest in those resources. Interagency cooperation and innovative partnerships with both the public and private sectors will be key elements in making best use of Alaska's potential as a wildlife viewing destination. Expansion and successful management of wildlife viewing opportunities in Alaska will benefit wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation, tourism, and the Alaskan economy.

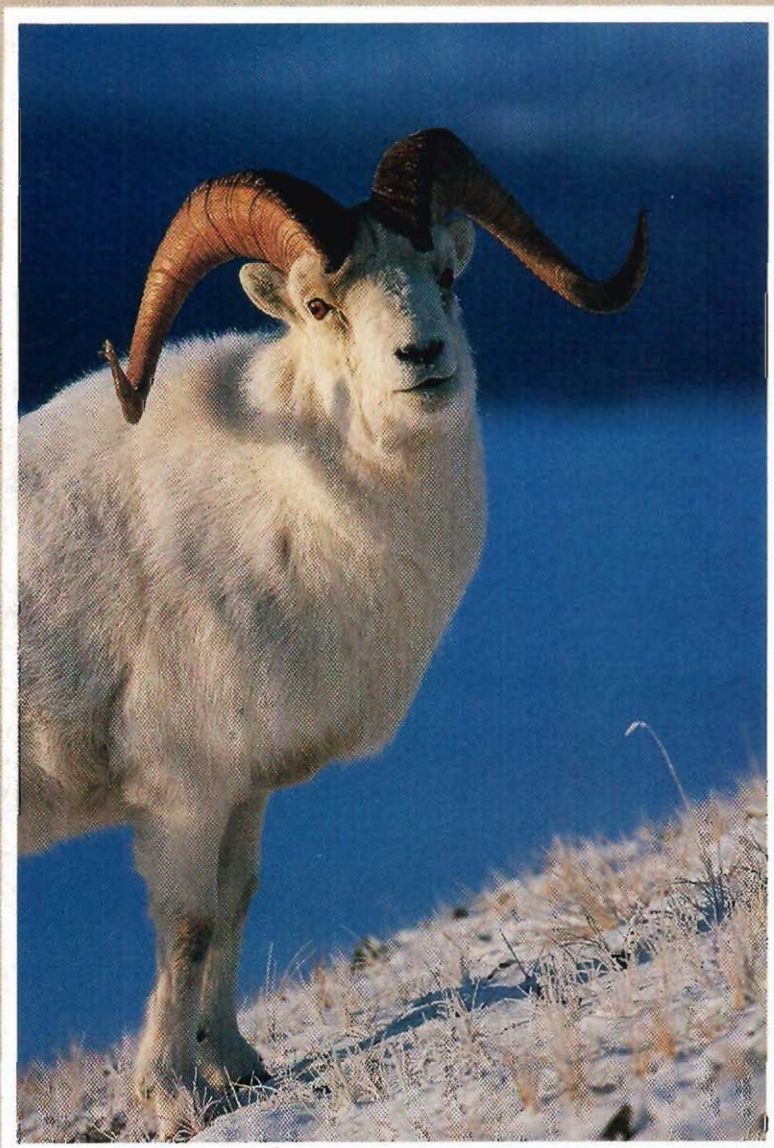
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The Magazine of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game

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