WOLF MANAGEMENT IN ALASKA[1/]

by

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Very briefly, the history of wolf management in Alaska, prior to statehood in 1959, was predator control and the bounty system. In 1915, a bounty of $10 was established on the wolf by legislative action. This was increased to $15 in 1917; to $20 in 1935; to $30 in 1945; and to $50 in 1949, where it now remains. When Alaska became a State in 1959, the bounty system was retained in the State statutes.

Before statehood, there was a fairly active predator control program in Alaska, centering primarily around the Anchorage-Matanuska Valley area, which includes considerable agricultural land. The program was quite effective in localized areas; so much so that biologists estimated the 1953 wolf population in the Nelchina Basin, an area of about 20,000 square miles, as 12 animals. This area was completely closed to wolf hunting between 1957 and 1965. The wolf population gradually increased, and now remains fairly stable at about 400 to 450 animals. A conservative figure for the present statewide population is approximately 5,000 wolves.

In 1963, the Board of Fish and Game, which is the regulatory board, passed a regulation that made the wolf a big game animal in Alaska. Since that time, it has been managed as such on the maximum, sustained-yield principle.

1/ Material provided by Robert A. Rausch, Research Coordinator, Anchorage Area, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

In 1968, the bounty statutes were altered in two ways. First, it became illegal to bounty an animal unless you were a resident of the game management unit in which it was killed. Second, the Board of Fish and Game was allowed to name the game management units in which bounties would be paid. (These statute changes applied to wolverines and coyotes as well as wolves. A check of past bounty records revealed that at one time in Alaska there were bounties on wolves, wolverines, coyotes, bald eagles, hair seals and dolly varden. Bounties have been removed from eagles and dolly varden and are retained on seals in only a portion of the State.)

In reference to bounties, the 1970 legislative year has been interesting. The Senate produced a bill to remove bounties on all animals in Alaska. The House submitted a bill to double the bounties on wolves. So, in every likelihood, the status quo probably will be maintained.

The wolf in Alaska cannot be discussed as one population, nor can Alaska be considered one contiguous State. In area, the State is one-fifth the size of the lower 48. It is about 1,500 miles from one end to the other, and about 1,000 miles wide, excluding the Aleutian Chain.

Looking at Alaska from the wolf population standpoint, there are actually four separate regions. The Southeast, a coniferous timber area, has not changed a great deal in regard to wolf numbers. Its rugged terrain insures the perpetuation of a sizeable wolf population.

In the South-central Region, with the heavily populated Anchorage area plus agricultural land, the wolf population may be down somewhat. In the Interior, that area around Fairbanks and north toward the Brooks Range, some units have normal wolf densities, while populations in a few areas are down.

North of the Brooks Range, in the area of oil activity, we are concerned about the wolf population. Because of the terrain, the wolf is quite vulnerable. With the increased activity, which will continue to increase, it will be necessary to monitor the wolf population carefully, and set future regulations accordingly.

We do use aircraft as a tool to harvest wolves in Alaska, and this practice has brought much criticism to the State. However, only about 40 percent of the total wolf harvest in Alaska is by aerial means. But 75 percent of all aerial kills come out of six game management units.

We have less than 3,000 miles of road in the entire State that are continually maintained. The only access into some of the wolf country is by airplane. There is no other way to harvest the animals, and we would rather have them taken through the use of airplanes than to have the Department forced by public pressure into a control program.

The use of aircraft for hunting wolves is controlled by the Department of Fish and Game by means of permits issued by the Commissioner. With this flexibility, we can control the number of permits issued and also can control the number of wolves allowed on each permit. For instance, on the North Slope, with its high incidence of oil activity, no aerial permits are being issued. In some of the other units we plan to restrict the permits to one or two wolves each.

So that summarizes what is being done in Alaska to manage the wolf. We can manage him because we have the tools available. The Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game has the authority to close any season, during any regulatory year, if an animal population is endangered.

The highest number of wolves bountied in Alaska was 1,700 animals in 1968. Because of changes in the bounty regulations and limitations on aircraft permits in some areas, the number of animals bountied dropped to 1,008 in 1969, and it will undoubtedly drop again this year. The Department feels that by using our management tools wisely, we can control the harvest and manage the wolf as a game animal within Alaska and can assure his continuing existence.

Proceedings

of a

Symposium

on

WOLF MANAGEMENT

IN SELECTED AREAS OF NORTH AMERICA

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Region 3
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife
U. S. Department of the Interior
Twin Cities, Minnesota 55111

Held in conjunction with the

Thirty-fifth North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference

Chicago, Illinois

March 24, 1970