

## DRAFT BOG Findings on wildlife habituation.

Wildlife viewing is a steadily growing segment of wildlife users. Bears at several locations and wolves along the Denali Park road have lost their innate fear of humans, at least when in these certain locations. Habituation is the term used to describe the change in natural response to human encounters caused by repeated "non-consequential" contact. This discussion is only peripherally concerned with food conditioning of wildlife, which is forbidden entirely in Alaska.

Closing specific areas to hunting to protect individual animals has proven problematic and controversial. The BOG has passed a resolution stating the goal of "no net Loss" of hunting or trapping opportunity.

The Unit 4 Brown Bear Committee discussed at length possible options to allow hunting to continue in areas where intensive bear viewing occurs. John Neary of the US Forest Service, presented some of his ideas which acknowledged that habituation of bears will occur, but can be minimized through facilities, staffing, and regulations. Geography and natural features of the area is also fundamental to the concept.

The importance of individuals to a successful bear viewing program has been repeated many time in testimony. The BOG and department of Fish and Game as well as federal land managers including the National Park Service share the policy of managing for the health of wildlife populations. In general, individual animals are not the focus of regulations and wildlife policy.

Wildlife Watching guidelines have been adopted by state and federal agencies as well as organizations such as the Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association. An overarching goal of these guidelines is that of avoiding disturbance of the animals, being viewed as well as inadvertent disturbance of others in the area. There are several suggestions for avoiding disturbance. Respect for the experience of other viewers is also important. Agencies and wildlife organizations distribute these materials to the public and tour operators to bring an awareness of the importance of following these guidelines. Denali National Park has issued stringent guidelines for wildlife photographers. These guidelines state that habituation of wolves might lead to dangerous situations for both humans and wolves. The bold quote is "Remember that achieving the perfect shot is not justified if it changes the animal's behavior or alters its natural mechanisms for survival by encroaching upon its space." It forbids approach of any animal feeding on a carcass closer than ½ mile, any animal den within 1 mile, and within 75 feet of a wolf. Marine mammals are also protected from close approach by stringent guidelines to avoid stress. In Alaska Fish and Game code, the definition of "take" includes pursuing and disturbing game animals.

The BOG recognizes that the close range viewing allowed by habituated animals is vital for satisfaction of viewers and hence the success of agency programs and wildlife tour operators. There is strong evidence that local closures of areas where habituated animals are concentrated maintain their habituation, which is desirable to viewers. Proponents of closures assert that hunting habituated animals is not "fair chase." In turn, allowing hunting to continue in the area provides more tarnish for the already distasteful image many nonhunters have of hunters in general.

ADFG Biologist Mark McNae stated during his presentation that habituation of bears reduces the likelihood of an attack on humans, but evidence suggests that habituation of wolves has the opposite effect and might be more likely to result in an attack. It is almost certain that any wolf bite, which draws blood, will result in the death of the wolf, for necropsy to check for rabies.

Allowing wildlife habituation to occur without attempting to at least monitor the progression might be considered to be irresponsible of land and wildlife management agencies.

The BOG supports promotion and enforcement of guidelines and regulations pertinent to wildlife watching to reduce disturbance.

Habituation has proven problematic to several aspects of agency management. The BOG encourages agency personnel to monitor undesignated bear viewing areas in particular, and guide the direction that viewing practices take to maintain the quality of viewing experience, minimize disturbance and perhaps prevent the habituation of these animals to the point of becoming another point of contention between consumptive and nonconsumptive users.