

"POLITICS OF MANAGING LARGE PREDATORS-AN ALASKAN PERSPECTIVE"

by

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Alaskans place great and diverse values on large predators. Alaskans support conservation of bear and wolf populations, but also demand that they be managed to reduce threats to humans and their property and to maintain high values of important prey species such as moose, caribou and deer. The management of large predators to achieve the latter goals has caused the greatest controversy over the past three decades.

Prior to statehood in 1959, the federal government carried out large scale wolf poisoning campaigns which greatly reduced numbers of not only wolves, but also bears and smaller carnivores in many areas of Alaska. The newly formed Alaska Department of Fish and Game immediately halted these federal programs based upon the prevalent belief of that time that large predators did not have the capability to limit ungulate prey populations under normal circumstances. Of course in 1959, populations of moose and caribou had reached high levels.

For several years following statehood the general public was taught that large predators posed no major problems for big game prey populations.

Unfortunately, only a few years later in 1965, many of our most important big game populations began to crash following two severe winters. Our laissez-faire management of large predators was openly challenged by experienced Alaskan hunters and guides. The department's credibility suffered and political pressure began to build for the state to take action.

However, the general public was still being indoctrinated according to the original, flawed predator-prey model. This, in turn, resulted in the formation of strong public opinion favoring protection of large predators. The State of Alaska was caught in a political dilemma of its own making.

In 1975, after a decade of nearly continuous game population declines, the decision was made to initiate some limited wolf control programs in important hunting areas. The department conducted wolf control in discrete areas of the state from 1975 until 1986. The programs successfully reversed declines in many of Alaska's most important moose

and caribou populations, restored harvest opportunities and improved our basic understanding of predator-prey systems in Alaska. Fortunately, good weather conditions allowed moose and caribou populations to continue to grow during the 1980s after the predation reduction programs were stopped and the politics of managing large predators abated.

Weather patterns worsened in the 1990s and, once again, moose and caribou populations declined. Predation by wolves and bears was determined to be a growing problem on declining prey populations of caribou and moose. The politics of managing large predators heated up again, fueled by the need to reduce hunting on declining game populations.

The maintenance of big game abundance and productivity is of no little consequence to Alaskans. Over half of all Alaskans over the age of 16 have purchased a hunting license within the past five years. Alaskans obtain over ten times more meat from hunting big game than from in-state livestock production and in a more environmentally sound manner.

In fact, the harvesting of fish and game is so important in Alaska that both state and federal laws give harvesting preference to those Alaskans needing game the most for subsistence uses. Subsistence hunting preferences are to be invoked when game resources cannot support other harvests in addition to subsistence harvests. This amplifies the importance being able to manage large predators in some circumstances to avoid unnecessary extended game shortages. In Alaska, the politics of managing large predators is overshadowed only by the politics of subsistence.

The emergence of new animal protection groups in Alaska and the growing power of large national groups added a new political twist. The department was obligated to consider these new views as well as those of hunters.

In 1990 the Alaska Department of Fish and Game initiated a public planning and consensus building process for the future management of wolves. A planning team was formed representing a wide spectrum of interests including subsistence and other hunters, environmentalists and animal protectionists. The planning team produced a final consensus report in June 1991 which recognized the need to actively manage wolves under certain circumstances. However, when the strategic planning process led to the approval of actual wolf control programs in November 1992, animal rights groups cried foul. Powerful national groups launched a national media campaign and called for a tourism boycott.

The false and inflammatory media campaign incited thousands of uninformed Americans to write or call Governor Hickel demanding that, in their words, "endangered" Alaskan wolves be protected. Quite frankly, we were unprepared for such a national emotional

outpouring and the wolf management plans were quickly put on hold for the remainder of winter 1992-93.

That decision, in turn, prompted an intense political backlash from Alaskan hunter and state's rights groups to allow the program to begin. Nearly two thousand hunters and trappers demonstrated in Fairbanks in January 1993 and Alaska trappers joined a recall campaign aimed squarely at Governor Hickel. Alaska's leadership was caught in a quandary.

In spite of the on again, off again tourism boycott, the number of visitors to Alaska in summer 1993 actually showed an increase. Some have even credited increased national exposure of Alaska as a possible factor for the increase such as occurred following the Exxon Valdez oil spill. This indicates that such boycotts may not be an effective political tool for extreme animal rights groups in the future.

A much reduced wolf control program was finally implemented this past winter to halt the decline of one important caribou herd. I will dedicate the rest of my time to sharing some of the lessons we learned from this experience with you.

First of all, never underestimate the power and skill of organized animal rights extremists. Such groups are masters at imposing their political will on wildlife agencies. Even though the percentage of the public which can be motivated to oppose any given program is minute nationwide, the sheer volume of public pressure which can be brought to bear on a single state can be staggering. It can shake political resolve and demoralize agency personnel. We received over 100,000 letters and innumerable phone calls on the wolf issue.

Agencies must be prepared to face such an attack proactively. Preparation for a political attack begins with keeping the state director, the governor and the state's congressional delegation fully apprised of the pros and cons of a program, potentially affected constituencies and the risk of controversy. Informed decisions must be made right up front.

After top level decisions are made and commitments obtained, agencies must then begin laying the informational groundwork with the public. Get out front with sound, factual information in the media and by working with mainstream conservation and environmental organizations. Even though state management of large predators is invariably environmentally sound, mainstream environmental groups may be tempted to enter a fray if for no other reason than fund raising. In public statements make a clear distinction between environmentalists and extreme animal rights extremists. Few mainstream environmental organizations can afford to be associated with extremists knowing that the extreme animal rights faction has lost a great deal of credibility with the general public.

You must boil complex technical reports down to the fewest, most powerful and persuasive talking points if you are to make it easy for the media to use your material and thereby build public support for your program. Prepare concise handouts with your informational "bullets" to expedite filling public requests for information.

Make sure that your agency issues the first carefully crafted news release which states the points you want to make, the way you want to make them. Don't get caught behind the power curve by allowing program opponents to define the issues for you.

Remain open and forthright with the media as the controversy unfolds. Designate a skilled spokesperson for the agency who is well informed and stays in close contact with agency decision-makers. Stick to your concise script of informational "bullets." This will continually reinforce your agency's message to the public.

Be aware that official agency news releases and quotes from headquarters will be scrutinized by your own staff as well as by the general public. Make sure all public statements are factually correct. Maintaining credibility internally as well as externally is of critical importance.

Do not fail to challenge factual misrepresentations by the opponents. Failure to do so may be misinterpreted to mean that the opposition's false claims may be true.

Do not tolerate illegal attacks against your agency or your state. If organized opponents knowingly use false information outside their membership to fuel boycotts or other injurious actions, consider filing suit for damages. If more states litigated, those organizations using false information would be robbed of their credibility, their fund raising and their offensive capabilities.

Be prepared for litigation against you. Work closely with your Attorney General and avail yourselves of legal guidance in the promulgation of regulations and policies. Establish sound records-of-decisions including clear and concise written findings. Adhere meticulously to all state and federal laws, particularly those governing public process. If you are targeted by litigation, work closely with state attorneys in preparing and conducting the defense.

Finally, be prepared for personally scathing attacks against individual decision makers, governors, directors and commission members. This is a favored tactic of the most extreme groups. Stay true to your principles and belief of self-worth. Do not allow anger or fear to cloud your judgement when publicly responding to personal attacks.

In summary, I do not subscribe to the theory that high profile species such as wolves, grizzly bears, black bears and cougars can no longer be professionally managed due to the potential for political controversy.

The very existence of large predators in the future depends upon the ability of state and provincial wildlife agencies to manage them in concert with other species. It is the only way local people and local governments will find it in their best interests to maintain productive habitats and abundant prey populations upon which large predators depend for their long-term survival.

The attitudes of local people toward large predators cannot be ignored if large predators are to exist in the future. Unless people who live closest to large predators view them as beneficial or, at the very least, neutral to their interests, all of the laws in the world cannot protect them. Local people must be assured that wildlife agencies can and will manage large predators in their best interests, or they will take matters into their own hands. The "shoot, shovel and shut-up" ethic can jeopardize the most sound of paper plans for the conservation of North America's wolf, bear and lion populations.

Alaska is fortunate to still have over 7,000 wolves, 150,000 black bears and 30-40,000 brown/grizzly bears inhabiting nearly all of their historic ranges in the state. Only two percent of Alaska has been developed. The lessons learned from extirpation of large predators from much of their former ranges in other states and provinces have not been lost on us. Through sound public education and management programs, the State of Alaska is committed to ensuring the conservation of wolf, grizzly and black bears far into the future. The politics of management are rough, but the conservation results are worth the effort.

Thank you very much for your attention. I would be happy to entertain any comments or questions you may have about Alaska's successful wolf and bear management programs.

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