

Alaska Wages War on Wolves

Alaska has decided that money from out-of-state moose hunters is more important than preserving America's wolves and has undertaken a massive and cruel campaign of killing wolves from helicopters.

The Alaska Fish and Game Dept. has undertaken the slaughter in spite of protests and legal action from a long list of organizations, including HSUS. The Fish and Game Department's sole objective seems to be to permit a major increase in the moose population, on which wolves prey, in order to offer trophies for the hunters who flock to the state annually.

Many of the wolves being killed are wearing radio transmitter collars that were placed on the animals by wildlife biologists seeking information that would enable them to help preserve America's declining wolf population.

The state began the wolf shooting program on Jan. 28 in several game management areas covering some 10,000 square miles of the state near Fairbanks and Anchorage. The objective is to completely exterminate wolves in one area and kill up to 80% of the wolf population in others. Game officials said they would continue shotgunning wolves, weather permitting, until their quotas had been met.

Ironically, the state's wolf control program—at least that part of it calling for the complete elimination of the wolf in one area—was called a "research effort" to find out how the moose would do without any wolf predation at all. HSUS wildlife expert Sue Pressman called the eradication or drastic reduction of wolf populations poor wildlife management policy. "This approach totally ignores what man has already learned through past observational studies of moose herd populations not affected by predators," she said. "This

experience shows that without any natural, non-human predator, the moose will increase so fast that it will doom itself to starvation through overbrowsing of food resources."

In addition to stabilizing the population of herbivores, wolves are very important in maintaining the health and vigor of their prey species since they kill only the weak, sick, or injured members of the herd. If wolves are artificially eliminated, the weaker moose will survive in greater numbers, thus lowering the general health and vitality of the herd.

The killing of winter-weakened Alaskan moose by hunters using 40 mph snowmobiles has been dramatically increased in recent years. In fact, the numbers of moose taken by hunters has been reportedly heavy enough to account all by itself for the decline in the animal's numbers. In 1973 (the last date for which figures are available), 1,500 hunters took 710 moose out of a population of 3,000 to 4,000 animals in the Tanana Flats area near Fairbanks. Trapper Jim Smith, who lives in the area, described hunters' excessive slaughter of moose as unbelievable. "One would have to be out here to observe the number of carcasses. I have observed hunters traveling into this area in hordes, literally running down moose with machines, like cowboys. Cows, calves, and bulls alike. Any idiot could guess as to the prospects of a future moose population under these unsportsmanlike and wasteful hunting procedures."

Belatedly recognizing the overhunting on the Tanana Flats, Robert Hinman, game supervisor for the area, said, "Our boo-boo was in not anticipating the effects of increased hunting and harsh winters." Another game department biologist said, "... in a sense you could say that the wolves are taking the

'chops' for bad winters (and) bad judgment."

Rather than closing hunting seasons on the moose to allow its numbers to increase, the state has instead given the hunters an opportunity to eliminate their competitor. Political pressures exerted by hunters on the state toward this end were publicly confirmed by Fish and Game Commissioner James Brooks in a recent hearing before the Alaska Senate Resources Committee. Brooks told the committee that his department is primarily devoted to the hunter. Brooks had earlier refused to allow a closed season on moose on the Tanana Flats, even though such action was recommended by his own staff.

In a letter to Alaska Governor Jay Hammond, HSUS President John A. Hoyt wrote, "The fact that Alaska's predator control is in the hands of the Board of Game, a group composed of political appointees, seems incompatible at best, and contradictory at worst, with your stated stand that wildlife programs should be free of partisan politics. We strongly feel that you should be more accessible to the opinions of biologists free from political constraints."

Wolf management programs in the lower 48 states, spurred by hunters who feel that the animal competes with them for game animals, have been largely successful in exterminating the wolf from 99% of its original range in the U.S. Present population figures show approximately 500 eastern timber wolves in Minnesota and Michigan and a few (if any) red wolves in Texas. Alaska remains the last state in the union where the wolf exists in any significant numbers—an estimated 4,000 to 10,000. HSUS believes that if the state-sanctioned wolf management program in Alaska is allowed to continue it will spell the eventual eradication of the animal

in the U. S. Further, HSUS believes that the program is reckless, and repugnant to sound predator control methodology.

HSUS joined several wildlife and humane groups in a lawsuit filed by the Natural Resources Defense Council in U. S. District Court in Washington, D. C., against the U. S. Dept. of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The suit asks that the killings be stopped from taking place on federal lands, where most of the hunt is taking place. It charges that BLM failed to comply with requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act that require an environmental impact statement be prepared before the wolf hunt could be initiated. Further, it requests that appropriate alternatives to the wolf eradication program be developed.

The court issued a temporary restraining order prohibiting further wolf killings on the Tanana Flats. However, U. S.

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District Court Judge George Hart later denied a temporary injunction against further hunting in the same area stating that "the killing of wolves does not rise to the dignity of a major federal action".

Soon after the court's decision the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service withheld federal wolf control funds from the state pending preparation of an environmental impact statement. The Defense Dept. followed by prohibiting wolf hunting on a military reservation near Fairbanks. But this did not stop the state.

HSUS urges members and friends to write President Ford demanding that he stop the mismanagement and abuse of the Alaska timber wolf and moose by a hunting minority, as well as institute an ecologically sound management policy to ensure the survival of the species. Write: The Honorable Gerald R. Ford, President of the United States, The White House, Washington, D. C. 20500.



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Balance of Nature Threatened