

A PRECIPITOUS DECLINE IN PARK WOLVES AND A NOVEL RESPONSE

by Barbara Brease

The National Park Service recently released new figures showing a sharp decline in wolf sightings by visitors in Denali National Park. In 2013, only 4% of park visitors saw wolves. By contrast 44% saw wolves in 2010. NPS also reported a spring count of 55 wolves in the park, which is the lowest number documented since counts began in 1986.

The steep decline in wolf numbers and viewability followed the removal of the Stampede Closed Area in the Wolf Townships in 2010. This “wolf buffer” established by Alaska Board of Game regulation in 2002 prohibited the killing of wolves on state lands west of the Savage River. Scientists know that wolves that spend a majority of their time in the park frequently cross the east and northeast park boundaries on forays into traditional caribou wintering grounds. Particularly vulnerable are the groups that are most commonly seen by park visitors along the road corridor. Last spring the most-viewed pack (Grant Creek) disintegrated following the trapping death of the pregnant alpha female next to the boundary.

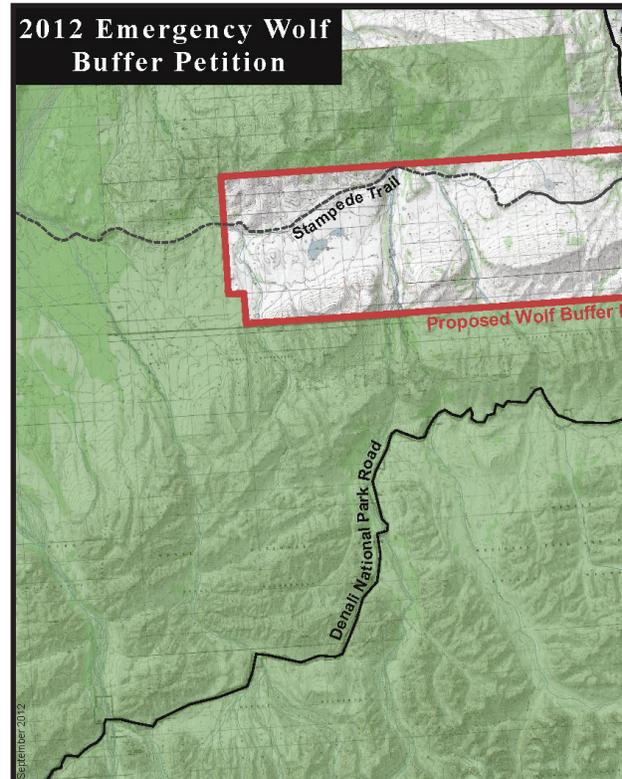
Alaska writer Marybeth Holleman, co-author with the late Gordon Haber of *Among Wolves: Gordon Haber's insights into Alaska's most misunderstood animal*, points out in a December 2nd *Anchorage Daily News* editorial that Haber predicted this possible outcome from hunting and trapping on the park boundary. As she described Haber's conclusion, “hunting and trapping of park wolves on these state lands often kills the alphas of the family group, thus causing the entire group to fragment and disintegrate – resulting in fewer park wolves, and fewer park visitors seeing wolves.”

Responding to the wolf numbers, Ted Spraker, chair of the Alaska Board of Game, asserted that a reduction in prey is behind the decline of wolves in the area. However, NPS officials disagree. An article in the *Alaska Dispatch* cites Dr. Philip Hooe, Assistant Superintendent for Resources, Science and Learning at Denali, in reporting that “numbers of both moose and caribou have slowly but steadily risen in the park,” with the caribou herd recently measured at its highest population in two decades. Hooe also notes that the relationship between wolf viewability and wolf population depends on the particular animals. “If you take out a breeding pair close to the road, you're going to have dramatically larger impacts than if you take out dispersing individuals (that roam all over the park).” Hooe makes the same point in broader terms in a November 27 NPS press release, stating, “We are just beginning to learn about the factors, such as pack disruption, that play a role in magnifying the impacts of individual wolf losses on viewability.” The same press release also points out that:

- research data shows the decline of wolf numbers has not translated to larger numbers of viewed prey species;
- the proportion of bus trips where bears, moose, caribou and sheep were seen varies by year, but none shows the steady decline found with wolves.

Restore the “Wolf Buffers”?

The Board of Game established the Stampede Closed Area and another closure along the Nenana River in 2002 to protect wolf-viewing opportunities in the national park. While helpful, some biologists and wolf advocates like Haber argued that they were not large enough to protect Denali's wolves. The buffers sunset in 2010, at which time the National Park Service, DCC and others proposed expanding them. Instead, the Alaska Board of Game voted against all the buffer proposals, let the existing buffers expire, and placed a six-year moratorium on discussing new buffer proposals except in the event of an emergency.



Potential boundaries of the easement proposal are the Stampede Trail and the Denali National Park Road. The Board of Game in 2012, as shown above.

The primary functional units of wolf biology are far more sophisticated forms of cooperation known to vertebrates, especially the primary alpha breeding pair, typically as a family unit. They commonly stand out near the forefront as leaders or with other pack members, and are vulnerable to ground and aerial shooting. Although wolf trapping losses, the behavior of the core adults leaves the pack vulnerable. High-ranking adults commonly try to help other family members avoid being caught in nearby traps and snares themselves. Also, in a park situation, a higher proportion of older, experienced wolves are more likely to be trapped. Their frequent exposure to humans along the road corridor, human activity or scent, and thus less likely to avoid traps.

DECLINE IN PARK WOLVES - A NOVEL SOLUTION

continued from previous page

Environmental advocates unsuccessfully petitioned the State last year for protection of the wolves arguing that increased trapping after the loss of the buffer had in fact created an emergency decline in the wolf population. The Board of Game refused to take action.

Economic Value of Wolves

The decline of Denali's wolves should not only concern conservationists, but also the Alaska visitor industry, which is a significant contributor to the state's economy. According to a letter from the National Parks Conservation Association to Governor Sean Parnell, "conservative estimates put the impact of Alaska's National Parks at \$208 million in direct visitor spending with Denali providing almost 75% of that amount (\$141 million). Alaska has what the Lower 48 does not – intact functioning ecosystems. And intact ecosystems are what visitors come to see."

"At stake," the letter says, "are millions of dollars in tourism revenue the state could lose if visitors decide against a trip to Denali -- one of Alaska's most popular destinations for tourists -- because they are unlikely to see wolves."

Marybeth Holleman noted in the *Anchorage Daily News* editorial, "Along with Yellowstone National Park, Denali had been known as one of the best places in the world to view wild wolves, but no longer. Over 400,000 visitors come to Denali each summer--many of them Alaskans--contributing over \$140 million to our state's economy. Many cite their desire to see wolves as a primary reason for visiting the park. As Denali superintendent Don Striker says, seeing wolves in the wild is an 'amazing, oftentimes transformative experience' for park visitors."

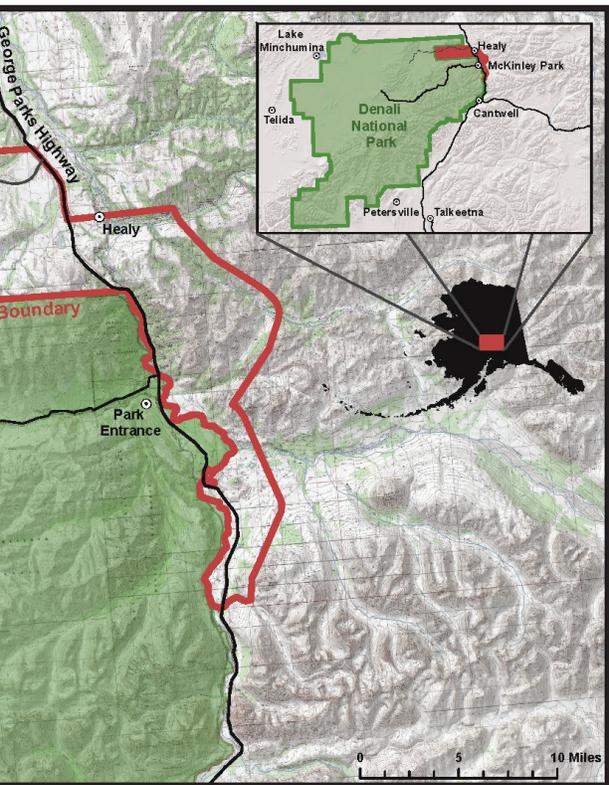
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) board member Rick Steiner stated, "The game board's 2010 decision hurts tourism. The State of Alaska should understand the simple economics of this," he said. "In places like Denali, wolves are worth far more alive than dead. Removing the buffer benefits two or three trappers, but costs thousands of park visitors the opportunity to watch wolves in the wild, and thus costs the Alaskan economy."

A Novel Solution

Following the release of the dismal wolf viewing numbers in late November, approximately a dozen public interest groups and individuals including PEER sent a letter to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Alaska Governor Sean Parnell requesting that they "negotiate an easement exchange or purchase to secure a permanent wildlife conservation buffer east of Alaska's Denali National Park." Additionally, the letter requested a temporary emergency closure to wolf hunting in the area.

With this exchange the State of Alaska would transfer a wildlife conservation easement east of the park (see map) to the federal government within which no take of wolves would be allowed. In return, the federal government would transfer an equal-valued federal property easement to the State, or else purchase the easement outright. The letter touts the proposal as a "win-win" for the federal and state governments and argues that there are many possible exchanges that could have mutual benefit.

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same as those advocated in an emergency petition to
Map by NPCA

families and extended families, featuring among the most experienced. A relatively few of the oldest, experienced wolves, assume the key roles. Because these core adults contribute most of the assertive behavior, they are disproportionately being killed, inexperienced wolves generally sustain most of the hunting pressure, and they are vulnerable to this killing method as well. In fact, the inexperienced members who are caught and in the process risk getting caught, where wolves are more accustomed to people, as the park road makes them relatively unconcerned with traps and snare sets."

Dr. Gordon Haber, excerpt from *Among Wolves*

DECLINE IN PARK WOLVES - A NOVEL SOLUTION

continued from previous page

The proposal attracted considerable media attention upon its release, and some positive reaction even from those unsympathetic to wolf conservation such as Board of Game chairman Ted Spraker. There has been some blurring of the lines in the media between a land exchange –proposed for the Wolf Townships since ANILCA but not actively pursued by anyone since the late 1990s - and this new idea, which would involve a conservation easement only.

Advocates for Denali's wolves are now looking to Interior Secretary Jewell and Governor Parnell for a response. The proposal has a long way to travel to become reality, including commitment to serious negotiations by the state and federal governments, identification of a specific exchange, gaining public support for the exchange, and possibly approval by Congress and the state legislature. At the very least, however, discussion of the proposal has the potential to change the dynamics of the debate about Denali wolves and perhaps lead the State of Alaska to acknowledge that the state has a stake in healthy wildlife viewing opportunities, an acknowledgement the Alaska Board of Game by itself has been unwilling to make. 

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By Alex DeMarban

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By Marybeth Holleman

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By Alex DeMarban

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Among Wolves: Gordon Haber's Insights into Alaska's Most Misunderstood Animal

By Gordon Haber and Marybeth Holleman

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Editor's note: DCC will publish a complete analysis of the proposal and our own take on it in the January/February DCC News. We welcome initiatives like this that could begin a broad conversation about the value of Denali's wolves and the best way to protect them.