

More Wolf Wars

by
Les Palmer

While afield on the Internet recently, I found something that relates to Alaska's endless conflict over wolf-control. In Time magazine (July 26, 1968), reporter Louis Kraar wrote about the U.S. Air Force 606th Air Commando Squadron, based in northeast Thailand. The 66 Commandos were doing noncombatant work — providing medical aid and showing villagers how to build bridges, dig wells, and the like. Local traditions sometimes required them to be creative.

Wrote Kraar: "When the Buddhist Thais objected to a Commando plan to kill 3,000 stray dogs as part of a rabies-control program, the Commandos solved the problem Thai-style. The dogs tagged for elimination were presented with two pieces of meat, one poisoned, one unpoisoned; the animals thus could more or less determine their own fate."

No, I'm not proposing that we offer wolves two pieces of meat. I'm suggesting that Alaskans are getting two kinds of "meat" in the form of information. The "facts" coming from organizations opposed to predator control have been poisoned with exaggeration and lies.

Many people haven't thought about predator control with an open mind, but have let emotion decide. Most Alaskans don't have a clear understanding of this complex, important issue.

Here's some of what I think I know:

- A great many Alaskans support the idea that moose and caribou should be managed for "maximum sustained yield." Some feel so strongly about this that they convinced the Legislature to imbed "intensive management" in state law.
- The three main factors that limit moose and caribou numbers are predators, hunting and severe winters. Sometimes, wolves are responsible for most of the predation; other times, bears. Predators always kill more ungulates than hunting, which averages about 10 percent. Nothing can be done about winters.
- Severe winters and predators can depress game populations and hold them down. Reducing predator numbers can allow prey animals to rise above this "predator pit." From past studies, state biologists know that some areas would support many more ungulates if there were fewer predators.
- Shooting wolves from the air has been found to be the only effective way to reduce wolf numbers enough to boost moose and caribou populations.
- Ideally, the state would use state employees and helicopters in its wolf-control program, but the cost would be prohibitive. The cost of issuing permits so private citizens can do this work is very low. The state's wolf-control program is now being conducted in five areas by permittees using private, fixed-wing aircraft.
- No one is proposing killing all the wolves in Alaska or all the wolves in any Game Management Area. Biologists agree that the state's wolf population is healthy.

The main controversy among Alaskans seems to be on the question of whether it's OK to reduce the number of wolves for the purpose of increasing the moose and caribou harvest. Beyond that, who does the reducing? How do they go about doing it? Under what conditions are they allowed to begin? Should predators be controlled in areas where non-resident hunters are responsible for much of the harvest?

In 1996, and again in 2000, Alaskans voted in favor of ballot initiatives that banned "same-day-airborne" shooting of wolves and shooting wolves from airplanes. In both cases, the Legislature changed the law, to allow the state to carry out a feasible predator-control program. Opponents of predator control now wail, "Why do legislators continually defy the will of the people?" In August of 2008, we'll be voting on another initiative, similar to those of 1996 and 2000. Like them, it's designed stop any semblance of an effective predator-control program. And as before, legislators probably will "defy the will of the people."

Why?

Mainly, I think, it's because most legislators aren't emotional about predator control. Also, they've been Alaskans longer than most voters, and they know a few things most voters don't know. To most of them — as

proven by their votes and public comments — providing moose and caribou for food for Alaskans is more important than feeding wolves. For this, we should applaud our legislators, not deride them.

You may have heard, the Legislature has appropriated \$400,000 to the Department of Fish and Game to help the public better understand the the state's predator-control program. While this might seem like a lot of money, it's nothing compared to what the Alaska Wildlife Alliance and the Washington, D.C.-based Defenders of Wildlife will spend on propaganda between now and next August, when they again force us to defend predator control at the ballot box.

Between now and next August, I'm hoping the state does a good job of educating the public. Armed with neutral, up-to-date, science-based, unpoisoned information, we can then go to the polls and better determine our own fate.

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