

# **LEGISLATING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT IN ALASKA**

Adopted for the 1996 Legislative Session

## **THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY RESOLUTION ON LEGISLATING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT IN ALASKA**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Wildlife Society is an international organization of professional wildlife researchers, educators, managers, and enforcement personnel dedicated to the sound stewardship of wildlife resources and the environment upon which wildlife and humans depend. We have over 8,000 members nationwide and approximately 300 in Alaska. Most Chapter members are wildlife professionals for State, Federal, private, or academic institutions.

The Alaska Chapter adopts resolutions on important wildlife management issues in the State. Our purpose for this resolution is two-fold: to express our concern over 1) the increasing frequency of legislative and ballot initiatives relative to wildlife management in the State that bypass the established processes of the Board of Game and advisory committees; and 2) the consequences of several recently introduced bills that would change the established process by which management decisions are made. Although legislation and ballot initiatives are valid means to direct and implement public policy, the existing appointed Board of Game and locally elected advisory committees have provided direction for wildlife management with good success. This system utilizes the best mix of professional biological advice and public input for wildlife management to adapt management strategies to changing conditions.

### **BACKGROUND**

During the 1996 session, the Legislature introduced several bills that would limit the ability of the Board of Game to manage on a sound biological basis and to respond to changing environmental and social conditions and would subjugate the public process vested in the Board of Game and local advisory committees. These bills include:

SB 81 – which changes the status of the wolf from "big game" to "unclassified game," implements a bounty system on wolves, and eliminates resident tag fees.

SB 247 – which requires that both Federal Aid and State Fish and Game Fund (the fund from sale of hunting and fishing licenses) could only be used on projects directed toward intensive management as defined in SB 77. Funds could only be spent on projects where consumptive use is allowed, and could not be used in areas subject to federal subsistence regulations. Research on species that migrate across jurisdictional boundaries would be severely compromised, and the effects of intensive management as defined in SB 77 could not be adequately evaluated.

SB 262 – which mandates that game populations be managed solely for maximum sustained yield by human harvest, and prohibits expenditure of Fish and Game Fund for nongame species

or events. Restricts the authority of the Board of Game to limit methods and means for hunting. Mandates that before any areas can have hunting access restricted, the Board must identify and open to hunting an existing closed area three times as large.

## FINDINGS

1. Alaska has a diversity of wildlife species, populations, and habitats with sufficient undeveloped land to provide a mix of human uses. Wildlife management options -- ranging from intensive management of populations and habitats for high levels of human harvest, to little or no manipulation -- should remain flexible and open to the checks and balances of the public process. Public support for wildlife and wildlife management in general depends on the public's ability to participate in management decisions and to maintain the diversity of human uses of wildlife resources.
2. Establishing objectives and methods for wildlife management by legislation or ballot initiative often oversimplifies complex issues that are routinely considered in the current Board of Game and advisory committee system. Furthermore, the flexibility to respond to changing wildlife populations and ecosystem conditions is eliminated, increasing the likelihood of mismanagement. The likely result will be poor public policy that does not meet the long-term goal of providing for all users of wildlife in Alaska.
3. The Alaska Chapter has long acknowledged and supported human harvest as a valid and important use of wildlife. Research by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has established the economic and social importance of hunting to Alaskans. However, harvest of wildlife is not always the "highest and best" use of wildlife in every situation, as these bills imply.
4. Populations of predators and their prey exist in dynamic and complex ecosystems that are often subject to forces beyond the wildlife manager's control (e.g., over-winter starvation, disease, human-caused habitat change). Because neither these bills nor SB 77 give habitat management authority to the Board of Game or to the Department of Fish and Game, the bills become, in effect, predator control bills. The underlying assumption appears to be that mortality due to predation is additive to other forms of mortality, which is not always the case.
5. Laws such as SB 81, 247, and 262 that mandate a certain proportion of the "harvestable surplus" be allocated to hunters, assumes that wildlife biologists can readily determine birth and survival rates of predators and prey for any hunted population in the State. However, this information is expensive and difficult to collect and will be difficult to gather in a comprehensive fashion. Proposed reductions in funding for the Department of Fish and Game will further compromise the Division of Wildlife Conservation's ability to gather this information. Because over 96% of the Division's funding is spent on projects associated with consumptive use of wildlife, the proposed cuts will likely be detrimental to hunters because, in the absence of good information about population status and trends, harvests will have to be restricted to ensure that game populations do not decline. This would have the opposite effect to that apparently desired by the bills' proponents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Therefore, the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society recommends:

1. That wildlife management in Alaska continue to be guided by the Board of Game/advisory committee system, rather than by legislation or ballot initiative.
2. That the Legislature does not pass SB 81, 247, 262, or House or committee substitutes of similar nature because of the high likelihood that these bills would lead to mismanagement of wildlife resources.