

IMPORTING, TRANSPLANTING, AND RANCHING GAME IN ALASKA

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY ALASKA CHAPTER

POSITION STATEMENT

OF

THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

ON

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The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society is dedicated to wise management of wildlife resources and their habitats. Alaska is unique in supporting native wildlife populations at historic levels over much of the state. These populations have great economic and cultural value to the state and its people as sources of food, fur, and revenue. Much of this value derives from wildlife being in its original, free-ranging condition where both consumptive and nonconsumptive users have access to this public resource.

English common law gave ownership of wildlife species to the ruler to be held in trust for the people. In reality, the only group that benefited from this arrangement was the privileged class. In North America, free-ranging wildlife species traditionally have been held in common by the public. Private ownership of wildlife thus can only occur as authorized by government acting in the best interest of the people.

The Alaska Legislature has authorized private ownership of bison, muskoxen, and elk. Plains bison and elk are exotic (i.e., non-native) species that have been imported to Alaska and established as wild populations in several locations. Muskoxen were extirpated in Alaska in the 19th century and re-established in the wild with imported stock. Alaska also has an existing reindeer herding industry. Ownership of reindeer herds in Alaska is restricted to Alaska Natives by federal law, although non-Natives have challenged the law by importing reindeer from Canada. Recently, persons promoting game ranching as business ventures have proposed legislation authorizing private ownership of additional wildlife species, including moose. Other proposed legislation would require resource-management agencies to transplant exotic species such as elk to areas where they do not currently occur.

Game ranching may have a place in some countries or regions of the world based on their unique conditions and institutions. In such situations, game ranching can provide an alternative to domestic livestock and may to some extent preserve the diversity and abundance of native ungulates. Alaska, however, has the opportunity to maintain its historic abundance of free-ranging wildlife species for the benefit of all its citizens without resorting to game ranching.

Game ranching or other private ownership of wildlife species threatens to diminish the abundance and quality of Alaska's wildlife resources. Wildlife species occupy the landscape regardless of land ownership, yet remain public property. It is common knowledge that commercial development of land often alters or eliminates wildlife habitat thereby reducing wildlife populations. The public may not realize that ranching or herding privately held wildlife may similarly reduce native wildlife populations through displacement, competition, disease, hybridization, poaching, and elimination of large predators.

Land occupied by ranches or herded game is land from which native wildlife species are excluded by fences or competition for resources. Habitat available for occupancy by free-ranging native wildlife is thus reduced, with concomitant reductions in their populations. Wild ungulates attracted to captive animals during the rut have been destroyed in several instances in other jurisdictions. In addition, there is no assurance that public lands would not be leased and fenced for game ranching. Public access to wildlife species for consumptive and nonconsumptive uses would be restricted by fenced ranges.

Importation and transportation of wildlife species poses the risk of spreading disease to free-ranging populations. Problems with disease have included bovine tuberculosis (*Mycobacterium bovis*) in elk, bovine brucellosis (*Brucella abortus*) in elk, rangeliferine brucellosis (*Brucella suis* biotype 4) in reindeer, and bluetongue in elk. Bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis are transmissible to humans as well as to native wildlife. Other diseases and parasites potentially present in imported wildlife include anaplasmosis (*Anaplasma marginale*), meningeal worm (*Parelaphostrongylus tenuis*), carotid artery worm (*Elaeophora schneideri*), and giant liver flukes (*Fascioloides magna*). Quarantine and/or veterinary treatment of imported, transplanted, and ranches game can reduce the risk of disease transmission to native wildlife, but these measures can fail if animals escape quarantine, if tests for disease are not foolproof, or if unscrupulous or lax individuals fail to adhere to proper procedures. Introduced parasites and diseases could diminish Alaska's wildlife populations.

Individual animals or groups of animals that are ranches or herded eventually will escape captivity through accidents or inadequate fencing or herd husbandry. For example, ranches elk have escaped captivity in Alberta, as have African ungulates in Texas and bison and reindeer in Alaska. Wildlife that escapes captivity poses the risk of contaminating the genetic integrity and fitness of Alaska's wildlife species through hybridization. Native wildlife populations exhibit particular genetic adaptations to their environments. For instance, Alaskan caribou have significantly longer legs than reindeer, an adaptation having important implications for escape from predators, energy costs of locomotion, and ability to move and forage in deep snow.

An established commercial market for game meat introduces an incentive for large-scale poaching of free-ranging wildlife species and for illegal sale of game meat. A poacher could sell poached meat to an unscrupulous game rancher to mingle with ranches meat from the same species or could sell directly to an unscrupulous retailer. Unauthorized live capture of wild ungulates to supplement ranches breeding stock could also occur. A very large regulatory network and force of inspectors for tracking the origin of game meat in the commercial market would be necessary to reduce the incentive for illegal take and sale of game. The resources to adequately accomplish this level of oversight of game ranching are unlikely to be available in Alaska.

Game ranching would jeopardize populations of large predators. In North America, large predators such as bears and wolves have been eliminated from most areas supporting significant concentrations of domestic livestock. Persons engaged in game ranching almost certainly would view predators as threats to their economic livelihood and would generate pressure to eliminate large predators from areas in which game ranching occurred.

In addition to considering the risks to Alaska's wildlife species posed by game herding or ranching, or by resource-management agencies importing or transplanting exotic wildlife, the

public should contemplate the philosophical implications of reducing species currently held in common to the status of privately-owned domestic livestock. Traditionally, consumptive users of wildlife have had a strong vested interest in maintaining healthy, abundant, free-ranging wildlife populations. More recently, nonconsumptive users also have supported legislation and policies that maintain wildlife habitats. Although captive wildlife may serve an educational role by providing highly managed viewing opportunities to the public, ranched game is unlikely to generate the incentive for maintaining large, relatively unmodified ecosystems currently engendered by free-ranging, native wildlife species.

Alaska's wildlife has local, statewide, national, and international importance. In recognition of this, and in the interest of maintaining these valuable resources for the enjoyment and use of future generations, the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society finds that:

1. Skillful, professional management is required to assure the future of wildlife resources in North America;
2. Wildlife species in North America have traditionally been considered common property of the people, and public ownership of wildlife has benefited both the public and the wildlife resources;
3. Reindeer herding by Alaska Natives is an economic benefit to those communities where herding has traditionally and continually been practiced since inception of the industry;
4. Private ownership of wildlife has led to unfair chase harvesting, inhumane treatment of captive wildlife, illegal commercial trade in wildlife and wildlife body parts, and escape of captive wildlife and potentially will reduce habitat for wild ungulates, impair public access to wildlife, decrease numbers of ungulates in a wild setting, disrupt the genetic integrity of native wildlife populations, and cause extirpation of large predators;
5. Exotic wildlife species, and to some extent native wildlife from non-Alaska stocks, imported to Alaska and subsequently transplanted within Alaska by resource-management agencies, pose many of the risks identified for ranched game;
6. Commerce in wildlife without a uniform system of disease inspection has facilitated introduction and transmission of non-native diseases and parasites, including bovine tuberculosis and bovine and rangeliferine brucellosis; and
7. The presence of free-ranging, native wildlife species has strongly contributed to the maintenance and protection of large, relatively undisturbed natural ecosystems.

In support of the preceding findings, the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society specifically recommends that:

1. Reindeer herding be limited to ranges traditionally and frequently grazed since inception of Native herding in Alaska and not be expanded to other areas of the state;
2. Research on range management, veterinary medicine, nutrition, animal husbandry, meat processing, and marketing be applied to enhance the value and productivity of reindeer herds as an alternative to expanding the distribution of reindeer to additional areas of the state;
3. Private ownership of elk, bison, and muskoxen for game ranching currently authorized by Alaska law be repealed, with provisions for protecting the interests of persons currently ranching or herding these species;
4. Private ownership of wildlife species be prohibited with the exception of zoos, research institutions, and educational facilities authorized by the Alaska Department of Fish and

Game for the purposes of public education, protection and propagation of endangered species, and scientific study, and with the exception that individuals authorized by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game may possess raptors for the purpose of falconry;

5. Pending repeal of Alaska law authorizing private ownership of wildlife species for game ranching, the industry should be fully regulated, including testing and certification of disease-free status to control interstate and intrastate spread of animal pathogens and minimize the potential of disease transmission to free-ranging wildlife populations, licensing of persons engaging in game ranching, mandatory tracing of animals and animal products in commercial trade, and comprehensive monitoring and enforcement of all relevant regulations;
6. Importation of exotic wildlife to Alaska, and transplantation of exotic wildlife within Alaska, by resource-management agencies for purposes of establishing free-ranging populations be prohibited; and
7. Transplantation of native species (e.g., muskox) within Alaska for wildlife management purposes be accomplished with stocks already present in the state rather than with imported stocks.