

# PREDATOR CONTROL, POLITICS, AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN ALASKA

Victor Van Ballenberghe

Department of Biology and Wildlife, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK 99775, USA

**ABSTRACT:** Lethal control programs aimed at reducing wolf (*Canis lupus*) and bear (*Ursus arctos* and *U. americanus*) numbers while attempting to increase densities of moose (*Alces alces*) and caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) for hunters have occurred intermittently in Alaska, USA, for the past 3 decades. These programs were accompanied by considerable controversy, much of it directed at methods of control including helicopter shooting by government employees, snaring, and fixed-wing aircraft shooting by private citizens. From 1976 to 1983, 1,300 wolves were taken in several areas of Alaska by a combination of helicopter shooting and private trapping. Adverse public reaction largely restricted wolf control from 1984-1994 when a snaring program again produced controversy and that control program was terminated. In 1997, a National Research Council review suggested numerous biological standards for Alaska's predator control programs. The review strongly endorsed the approach of conducting predator control as adaptive management. Control proponents sponsored legislation in the 1990s that mandated intensive management of certain depleted populations of ungulates deemed important for consumptive use by humans. The primary management tool to increase such populations is predator control. Intensive management also required setting population and harvest objectives for ungulates. These objectives often were based on historical highs that are now likely unattainable and almost certainly unsustainable. Implementation of intensive management programs involving reductions of black bears and brown bears as well as wolves has now been approved in 5 areas of Alaska totaling about 43,000 square miles with up to 610 wolves scheduled to be shot by April 2005. Approval of additional programs is pending. Controversy now is focused not merely on ethical objections to methods of control, but extends to basic principles of wildlife conservation including sustainability of ungulate populations, protection of habitat integrity for ungulates, and population viability of predators. Recommended biological standards and guidelines for justifying, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating control programs are not being applied

ALCES VOL. 42: 1-11 (2006)

**Key words:** Alaska, *Alces alces*, bears, *Canis lupus*, caribou, moose, politics, predator control, *Rangifer tarandus*, *Ursus arctos*, *Ursus americanus*, wolves

---

Lethal predator control aimed at reducing wolf (*Canis lupus*) and bear (*Ursus arctos* and *U. americanus*) populations while attempting to increase densities of ungulates for hunters has been a highly controversial issue in Alaska, USA, for decades. Much of the controversy centered on wolves and methods of control including the use of poison, bounties, aerial shooting by private pilots, helicopter shooting by state employees, and snaring. Other issues including the quality of data used to justify, implement, monitor, and evaluate control pro-

grams were also part of the debate. In recent years the controversy broadened to include bears. Approval of large-scale programs, now totaling about 43,000 square miles with up to 610 wolves to be shot by spring 2005, has raised several conservation concerns. These programs were adopted with weak implementation, monitoring, and evaluation protocols, no study plans, and no research components to fill data gaps. Under the state's intensive management law, population and harvest objectives have been set that, in many instances,

are based on historical population highs for ungulates that are now likely unattainable and almost certainly unsustainable. As a result, poorly designed control programs may forever chase unattainable objectives, and long-term conservation problems may outweigh short-term gains.

In 1995, Governor Tony Knowles requested that the National Academy of Sciences conduct a review of past control programs and provide recommendations for future efforts. This review was conducted by the National Research Council (NRC 1997) and addressed biological and socioeconomic issues. The review contained 17 broad conclusions with 16 recommendations. Of these, 8 recommendations applied to the biological aspects of the review. In addition, the review contained a section with decision-making guidelines. Contained in the report were many recommended biological standards and guidelines. This review was the first comprehensive attempt to provide standards to guide Alaska's decision makers in the complex process of ensuring that sound science was incorporated in predator control programs.

Following the release of the NRC report, Alaska's Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) assembled a team to design a predator control program in the McGrath area of interior Alaska (ADFG 2001). Many of the NRC's standards were incorporated in the team's plan. Shortly thereafter, Frank Murkowski was elected governor and the McGrath program plus several additional areas were approved for control. These programs largely abandoned recommended standards and did not follow an adaptive management approach. I recommend a re-evaluation of the existing programs and a return to the McGrath model wherein the NRC's recommended standards and guidelines were applied.

### **A Brief History**

Following World War II when Alaska was still a U.S. territory, a federal poisoning and

aerial shooting campaign began (Harbo and Dean 1983). By the mid-1950s, the program had greatly reduced wolf numbers in much of south-central and interior Alaska. Wolves persisted in some areas largely because the country was extraordinarily vast and remote. In the Nelchina Basin near Glennallen, a 20,000 square mile area, only 1 wolf pack remained, reportedly spared for study. Aerial shooting on the North Slope reduced wolves to very low levels and they remained low for decades.

After statehood in 1959, the controversy over poison was so intense that it was permanently banned by the new state legislature (Harbo and Dean 1983). Aerial shooting and bounty payments, however, continued through the 1960s. Large numbers of wolves were taken and densities remained low. After passage of the Federal Airborne Hunting Act in 1972 and termination of the bounty, wolf numbers increased as ungulate populations declined following irruptions in the 1960s (Van Ballenberghe 1985). In some instances, there were spectacular crashes evidently precipitated by severe winters and accelerated by predation and overhunting. For example, the Nelchina caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) herd declined from 90,000 in 1962 to 8,000 in 1972. The Tanana Flats moose (*Alces alces*) population south of Fairbanks went from 23,000 to 2,800 during 1965-1975 (Gasaway et al. 1983).

Faced with declining ungulate populations by the mid-1970s, hunters demanded wolf control in several areas and ADFG responded by proposing helicopter-shooting programs. Despite legal challenges, these programs accounted for 1,300 wolves at a cost of \$824,000 between 1976 and 1983 (ADFG 1983). By 1984, considerable public opposition largely terminated state-sponsored control programs, nevertheless, taking of wolves by private pilots, termed "land-and-shoot" hunting, continued. This served as de facto wolf control in certain areas where terrain features were suitable, and regulations requiring hunters to land before

shooting were difficult to enforce.

In the early 1990s controversy flared again as a new administration proposed more shooting of wolves from helicopters (Franzmann 1993). Governor Walter Hickel received more than 100,000 letters of protest. A wolf-snaring program emerged as a substitute to aerial shooting, but also provoked international protests as video footage documented wolves chewing their frozen feet caught in snares.

In the 1990s, political involvement in control issues increased greatly. In 1994, hunting and trapping interests successfully lobbied the state legislature for an “intensive management” bill that mandated efforts to restore depleted ungulate populations to former levels of abundance. The bill’s clear intent was a strong emphasis on predator control. In 1996, however, a ballot initiative banning public land-and-shoot wolf hunting passed by a large margin. Efforts by the legislature to resurrect the public’s use of airplanes to shoot wolves resulted in a public referendum in 2000 that again banned this practice.

In 2003 and 2004, after a decade largely free of major predator control programs, a new state administration headed by Governor Frank Murkowski approved 5 new programs involving the use of private pilots to shoot wolves from airplanes. Affected areas total about 43,000 square miles with about 610 wolves scheduled to be shot initially and undetermined others to follow in subsequent years. In addition, hunting and trapping seasons, bag limits, and methods of take for wolves in these and most other areas of the state were liberalized. In particular areas of the State, seasons extend from mid-August to May, there are no trapping bag limits, and wolves can be pursued and shot from snowmachines. Currently, hunters and trappers take about 1,500-1,700 wolves annually, excluding those taken in control programs, from a total population crudely estimated at 7,500-11,000.

Black and brown bear populations also are scheduled for reduction in certain areas. In

March 2004, the state Board of Game (BOG), a 7-member body that promulgates hunting and trapping regulations and sets predator control policies, revised its bear conservation and management policy to include a section on predation. Methods and means that the BOG may consider include relocation, sterilization, use of electronic equipment for communication between hunters, sale of hides and skulls, trapping, baiting with human-derived foods as an aid to hunting, same-day airborne taking, and diversionary feeding. Efforts to reduce bear numbers by lengthening autumn hunting seasons, opening spring seasons, increasing bag limits, and eliminating hunting tag fees have occurred during the past 2 decades in certain areas where bears were thought to prey on moose at high rate. In 2004 the BOG approved baiting of brown bears as a predator control measure in one area. Although baiting of black bears has long been legal, this is the first time that this practice will be allowed for brown bears.

### **Early Standards and Guidelines for Predator Control**

Although poorly documented, the standards and guidelines used by ADFG and the BOG for predator control in several wolf control programs during 1976-1983 included preparation of “issue papers.” These consisted of reviews of the available data including sex and age ratio information for ungulates, predator population status and trend, harvest information for predators and prey, predator-prey ratios, and crude information on habitat condition and trend. Except for certain areas where research resulted in ungulate population estimates from sampling with fixed-wing aircraft, reliable population estimates for ungulates were generally unavailable. Wolf population surveys in winter based on aerial track counts and observations of live animals were supplemented with trapper reports to estimate wolf numbers.

At that time the BOG adhered to a policy

prohibiting poison. This policy allowed private pilots to take wolves in certain areas under a permit system in accordance with Federal Airborne Hunting Act provisions, and directed ADFG employees to take wolves by helicopter shooting where feasible (ADFG 1983). BOG policy prohibited total elimination of wolves in the control programs, and often specified leaving 20% of the pre-control wolf population. Despite these guidelines, there were neither formal requirements in the predator-control regulations requiring certain types of data or standards for data quality necessary to justify control, nor were there protocols for implementing, monitoring, or evaluating control programs.

In the late 1980s, the BOG adopted an “emergency” standard for justifying control programs. Under this standard, wolf control would be infrequent and not applied unless prey populations were demonstrated to be at low densities and were unlikely to recover without control. Protocols were established to determine if wolf predation was limiting ungulates rather than some other factor. Control programs would cease when prey populations had recovered. The BOG rescinded this standard by 1991 to accommodate proposed helicopter shooting of wolves under a zoning program as part of a strategic wolf management plan. In certain zones, ungulates would be managed at high densities and wolf numbers would be kept low.

The intensive management statute, passed in 1994, mandated new standards for management of ungulates. These were based on restoring “depleted” populations to former levels of abundance, but depleted was undefined. Predator control could be applied at any level of ungulate abundance, low, medium, or high, with the overall goal of increasing opportunity for hunters and to manage ungulates exclusively for high levels of human consumption. No attempt was made to understand the potential effects of habitat quality on moose numbers.

Under Governor Tony Knowles, 3 broad standards were mandated for control programs. Control would be based on sound science, it would be economically justifiable, and it would have broad public support. These standards precipitated debate on what constituted sound science and who determined science quality, and on methods of measuring public support.

### **The National Research Council’s Standards and Guidelines**

The National Research Council review (NRC 1997) addressed two basic questions:

1. In attempts to understand interactions between moose and caribou and their habitats and predators, have appropriate types of data been gathered, and has enough been learned from past research to identify the information needed to enable us to predict quantitative responses of prey populations to predator control efforts?
2. What critical data gaps exist in our scientific understanding about these populations and what would be needed to fill them?

The committee reviewed past and present control programs, Alaska’s biomes, people, and wildlife species of concern, predator-prey interactions, wolf and bear management experiments and evaluations, socioeconomic implications of predator control, and decision making. The resulting report included 9 major biological conclusions and 8 recommendations. Many of the specific points included in the recommendations provide the basis for suggested standards and guidelines for predator control programs. These included:

1. Wolves, bears, and ungulates should be managed with an adaptive management approach.
2. Management actions should be planned as experiments so it is possible to assess

- their outcome. Control actions should be designed to include clearly specified monitoring protocols of sufficient duration to determine whether or not predictions are borne out and why.
3. Managers should avoid actions with uninterpretable outcomes or low probability of achieving stated goals.
  4. The status of predator and prey populations should be evaluated before predator reduction efforts occur.
  5. Better data on habitat quality should be collected and carrying capacity of the prey's habitat should be evaluated.
  6. Changes in the population growth rate of prey and in hunter satisfaction should be monitored.
  7. The scope of studies of predators and prey should be broadened and better data on bear ecology should be collected.
  8. Development of long-term data sets should continue and better data on long-term consequences of control should be collected.
  9. The use of controlled fire for increasing the carrying capacity of moose habitat should be further investigated.
  10. Decision-makers should be more sensitive to signs of over-harvest.
  11. Decision-makers should be more conservative in setting hunting regulations and designing control efforts.

The NRC review also contained a section on decision-making that reiterated several of the standards and guidelines listed above and provided additional standards (NRC 1997:128-130). The first step suggested in deciding whether or not to reduce predators was to identify reasons for wanting more ungulates. These include biological emergencies, subsistence emergencies, lifestyle and recreational hunting demands, and viewing and tourism demands. Next, the unmet demand should be quantified and the extent to which ungulate numbers must be increased should

be determined. Population models and cost-benefit analyses should provide estimates of the extent and duration of management actions necessary to meet the projected demand and to estimate costs of predator reduction.

Once these issues have been addressed, ecological investigations should be conducted to assess the likelihood that predator reduction will achieve desired goals. Necessary studies include: historic population trends of ungulates, current ungulate population trends, emigration studies, an evaluation of habitat conditions, studies of predator ecology, identification of limiting factors, and identifying ecological consequences of predator control.

Next, management options should be identified that increase ungulate reproduction and survival or decrease predation rates. These include habitat manipulation to improve the quantity, quality, or distribution of habitats; non-lethal control methods for predators including diversionary feeding, sterilization, and translocation; selective removal of individual animals or wolf packs; timing of removal to increase efficacy; assessment of removal methods to identify those that are most humane, efficient, cost effective, and politically acceptable; and identification of removal locations to concentrate actions in critical areas to maximize effectiveness while minimizing effects on predator populations.

Finally, predator reductions must be monitored with protocols of sufficient magnitude, duration, and geographic extent to show clear results. The report noted that most past programs resulted in unclear results. Pre-treatment and post-treatment monitoring was sometimes insufficient, non-experimental areas were not maintained, and weather conditions were often poorly measured. "Wherever possible, predator control programs should be incorporated into a reviewed experimental design to ensure that knowledge is one of the benefits of the reduction program" (NRC 1997:130).

**Application of the NRC's Recommended Standards, 2000-2001**

The first extensive effort to apply the NRC's recommended predator control standards and guidelines came in 2000 and 2001 when Alaska addressed a long-standing demand for wolf control by residents of McGrath on the Kuskokwim River in interior Alaska. In 1995 the BOG received reports from local residents that moose numbers had declined greatly from high levels in the 1970s and wolves were thought to be keeping moose numbers from increasing. Preliminary data collected by ADFG indicated a moose:wolf ratio of 12:1. The BOG approved a control program to take 80% of the wolves in the area but the program was not implemented, nor were similar plans approved subsequently. Governor Tony Knowles appointed a stakeholder's group called the "Adaptive Wildlife Management Team" in 2000 to review the issues and to provide recommendations to the ADFG Commissioner.

The team found that the moose population in the area (estimated at 869) was insufficient to support the harvest demand of 130-150 annually. ADFG biologists estimated that 3,000-3,500 moose could provide the desired harvest and the team adopted this and the desired harvest as population and harvest goals (ADFG 2001). The team recognized that there were significant needs for additional data, notably the extent of bear predation on neonate moose, quality of moose habitat in relation to moose body condition and pregnancy rates, movements of moose in the area, and more precise estimates of moose, wolf, and bear populations. ADFG biologists prepared a detailed study plan that was peer reviewed by 8 experts within and outside Alaska.

The team recommended a program of wolf and bear reduction involving wolf trapping by local residents followed by aerial shooting (ADFG 2001). Bear hunting by local residents would be encouraged if bear predation on neonate moose was found to be

important. Moose hunting seasons in a portion of the area would be closed until the moose population increased. Studies and monitoring efforts would be designed to fill data gaps. The entire program would be conducted in an adaptive management context. The team would reconvene periodically to review progress and suggest alternate approaches as necessary.

ADFG's Commissioner approved the plan early in 2001 with the provision that aerial shooting of wolves would be done by ADFG employees using helicopters rather than by private pilots in fixed-wing aircraft. The BOG approved the plan, but before it could be implemented a moose census in autumn 2001 indicated 3,660 moose in the area versus the previous claim of 869. Clearly, previous estimates were based on faulty censuses done under poor conditions and moose numbers were actually much higher than expected. Plans to reduce predators were suspended in light of this new information.

In general, many of the NRC's recommendations were followed in designing this program but there were important exceptions. Predator reduction was to begin immediately rather than be delayed pending additional data despite very limited information on key components including the extent of bear predation. And, wolf control, bear reduction, and moose hunting closures were to be simultaneously applied thereby confounding interpretation of results and complicating assessment of the relative importance of these limiting factors.

**Predator Control Programs 2003-2004**

Frank Murkowski was elected Governor of Alaska in November 2002 and shortly thereafter appointed 5 new members to the 7-member BOG. One of the BOG's first actions was to review the McGrath program. In March 2003 the board approved a predator control program for the McGrath area incorporating several important changes from the previous plan

(BOG 2003a). Aerial shooting of wolves by private pilots under permits issued by ADFG replaced the proposed helicopter-shooting program conducted by ADFG employees. About 35-45 wolves were thought to be in the control area and all were scheduled to be shot. Bears were to be translocated after capture by ADFG personnel. The Adaptive Wildlife Management Team was disbanded. Subsequently, the wolf control area was doubled in size and the moose population objective was doubled with no in-depth assessment of habitat conditions or carrying capacity. The harvest objective for moose in the area was increased from 130-150 to 400-600. And the peer-reviewed study plan designed to guide research and monitoring was shelved.

A second predator control program was approved in 2003 for the Nelchina Basin (Game Management Unit 13, hereafter Unit 13) (State of Alaska 2004a). Unlike other areas of concern, moose in Unit 13 remained at moderate densities following declines from higher levels in the 1980s (BOG 2003b). But the BOG approved a control program under provisions in the intensive management statute to restore ungulate populations to former levels of abundance. About 140 wolves in the control area were to be shot by private pilots and moose hunting seasons would continue during the control program. In accordance with previous research indicating heavy bear predation on moose in this area, liberal bear hunting seasons and bag limits continued, but no other explicit measures to reduce bear numbers were approved. No study plan was required and no additional data collection was specified in addition to annual surveys conducted to obtain routine management information. Limited data on habitat quality were available, indicating persistently heavy use of important browse species by moose in several areas, but carrying capacity was assumed sufficient by the BOG to support additional animals.

During winter 2003-2004, 17 wolves were

taken near McGrath by aerial shooting with 11 more taken by trappers. Private pilots took 127 wolves in Unit 13. In spring 2003, 90 bears were translocated at McGrath, with 35 additional bears moved in spring 2004.

The BOG approved two additional predator control programs in March 2004. These include an area in Upper Cook Inlet near Anchorage (Unit 16B). Moose numbers and harvests were thought to have declined during the past 10 years while wolf numbers increased (BOG 2004a). No quantitative data were available on the effect of wolf predation on moose numbers. Bears were suspected to be important predators of moose but no quantitative data were available. Habitat conditions and carrying capacity were unknown. Despite firm resistance by ADFG, the BOG approved a wolf control program using private pilots under permit to take about 80% of the wolves in the control area beginning in autumn 2004 (State of Alaska 2004b). Moose hunting seasons remained open and no further steps to reduce bear numbers were approved. A study plan was not required and no additional data collection was specified other than annual surveys for routine management information.

The second program approved in 2004 was in Game Management Unit 19 (Unit 19) in the Central Kuskokwim River area of interior Alaska. Moose numbers in this area apparently declined during the 1990s but crude estimates suggest moderate densities persist relative to other areas in interior Alaska (BOG 2004b). As is the case for Unit 16B, no quantitative data exist on the extent of wolf predation on moose, on the effect of bear predation, or on moose habitat quality and carrying capacity. The BOG approved a control program using private pilots to shoot wolves in this area beginning in autumn 2004 (State of Alaska 2004c). Moose hunting seasons were not closed. No further steps were approved to reduce bear numbers other than through continuation of liberal hunting seasons and bag limits. A study plan was not required and no additional

data collection was specified other than that gathered for routine management.

The BOG approved an additional program in November 2004 (Board of Game 2004c). The program includes portions of two Game Management Units, 12 and 20E, located in the eastern interior. Wolves will be reduced in an area of about 6,600 square miles; brown bears will be reduced in a 2,700 square mile portion of the total area. Wolves will be taken by public aerial shooting and bears will be baited. Up to 60% of the bear population may be removed. Research during the 1980s and early 1990s clarified the role of predation in limiting moose and caribou in this area (Gasaway et al. 1992) and a wolf sterilization and translocation program to benefit caribou was implemented. As with the other programs, a study plan was not required, and there were no plans to collect additional data.

The 5 areas approved by the BOG for predator control in 2003-2004 (McGrath, Unit 13, Unit 16B, Unit 19, and Units 12 and 20E) total about 43,000 square miles. Private pilots with permits to shoot wolves may take up to 610 wolves in winter 2004-2005. This will be in addition to wolves taken in routine hunting and trapping seasons that in recent years accounted for 1,500-1,700 animals.

How well do the predator control programs approved in 2003-2004 conform to the NRC's recommended standards and guidelines? In general these programs differ significantly from the process used in 2000-2001 to design a control program in the McGrath area. For example, 3 of the new areas (Unit 13, Unit 16B, and Units 12 and 20E) did not involve a citizen's planning team. The Unit 19 program was preceded by a team convened to review the issues, but the level of biological detail involved was substantially less than for McGrath. By disbanding the McGrath team, the BOG lost the opportunity for future valuable input, including that from one resident of McGrath who served on the team from the outset.

For McGrath, much of the groundwork was complete by 2003 as a result of the team's efforts. Nonetheless, the decision was made to proceed with wolf control despite the 2001 moose census that indicated nearly 4 times as many moose as estimated earlier. Studies in progress at McGrath on moose calf mortality, bear translocation, and moose population characteristics continued through 2004. Similar studies are not in progress in any of the other areas, and the BOG did not identify the need for such studies when it approved additional programs despite obvious deficiencies in data.

The BOG failed to recognize the importance of filling data gaps and was willing to proceed with insufficient data on several key components of predator control programs including current, quantitative data on predator and prey numbers. This ignored the NRC guideline of evaluating the status of predator and prey populations prior to predator reduction. Furthermore, the BOG risked repeating the mistakes made in some control programs conducted in 1976-1983, as well as later at McGrath, where prey numbers were greatly underestimated and wolf control was suspended when adequate censuses occurred. The BOG's approval of wolf control in Unit 16B despite warnings from ADFG that data were nonexistent or insufficient is particularly alarming.

The BOG also retreated from the McGrath model's approach of requiring study plans that provided protocols for implementing, monitoring, and evaluating predator control actions and for conducting additional studies. Peer review of the McGrath plan in 2001 by biologists outside ADFG with no stake in the plan's outcome resulted in several ADFG revisions to the study plan. Similar reviews of plans for other areas, if they had been required, would undoubtedly have resulted in improved designs.

An important NRC finding was that most previous predator control programs in

Alaska and Canada had unclear outcomes, in part because the programs were primarily management actions based on particular assumptions about predator-prey dynamics. These programs were not designed to test those assumptions. "As a result, less has been learned from these experiments than would have been possible had they been better designed and executed, and if the results had been more extensively monitored" (NRC 1997:5). By continuing to implement similar management programs with insufficient monitoring, recent BOG actions will result in more unclear outcomes and continued inability to improve the design of future programs.

A consistent and often repeated concern in the NRC review pertained to ungulate habitat quality and carrying capacity issues. Obviously, predator reductions will not result in increased ungulate numbers if the necessary habitat to support more animals is lacking. In theory, all predators could be removed with no response in ungulate numbers if habitat quality is poor. There is extensive literature linking ungulate nutrition, body condition, growth rates, pregnancy rates, and survival to habitat quality (Klein 1981). Furthermore, winter severity can lower carrying capacity as snow buries forage and increases the energy costs of movement (Parker and Robbins 1984). The NRC review recognized these important ecological relationships and their significance to predator control programs, and provided suggested guidelines for incorporating them in management actions. The BOG's approach in approving recent control programs was to accept crude, qualitative information and broad generalizations on habitat quality and carrying capacity rather than requiring quantitative data. This is a serious breach of recommended standards.

In general, the BOG's recent approval of programs to reduce wolf and bear numbers, in an attempt to increase ungulates, represents a retreat from the sound science standard in place in Alaska the previous decade. Arguably,

most of the important biological standards and guidelines recommended by the NRC (1997) have not been followed. The NRC strongly recommended that predator control should be done as adaptive management, that management actions should be planned so that outcomes are clear, and that programs with a low probability of success should be avoided. Contrary to NRC recommendations, the BOG has begun a process where there is less attention to experimental design and monitoring of results and more reliance on anecdotal and qualitative information to justify control programs. This approach jeopardizes progress made during the past 2 decades in applying science-based management to the controversial practice of predator control in Alaska.

A fundamental, underlying problem in applying recommended biological standards and guidelines to predator control in Alaska is the State's intensive management statute. This 1994 law requires a political standard aimed at restoring depleted ungulate populations to previously attained levels including historical highs. In many instances such highs resulted from irruptions linked to large-scale predator control in the 1950s and 1960s. Peak populations were clearly unsustainable and restoring them now is likely unattainable. Furthermore, estimates of the magnitude of peak populations, even those reached as recently as the 1980s, are often little more than guesses and are often inflated.

Despite these problems, the BOG, guided by the intensive management statute, has consistently set ungulate population and harvest objectives at high levels, or, as was the case in McGrath, raised previous objectives in the absence of data on habitat quality and carrying capacity. The net result of this is to commit the BOG to approving perpetual predator control programs that chase unattainable objectives. Such an approach may repeat the historical pattern of wolf and bear control that triggered ungulate irruptions and subsequent habitat damage and sharp ungulate declines.

Intensive management and its accompanying widespread predator control will likely place established conservation principles at risk in those areas where predator control programs are implemented. Fortunately, predator control will not occur on some federal land including national parks. Conservation principles at risk include sustainability of certain ungulate populations that will likely exceed carrying capacity as wolf and bear populations are suppressed. Past predator control programs in Alaska, including the federal poisoning effort of the 1950s, had exactly this effect — ungulate irruptions were triggered followed by habitat damage and ungulate declines. But we also have more recent examples including the Tanana Flats moose that increased from 2,800 in 1975 to about 11,000 by the early 1990s following wolf control from 1976 to 1983. Now, the population is estimated at 16,000 and shows density-dependent signs of approaching or exceeding carrying capacity including reduced twinning rates, poor body condition, reduced growth of calves, female reproductive pauses, and increased age of first reproduction (Young 2004). Browsing intensity of winter forage plants is very high. In response, the BOG recently increased the moose population objective by about 10 %, a debatable management strategy.

Alaska's record of managing high-density ungulate populations demonstrates a consistent inability to prevent ungulates from exceeding carrying capacity or quickly responding once problems are apparent. Clearly, the irruptions of the 1950s and 1960s were unmanaged and the resulting sharp declines were, in some cases, worsened by excessive harvests. Currently, the Tanana Flats moose population is at high density as a result of past wolf control, but despite recognizing the problem, managers were unable to respond quickly; antlerless harvests did not begin until 2003. Public opposition to harvesting cow moose has complicated matters. In the Nelchina Basin, moose increased during the 1980s as wolves

were heavily harvested. Moose declined in response to severe winters thereafter. Managers failed to anticipate the decline, having overestimated carrying capacity. Now, despite moderate moose densities, predator control aims to again increase the Nelchina Basin moose population and repeat past patterns of increases and declines in response to winter weather.

The Board of Game's recent approval of programs to reduce bear and wolf numbers in an attempt to increase ungulates represents a retreat from earlier programs that incorporated most of the NRC's major biological standards and guidelines. Arguably, most of those standards are not implemented currently with less attention toward experimental design and monitoring, and more reliance on anecdotal and qualitative information. This approach risks unexplainable or unclear results at best, and wasted effort with failure of ungulate numbers to increase at worst, if undetected factors rather than predation are limiting. Alaska's intensive management statute is a major barrier to implementation of the NRC's recommendations. Efforts to chase unattainable population and harvest objectives with poorly designed predator control programs risk long-term sustainability of ungulates, protection of habitat integrity, and predator population viability.

## REFERENCES

- (ADFG) ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME. 1983. Wolf management programs in Alaska 1975-1983. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. Experimental program to rebuild the moose population in GMU 19D. Prepared by the adaptive wildlife management team. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- (BOG) BOARD OF GAME, STATE OF ALASKA. 2003a. Findings of the Board of Game and guidelines for a Unit 19D east predation control program. Department of Fish and

- Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003b. Findings of the Alaska Board of Game authorizing wolf control in portions of Unit 13. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004a. Findings of the Alaska Board of Game authorizing predator control in the western Cook Inlet area in Unit 16B with airborne or same day shooting. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004b. Findings of the Alaska Board of Game authorizing wolf predation control in the Unit 19A portion of the central Kuskokwim wolf predation control area with airborne or same day airborne shooting. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004c. Findings of the Alaska Board of Game authorizing wolf and bear predation control in portions of the Upper Yukon/Tanana predation control area. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- FRANZMANN, A. W. 1993. Biopolitics of wolf management in Alaska. *Alces* 29:9-26.
- GASAWAY, W. C., R. D. BOERTJE, D. V. GRANGAARD, D. G. KELLYHOUSE, R. O. STEPHENSON, and D. G. LARSEN. 1992. The role of predation in limiting moose at low densities in Alaska and Yukon and implications for conservation. *Wildlife Monographs* 120.
- \_\_\_\_\_, R. O. STEPHENSON, J. L. DAVIS, P. E. K. SHEPHERD, and O. E. BURRIS. 1983. Interrelationships of wolves, prey, and man in interior Alaska. *Wildlife Monographs* 84.
- HARBO, S. J., and F. C. DEAN. 1983. Historical and current perspectives on wolf management in Alaska. Pages 51-65 in L. N. Carbyn, editor. *Wolves in Canada and Alaska*. Report Series 45, Canadian Wildlife Service, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
- KLEIN, D. R. 1981. The problems of overpopulation of deer in North America. Pages 119-127 in P. A. Jewell and S. Holt, editors. *Problems in Management of Locally Abundant Wild Mammals*. Academic Press, New York, New York, USA.
- (NRC) NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL. 1997. *Wolves, Bears and Their Prey in Alaska*. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., USA.
- PARKER, K. L., and C. T. ROBBINS. 1984. Thermoregulation in mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus hemionus*) and elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*). *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 62:1409-1422.
- STATE OF ALASKA. 2004a. Game Management Unit 13, Wolf predation control area. 5AAC 92.125. Wolf Predation Control Implementation Plan. Register 170, State Regulations. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004b. Game Management Unit 16B, Wolf predation control area. 5AAC 92.125. Wolf Predation Control Implementation Plan. Register 170, State Regulations. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004c. Game Management Unit 19A and 19B, Wolf predation control area. 5AAC 92.125. Wolf Predation Control Implementation Plan. Register 170, State Regulations. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.
- VAN BALLEMBERGHE, V. 1985. Wolf predation on caribou: the Nelchina herd case history. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 49:711-720.
- YOUNG, D. 2004. Status of the GMU 20A moose population. Report to the Alaska Board of Game. Department of Fish and Game, Juneau, Alaska, USA.