

August 23, 2018

National Park Service
Regional Director, Alaska Regional Office
240 West 5th Ave.
Anchorage, AK 99501
and submitted at <http://www.regulations.gov>

Re: Alaska: Hunting and Trapping in National Preserves in Alaska (36 CFR Part 13 RIN 1024-AE38); comments from scientists and natural resource management professionals and decision makers on the proposed rule change.

The undersigned urge the National Park Service (NPS) to retain the existing (2015) rule regarding hunting on national preserves in Alaska (80 FR No. 205, October 23, 2015, RIN 1024-AE21) and to reject the proposed replacement rule. The proposed rule would effectively require the NPS in Alaska to adopt the State of Alaska's (SOA) hunting and trapping regulations in national preserves in Alaska. The SOA regulations of concern are designed to reduce the abundance of large carnivores (grizzly/brown bear, black bear, and wolves). These SOA regulations are intended to increase hunter harvests of wild ungulates (primarily moose, and caribou). Such regulations are inappropriate for lands managed in the national interest by NPS. In this letter we also include a partial list of issues that must be addressed in the pending Environmental Assessment on the proposed rule.

The undersigned 110 persons include 65 individuals with Ph.D.s and 33 with MS, JD or equivalent advanced academic degree. All signers have current or former careers in natural resource management, conservation and education, and many are experts in large carnivore management. The signers include a former Alaska Governor (Knowles) and Lt. Governor (Ulmer) who also have expertise in natural resource management. Of the signers, 17 are retired staff with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (including a retired Commissioner—Rue—and a retired Director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation—Pamplin), 10 are retired staff with the National Park Service, and 20 are current or former staff of Department of Interior, Department of Agriculture, or Canadian natural resource agencies. The signers include 46 individuals who were current or former resource management or research professionals in Alaska including 30 who are current Alaskan residents. Signers include 17 individuals with international expertise in large carnivore management ranging geographically from Europe to Asia.

Under the SOA's "intensive management" (IM) law of 1994 (AS 16.05.255 e-g & k) in cases where current abundance of ungulates is insufficient to meet hunter demand for wild game meat, IM must be undertaken in an effort to increase ungulate abundance for hunter harvests. This IM law establishes a demand-based harvest management priority for ungulates that is in effect throughout most of Alaska. The National Research Council made a series of recommendations regarding predator management in Alaska (NRC 1997) that have been ignored by the SOA in adopting these regulations (Miller et al. 2011, 2017).

Alaska is the largest area remaining in the United States where large carnivore habitats remain both extensive and relatively unaffected by anthropogenic influences. Management practices for large carnivores adopted by the SOA, however, are a reversion to historical practices that treat large carnivores as lesser or undesirable species. Alaska is the best place remaining in the United States with the potential to maintain healthy and natural ecosystems with naturally-occurring abundances of

predators and prey species. Accordingly, the NPS has a responsibility to manage these lands in the national interest consistent with applicable federal laws and the 1916 NPS Organic Act.

Manipulation of predator:prey ratios to increase hunter harvests of ungulates is inconsistent with the mandate of the NPS under its Organic Act and subsequent regulations: “...It is contrary to the National Park Service concept to manipulate habitat or populations to achieve maximum utilization of natural resources. Rather, the National Park System concept requires implementation of management policies which strive to maintain the natural abundance, behavior, diversity, and ecological integrity of native animals as part of their ecosystem” (NPS 1981:30-31). Regardless, since 1990, federal authorities have adopted hunting regulations for national preserves in Alaska that largely mirror the regulations adopted by the Alaska Board of Game (BOG). There has been NPS pushback to these SOA regulations only in some cases mentioned in the 2015 rule including, for example, allowing baiting of both bear species in NPS-managed areas.

The 2015 rule correctly identified some SOA hunting regulations designed to reduce the abundance of large carnivores. In contrast, the new proposed rule asserts only that the SOA “disputes” that their regulations are intended to function as ‘predator control’ programs. The SOA’s ‘dispute’ is based on its very narrow definition of “predator control” that includes only specially designated “Predator Control Areas” (PCAs) where methods are allowed that have included state employees shooting bears (both species) from helicopters, public snaring of both bear species, shooting brown bears accompanied by yearling cubs, and public shooting of wolves using aircraft.

The most general form of predator reduction efforts that is widespread across Alaska, however, is liberalization of general hunting regulations for large carnivores. This is identified as a preferred means for reducing predators in the SOA’s “Predator Management In Alaska” protocol which states that “take of predators by conventional hunting and trapping may be increased through liberalizations of seasons and bag limits to reduce the effects of predation on prey populations” (ADFG 2007:6). Hunting regulations for brown bears in Alaska have been greatly liberalized and include increasing areas allowing sales of brown bear hides and skulls, baiting of brown bears, and greatly expanded seasons and bag limits (Miller et al. 2017).

We are greatly concerned by the extremely limited scientific evidence available to justify the liberalizations of hunting regulations for large carnivores that have occurred in Alaska (Miller et al. 2017). This lack of information applies to NPS-managed lands in Alaska including national preserves. NPS does not even have systematically-collected information on numbers of large carnivores harvested within any national preserve, national park, or national monument in Alaska.

NPS plans to provide an Environmental Assessment (EA) on the new proposed rule. In this letter, we provide a partial list of items that the EA must address:

1. The role of large carnivores (apex predators) in ecosystem function based on a review of the literature in Alaska and elsewhere;
2. The proposed rule states that SOA “asserts” that their regulations are not “predator control” but the 2015 NPS rule clearly recognizes that predator reduction to increase ungulates is their intent. The EA must clearly recognize that this distinction is based on the SOA’s narrow definition of “predator control” and justify how predator reduction regulations are consistent with NPS policies and guidelines.

3. The scientific (non-anecdotal) bases used to inform and justify the hunting and trapping regulations already adopted or proposed for NPS lands in Alaska;
4. The process NPS will use to document changes in harvest numbers of the large carnivore species within the borders of the NPS units where the hunting regulations apply;
5. The EA should explain how the proposed new rule is in conformance with NPS law, regulation, and policy including (NPS 2013) and why the findings of the existing 2015 rule with respect to these issues are now found to be incorrect making a new rule necessary.
6. A comparison of information available on mortalities of large carnivore species in NPS units in the lower 48 states with the information available in Alaska and explanation of how the disparity in information available is justifiable.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

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