



Subadult grizzly 10 yards of the Denali Nat'l Park Road; Jon Waterman photo

Guest Essay

Why Were Nearly 100 Bears Shot by the State of Alaska?

By Jon Waterman

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I recently had the good fortune to spot grizzly bears on back-to-back days near the road that runs through the center of Alaska's Denali National Park and Preserve. "Glimpse" might be a better word. These lords of the tundra, as magnificent and arresting as Denali itself glowing incandescently 18,000 feet above, vanished quickly, apparently having seen me or caught wind of my scent.

This all happened before I could even steady my camera. Had I been a hunter instead of a photographer, I wouldn't have had time to fire off a shot. But nearly 100 brown bears (a [bigger, coastal version](#) of the grizzly bear) several hundred miles away were not so lucky. They were slaughtered by state game workers, shot from the air in and around Wood-Tikchik State Park in southwestern Alaska.

The bears had no chance.

Those killings of 94 brown bears, five black bears and five wolves over 17 days in May and June when caribou were calving were ordered to boost calf survival by the Alaska Board of Game (six governor-appointed men and one woman who are hunters, big game guides, trappers or fishermen, not scientists). At a board meeting where the decision was made, state wildlife biologists presented data that showed that the state's predator control program involving wolves had been ineffective in bolstering the herd. But the board nonetheless voted to extend the wolf control program and add bears to the effort. The reason, [according](#) to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, was that "predator control is an immediate tool" that can be used "to attempt to reverse the herd's decline."

It was a foolish and hapless effort to protect what is left of the plummeting numbers of the Mulchatna caribou herd.

In 2011 the Alaska Board of Game authorized a predator control program to reduce the wolf population to bolster the herd, which is important for subsistence hunting in the roughly 50 remote communities within its range. Since 2011, more than 470 wolves in the region have been killed, including more than 140 as part of the state's predator control program, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Still, the caribou herd had fallen to 12,000 animals by 2017, where it remains, from about 200,000 in 1997.

In 2020, Alaska Fish and Game biologists who studied the herd discovered that up to a third of the animals sampled were suffering from brucellosis, an infectious disease caused by bacteria that can result in infertility, late-term abortions and lameness. Scientists have also [raised concerns](#) in an ongoing study about the availability of sufficient nutrition for the herd after finding large variability in the condition of the caribou in the fall, with a lower percentage of fat in lactating females.

Killing wolves had made no difference. Worse, dead wolves could no longer work to keep the herd healthy by culling sick caribou. Bears, which subsist on protein-rich plants for much of their diet, will kill caribou calves, but there is little evidence that this affects overall herd populations.

Indeed, in a recent [opinion article](#) in The Anchorage Daily News, 34 retired Alaska scientists and wildlife managers wrote that "bear control is unlikely to substantially increase caribou numbers given current nutrition, disease and illegal harvest issues."

Historically, caribou herd populations rise and fall cyclically. More recently, herds have been in [precipitous decline](#) throughout North America because of climate change, habitat loss, hunting and disease. The state's ongoing study of the Mulchatna herd found that out-of-season hunting is the "predominant cause of death in adult females" and that "none of our current data streams point to predators as a significant challenge" to adult caribou.

Like other park tourists, I went to Denali to enjoy the wilderness. I saw caribou and moose and came upon wolf tracks. I also hoped to photograph bears — like those shown by the [State of Alaska](#) to promote tourism. I was left to wonder how state tourism officials and the Alaska Board of Game could work against each other.

"The plan to exterminate bears in such an extreme manner is best described as shameful," Dr. Gary Kofinas, an emeritus professor of resource policy at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, told me. He said that the board, through "disrespectful arrogance," had "based its decision on little data, no scientific review, no meaningful opportunity for public comment and a disregard for the decision's implications to the ecosystem as a whole."

The killing program has ended for this season. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game now plans to review the results to determine whether "further bear and wolf reductions during the spring calving season is warranted." At least two lawsuits have been filed to stop the bear killings. Predator control programs are [slated to continue](#) in the region until 2028.

Tony Knowles, a former governor of Alaska, is among many in the state who want the predator control program shut down. “This Mulchatna massacre is not just a local Alaskan issue of people shooting from a plane. They killed 94 brown bears without any scientific support,” he told me. “This hopefully will be a shock wave that will cause a new look all over America on how we handle our wildlife and what that means to our environment.”

Alaska needs to revamp its outdated [Intensive Management Law](#), passed in 1994 to ensure that certain populations of moose, caribou and deer are sufficient to provide food for Alaskans. When the animals’ numbers decline, the Board of Game is authorized to reduce predators like bears and wolves. But a study published last fall in the journal [Diversity](#) by three wildlife biologists raised questions about this approach. It found no increase in moose harvests in a region in south-central Alaska after bears and wolves were killed to reduce predation. The authors argued that the state needs “more well-rounded wildlife-management” approaches that “consider more than just harvest” of moose, caribou and deer.

One of the study’s authors, Sterling Miller, who worked for the state for two decades as a research wildlife biologist, [told Alaska Public Media](#) last month that he thought the state’s fish and game and wildlife conservation agencies have “not done adequate analysis and in some cases even misled the Alaska public about whether or not these programs are accomplishing their objectives.”

Catching sight of those two grizzlies in Denali before they vanished like ghosts, I realized that our wilderness and our nation would be empty without bears. The country’s wildlife, including wolves and caribou, now need us as much as we need them.

Alaska’s predator control efforts hark back to an inhumane, unscientific, 19th-century attitude toward bears and wolves as evil scourges, rather than sentient beings that keep the ecosystem balanced. They are animals that must be wisely protected. Killing bears and wolves to boost game populations must be stopped.

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