

## **HB 105: "An Act establishing the Gordon Haber Denali Wolf Special Management Area."**

Testimony of Rick Steiner, Professor and Conservation Biologist  
Oasis Earth ([www.oasis-earth.com](http://www.oasis-earth.com)), Anchorage  
**Alaska House Resources Committee Hearing**  
**Feb. 10, 2017**  
-----

### **Introduction**

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comment in support of HB 105, and look forward to any questions you may have afterward.

For the record, I am a conservation biologist with Oasis Earth ([www.oasis-earth.com](http://www.oasis-earth.com)) in Anchorage, and I was a professor with the University of Alaska from 1980 – 2010, stationed in Kotzebue, Cordova, and Anchorage.

As legislators, you all face many difficult decisions this session, but HB 105 is not one of them. This bill should be an easy and unanimous "YES."

1. One simple standard with which to decide bills in front of you is: does it hurt, or help the Alaska economy? And regarding HB 105, it is an overwhelming economic positive.

In these challenging economic times the state needs to do everything possible to support the Alaska economy.

One of the easiest and most cost-effective measures lawmakers can take to enhance our economy is to do everything possible to enhance the wildlife tourism industry – a \$2.7 billion/year industry in Alaska (I will elaborate more on that a bit later).

2. Another critical standard to base your decisions on is the principle of fairness and common ownership of all resources (including wildlife) by all Alaskans, embodied in the State Constitution, Article 8, Section 3: "Common Use":

***Wherever occurring in their natural state, fish, wildlife, and waters are reserved to the people for common use.***

All of us own and have equal access to the wolves in Denali, including the 70,000 Alaskans who visit the park each year -- not just the 2 or 3 individuals who hunt and trap them along the NE boundary.

And this month (Feb. 26) marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Alaska's most iconic tourism destination - Denali National Park & Preserve (DNPP). This would be the

perfect time to finally resolve the century-old problem of conserving park wildlife along the park's eastern boundary. HB 105 goes a long way toward doing just that.

[The only friendly amendment I would respectfully suggest is to include, in addition to wolves, a prohibition on take of all park predator species – bears, lynx, wolverine, coyote, etc., as these are valuable watchable wildlife for the park as well.]

## **Wolf Townships History**

In 1906, when east coast hunter-naturalist Charles Sheldon explored the Denali area, he noted that commercial hunters selling Dall sheep meat to railroad workers and miners were decimating local wildlife populations. Sheldon went to Washington D.C. and, along with the Boone and Crockett Club, advocated establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park as a “game refuge.” President Woodrow Wilson signed the original 2 million acre park into law on Feb. 26, 1917. But the precise boundaries necessary to protect park wildlife were unclear, imperfect, and continued to be debated. In particular, lands northeast of the original park boundary, where park wildlife migrate seasonally, were considered by many to need park protection as well.

According to Fairbanks historian Ed Davis, since the initial establishment of the park, there have been many unsuccessful attempts to add lands along the northeast boundary, now known as the “Wolf Townships” and “Stampede Trail,” into the park to protect park wildlife:

**1922** – AK Railroad proposes to include Wolf Townships in McKinley Park to protect Park wildlife.

**1965** – State selects Wolf Townships, but cites need to expand Park to protect caribou, and that existing Park boundary is “an arbitrary line.”

**1969** – Johnson administration considers, but declines, to add Wolf Townships into Park

**1978** – Wolf Townships found worthy for inclusion in Denali National Monument, but lands had been selected by State.

**1980** – The original version of ANILCA included the Wolf Townships within the new park boundaries because this area provides critical habitat for park wildlife. Although this area was removed from the final bill, the Senate report accompanying ANILCA made it clear the expectation was for the wolf townships to become part of Denali:

*The prime resource for which the north addition is established is the critical range necessary to support populations of moose, wolf, and caribou as part of an integral ecosystem. Public enjoyment of these outstanding wildlife values*

would thus continue to be assured.

Senate report 96-413, 1980, page 166

*In the northeast portion of the area, near the existing headquarters, there are some 3 townships of state lands which are critical for sheep, caribou, and wolf habitat and should eventually become a part of the park. ... The Committee recognizes that these areas are important to the park and recommends that the Secretary seek land exchanges with the State of Alaska that would serve to bring these areas into the Park.*

Senate report 96-413, 1980, page 167.

**1985** – State proposes to bring Wolf Townships into Park in exchange for Kantishna/Dunkle Mine being excluded from Park.

**1992** – Alaska Board of Game establishes 811 square mile wolf buffer on Wolf Townships and along entire eastern boundary of the park, but rescinds buffer two months later in political retaliation for Gov. Walter Hickel's suspension of some wolf control programs elsewhere.

**1995** – State proposes a rail line through Wolf Townships, and NPS plan cites need to protect area affected by rail line as Park.

**2000** – Board of Game reestablishes small no-kill wolf buffer, expands it in 2002 to 122 sq. mile (western part of Stampede Trail and Nenana Canyon).

**2001** – State (Knowles administration) proposes to convey Wolf Townships to UA, to then sell to Park.

**2008** – Scientists propose that ADFG Commissioner use Emergency Order authority to expand existing buffer to 530 sq. mile – denied.

**2010** – Four Alaska groups independently propose to Board of Game significant expansions of the existing wolf buffer – Denali Citizens Council, DNPP, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Anchorage Fish & Game Advisory Committee - all denied. Board instead eliminates the existing buffer entirely, and adopts a moratorium on considering any further Denali buffer proposals for 6 years.

**2010-2013** – Alaska citizens groups (including Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Denali Citizens Council, National Parks Conservation Association) file three Emergency Petitions asking Board of Game to reestablish the buffer (two in 2012, one in 2015) - all denied.

Alaska citizens repeatedly petition ADFG Commissioner to use emergency closure authority to close the area. Except for one 2-week closure ordered in May 2015 after the pregnant female of the East Fork wolf family group was killed in the area - all

denied. Alaska citizens propose in 2013 that the Board of Game lift its moratorium - denied. And despite the moratorium, Alaska citizens propose to Board of Game a wolf buffer in GMU 13, along south Denali boundary - denied.

**2013 – Present** – It had become obvious that the Board of Game will not and cannot provide a lasting solution to the Denali watchable wildlife problem. The Board remains ideologically opposed to protecting watchable wildlife in parks; and most significantly, even if the Board were to enact a legitimate closed area, the closure would not be permanent and could easily be removed by subsequent Board action. As example, the initial wolf buffer established by the Board in 1992 was then removed by the same Board only 2 months later, due to unrelated political issues.

None of these efforts throughout the park's 100-year history have succeeded.

Thus to restore and enhance the valuable wildlife viewing resource of DNPP, an authentic and durable solution is needed -- HB 105.

## **Denali wildlife viewing decline**

Today, against the wishes of many Alaskans, the state continues to permit hunting and trapping of Denali wildlife along the northeast park boundary. While this lethal take is relatively limited (ADFG reports a total of roughly 25 bears, wolves, lynx, and wolverines / year, taken by a few individuals), it has had a significant impact on wildlife viewing in the park.

For instance, just since the wolf buffer was eliminated in 2010, park visitor viewing success for wolves plummeted from 45% to only 5%, and has remained at this low level for the past 4 years (see NPS table in packet). This decline translates into an additional quarter of a million visitors per year being deprived the opportunity to view wolves in Denali.

Natural factors (e.g. low snowfall, etc.) may play a role in the wolf population and viewing decline, but it is clear that trapping/hunting take of important breeding individuals on state lands northeast of the park is also a significant contributing factor. And while wildlife managers can't do much about natural causes, they can and should help to restore the population by minimizing additional losses from trapping/hunting. This aligns with old adage: Change the things you can, accept the things you can't, and know the difference.

The science is clear. Studies confirm that killing Denali wolves along the park boundary has reduced the park wolf population, denning near the park road, and visitor viewing success (see 2 NPS studies in your packet).

**Breeder loss effect:** If significant breeding individuals are killed, their loss can cause a cascade of losses and disintegration of the family group.

**Grant Creek 2012:** This occurred with the Grant Creek wolf family group in 2012, after the last breeding female was trapped along the park boundary, leading to the disintegration of the family group from 15 to only 3 wolves that year. Viewing success in the park plummeted that year alone from 21% to 12%, due primarily to the trapping take of the one Grant Creek female.

**East Fork 2015/2016:** This effect occurred once again when the pregnant female of the East Fork (Toklat) family group was shot by an out-of-state hunter at a bear bait station just outside the park in 2015. Just as with the Grant Creek in 2012, the East Fork group in 2015 then failed to pup or den, dispersed and declined from 15 to only 2 last winter. In May 2016, the sole remaining East Fork male (collar designation GM1508) was shot by a hunter also at a bear baiting station, leaving one lone female survivor of this long-studied (70-year) Denali wolf family group. The surviving female denned and had two pups, but all have since disappeared and are presumed dead. This long studied wolf family group – one of the longest studied mammal groups in scientific history – is now almost certainly gone, due to the hunting take of two breeding members along the park boundary. This is an unnecessary and unfortunate loss to science.

**Park Mandate Unfulfilled** -- Clearly as the National Park has a mandate to protect the ecosystem in a natural, undisturbed condition, it has been unable to fulfill this mission due to wildlife take on the boundary.

## **Economic value of wildlife viewing**

One of the primary reasons visitors come to Alaska is to view wildlife. A 2011 study sponsored by ADFG estimated that wildlife viewing in Alaska supported over \$2.7 billion in economic activity - over twice that generated by hunting. Wildlife viewing supports an estimated 18,820 sustainable jobs in Alaska (with visitor spending per trip averaging \$6,000), while hunting supports 8,400 jobs.

For the many Alaska visitors who don't venture from the road system, Denali is their best chance to view wildlife. Studies confirm that a majority of Denali visitors cite wildlife viewing as the main purpose of their trip, and that viewing large carnivores, particularly wolves and grizzly bears, is a main indicator of a satisfying visitor experience in Denali.

The economic value of Denali wildlife viewing is enormous, and dwarfs the economic value of hunting/trapping these park animals.

Denali is Alaska's most visited national park, with 650,000 visits last year, 70,000 of who were Alaska residents.

**Visitor spending generated by Denali in 2015 was estimated at \$567 million** (exceeding Yellowstone and Yosemite), supporting some 7,300 jobs (NPS, 2016;

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>). In fact, Denali is the 4th largest revenue generating national park in the nation (exceeded only by Blue Ridge Parkway, Smoky Mountains, and Grand Canyon). And a great deal of this revenue comes into Anchorage.

Much of this economic value is driven by wildlife viewing.

Regarding the value of wildlife viewing, an interesting comparison is at Yellowstone National Park where, with an average visitor viewing success for wolves at 45% - 85%, the value of wolf viewing alone is estimated at \$35 million/year. Some Alaskans who want to view wolves in the wild now go to Yellowstone, not Denali. It is easy to imagine the potential value of restoring wolf viewing in Denali to such levels.

While the economic value of hunting and trapping of Denali wildlife is minimal, on the order of a few thousand dollars / year, the value of reallocating these animals to sustainable wildlife viewing in the park is orders of magnitude greater - in the tens of millions of dollars/ year. The rational economic choice is clear.

## **Denali Wildlife Conservation Area**

At this point it may be difficult to transfer these state lands into the national park, but the goal of protecting park wildlife can be achieved simply by the state administratively establishing a wildlife conservation area east of the park, leaving land title in current ownership. This would be similar to the Governor of Montana's establishment of a 300,000-acre bison conservation area on the boundary of Yellowstone last year.

Thus, to commemorate this month's centennial of Denali, many Alaskans are asking Governor Walker to establish a permanent Denali Wildlife Conservation Area along the northeast boundary of the park. As proposed, the DWCA would encompass about 530 mi<sup>2</sup> of lands (about 2/3 the size of the original buffer), would prohibit take of predator species (bears, wolves, wolverine, lynx, etc.), and would remain open for take of ungulates (moose, etc.) and small game as currently permitted by the state.

The argument re: "Isn't 6 million acres enough?" is answered by the simple fact that only 2 million acres of Denali are closed to hunting/trapping, 4 million acres are open to hunting/trapping (ANILCA).

The few hunters/trappers that would be displaced would retain access to millions of acres of state and federal lands to the north, east and south. And the 70,000 Alaskans and another 600,000 out-of-state tourists visiting the park each year, wanting to see these same animals alive, would benefit. This is a rational reallocation of the 25 or so animals killed each year by a few locals, to remain alive as watchable wildlife for hundreds of thousands of paying visitors.

The passage of HB 105 will get us part way there in fulfilling the century-long effort to protect park wildlife along the NE boundary of the Park.

## **Public support**

Thousands of emails and other communiqués have been sent to the Governor and ADFG Commissioner in support of permanent protection for Denali wildlife along the park boundary.

The state's main tourism association – the Alaska Travel Industry Association - supports a Denali wildlife buffer.

An on-line citizens petition in support of a Denali wildlife conservation area has over 330,000 signatures, from over 100 countries, all U.S. states, and many from Alaska:

<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/423/700/229/halt-the-killing-of-denali-national-park-wolves/>

And last August, the Fairbanks North Star Borough adopted Res. 2016-39: “A Resolution Urging Governor Walker To Close Areas Adjacent to Denali National Park & Preserve To The Trapping and Hunting of Bears, Wolves, and Wolverines.” (in your packet).

Clearly, Denali's watchable wildlife is one of the most important tourism assets in Alaska, and the economic benefit of protecting park wildlife on state lands east of the park is overwhelming and clear.

Many Alaskans hope that the Legislature will rise to this historic opportunity, and give Alaskans, Americans, and the world a long-overdue birthday present for Denali's centennial, by passing HB 105. Again, it may well be the easiest decision you will have to make this session!

Thank you for your consideration, and I'd be glad to answer any questions the Committee may have.

-----

[Also I offer my support HB 40 heard Monday – 200 feet trapping set back along public trails]