

## Kenai Wilderness: The cornerstone of wildlife conservation on the Kenai Peninsula

by Rick Johnston

Here on the Kenai, if you've visited the Russian River falls, caught a Russian River red or an early run king, fished commercially, harvested a trophy bull moose, or held your breath at the sight of Brown bear, you're reaping the benefits of Wilderness protection. Like shrewd investors who have protected their nest egg for hard times, Kenai Peninsula residents have a rich bank account of tangible fish and wildlife benefits as a result of the foresight of those who spent years working for Wilderness protection for the Kenai.

Wilderness...to some the word has almost prayer-like connotations...to others it represents too much federal land protection and an unnecessary substitution of distant federal decision-making over local wisdom and tradition. Even many wildlife managers have historically seen Wilderness protection as an impediment to good management. Others, however, like myself, see Wilderness as the only lasting protection for wildlife dependent on large home ranges and vulnerable to human activities.

I find it odd that the definition of "wilderness" in the Wilderness Act of 1964 did not specifically mention wildlife, but focused only on human impacts:

A wilderness in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions...

It was some years after the 1964 Wilderness Act that people began to appreciate federal Wilderness as protected habitat for wildlife, when human population and urban sprawl began to compete more aggressively with wildlife for undeveloped lands. This theme

was first hammered home by wildlife advocate Hank Fisher to a large group of resource managers at the First American Wilderness Management Conference at the University of Idaho in 1983. Striking a Winston Churchill pose, Mr. Fisher announced, Wilderness is good for wildlife!, and like Churchill, he proceeded to repeat this utterance eye-to-eye to various members of the audience, until they began to squirm. To this day I'm sure that no one present has ever forgotten his point!

Hank Fisher's point, simply translated, was that all things considered, federal Wilderness protection was the single most important cornerstone of wildlife protection in the United States.

One might think Mr. Fisher was preaching to the choir, considering the hundreds of federal land managers, biologists, and academics in attendance. To the contrary, however, many forest and wildlife managers had resource husbandry backgrounds; they considered Wilderness protection more of an "outdoor recreation" benefit rather than a preferred wildlife management tool. Many had spent their careers working to restore heavily grazed and cutover lands in the Lower-48, and the idea of preserving pristine lands for wildlife (rather than for human enjoyment) was beyond the scope of their professional experience.

Alaskans, however, knew real wilderness, and knew its value for wildlife. One of the first Wilderness Areas within the National Wildlife Refuge System was Chisik Island—that island geologic upheaval across from Ninilchik at the mouth of Tuxedni Bay. Tuxedni Wilderness encompasses most of Chisik Island and was established in 1967, and tens of thousands of nesting sea birds call Tuxedni Wilderness home each spring.

Support for federal Wilderness in Alaska had its roots on the Kenai Peninsula much earlier at the Kenai National Moose Range, as the Kenai Refuge was originally called. The Kenai National Moose Range was one of the first places in Alaska where wildlife and habitat protection came face-to-face with oil and gas development, community expansion, and road construction.

Seeing oil and gas development throughout the 1950's, as well as withdrawal of Refuge lands for homesteading, Refuge Manager Dave Spencer became concerned about loss of habitat for free roaming wildlife on the Kenai National Moose Range.

In the late 1950's, invoking the name of master guide Andrew Simons who was a strong supporter of wildlands, Dave Spencer established the Andrew Simons Research Natural Area between Skilak and Tustumena Lakes. The 806,000-acre area was chosen to protect salmon and brown bears and their habitat, and it was closed to all oil and gas exploration and leasing.

Later, the Wilderness Act of 1964 established Wilderness Areas and called for a systematic inventory of all federal land within existing National Forests and National Wildlife Refuges. The Kenai National Moose Range lands were inventoried and studied in the late 1960's and early 1970's with much public input. The Andrew Simons Research Natural Area became the core of several wilderness proposals which also included the Swan Lake and Swanson River Canoe route areas, the Caribou Hills, and the Mystery Hills. However, after getting caught up in debate regarding federal lands throughout Alaska, it wasn't until 1980 that Congress acted on the Kenai's proposals. As a provision of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), the Kenai Wilderness Area

was established, with considerably more acreage than the Refuge originally proposed. Underscoring the importance of fisheries protection, Congress added all of Tustumena Lake's 72,000 acres to the final Wilderness designation.

The Kenai Refuge presently has 1,315,809 acres of Wilderness, which represents 69% of the Refuge's almost 2 million acres. We have proposed (in 1988) classifying an additional 192,000 acres in the Chickaloon Flats—Big Indian Creek area as Wilderness, but it could be years before Congress acts on this proposal.

Although there has always been spirited debate regarding Wilderness protection on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, the early hunting guides, fish and game advisory committees, homesteaders, Refuge managers, and long-time Kenai Peninsula residents provided the support that ultimately resulted in Wilderness protection. In many ways they foresaw the simple truth spoken by Hank Fisher at the 1983 Idaho conference...that Wilderness is indeed good for wildlife, and that protecting large ecosystems was ultimately the only way to insure a continuing legacy of wildlife on the Kenai.

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