

Kenai National Wildlife Refuge concept born during 1897 hunt

by Gary Titus



Dall DeWeese, 1897

Most of us at some time or another have enjoyed recreational activities on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, be it hunting, fishing, hiking or snowmachining, to name a few. Some of us might know that the refuge was originally established as the Kenai National Moose Range, by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941. But how many readers are aware that the Kenai refuge concept had its beginnings as early as 1897?

It all started when a wealthy big game hunter from Canon City, Colo., traveled to Alaska, checking out rumors of giant moose on the Kenai Peninsula. Arriving in Cook Inlet, Dall DeWeese was told he would be fortunate to find a hunter by the name of Andrew Berg to guide him.

DeWeese found Berg at a Kasilof cannery and secured his services. The hunt, in the Tustumena Lake region, was successful, with several trophy moose taken and the peninsula stamped indelibly on DeWeese's mind. On the steamboat journey home DeWeese was already planning his next hunt here.

Word spread of a new territory with giant moose and white sheep, and many hunters laid plans for the season of 1898. For those lacking the time and financial wherewithal for an Alaska hunt, other means of acquiring trophies were available. At that time, there

were no game regulations whatsoever in the Territory of Alaska, and wildlife could be openly bought and sold by anyone. Local Alaska hunters started market hunting by killing moose and caribou for their heads and selling them at good prices for shipment to San Francisco and other points.

Upon DeWeese's return in the fall of 1898, after an absence of only one year, he was surprised to see a marked decrease in game populations. On his southbound trip, he stopped in Sitka and voiced his concerns to the editor of the Alaskan Sitka newspaper. The next day the paper's headline read, "ALASKAN GAME DOOMED. DALL DE WEESE THE GREAT HUNTER TELLS THE REASON." In this article, DeWeese made a plea for game preservation in the form of hunting laws and established game preserves.

Another big game hunter, Harry E. Lee, traveled north in the fall of 1899 to hunt the Kenai Peninsula. Lee had a good hunt, yet he saw problems developing with the lack of game laws. In a magazine article Lee wrote: "I would like to suggest that the American sportsmen should by all means try to secure this tract of land from the Government as a game preserve, and I hope someone will take the matter in hand before another year, for the game is wantonly killed by market hunters every winter, and if this is not soon put a stop to, it will be entirely exterminated."

This call for preserving the Kenai Peninsula wild game was taken up by many subsequent visiting sportsmen.

Dall DeWeese returned to hunt in Alaska again in 1899 and 1901, and he continued his call for wildlife preservation. In a letter to the new president, Theodore Roosevelt, in December of 1901, DeWeese wrote: "This is a subject that appeals to every 'true-blue sportsman,' every lover of animal life, and all those who see beauty in nature, embracing forests, plains, and mountains throughout our entire country, and while the woods, plains, and mountains are naturally beautiful, we all agree that they are much more grand and lifelike when the wild animals and birds are present. There are now several organizations doing

work toward the preservation of wild animal and bird life. There is much yet for us to do; to resolve is to act. Let us be up and at it.”

Someone must have been listening, because Teddy Roosevelt’s new Forestry chief, Gifford Pinchot, sent a young forester named William A. Langille to make a reconnaissance of the Kenai Peninsula in 1904. Langille traversed the peninsula from Seward to Seldovia, and during this trip he realized the unique value of the land as a wildlife and hunting preserve.

In his 1904 report, Langille expressed the opinion that on the peninsula, “there is room for the frontier settler and fishermen on the shore land; there let them abide in peace and prosper, but keep out the fire and wanton game destroyers.”

Langille further recommended that certain portions of the proposed Kenai Forest Reserve be specifically designated as game preserves for perpetuating the game species of the region. He recommended that Sheep Creek at the head of Kachemak Bay be set aside for Dall sheep, and that the Caribou Hills be set aside for moose and the few remaining caribou. (In 1909 Langille headed up the new Alexander Archipelago Forest Reserve, which became today’s Tongass National Forest. Many historians regard William Langille as the father of forestry in Alaska.)

Following Langille’s recommendations, the Chugach National Forest was designated on July 23, 1907, with further additions in 1909. At its maximum

size, the Chugach National Forest extended from the Copper River on the east to Cook Inlet on the west, to Kachemak Bay on the south, and included all the Chugach Mountains to the north.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, hunters and conservationists continued to press Congress to designate part of this land specifically as a wildlife preserve, without logging, mining and other forms of development. Congress finally recognized these voices, and a second President Roosevelt—FDR—signed the enabling legislation for the Kenai National Moose Range on Dec. 16, 1941, just nine days after Pearl Harbor.

In December 1980, the moose range was renamed the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and its purposes were expanded to include all wildlife species.

We owe a great vote of thanks to the early hunters and conservationists such as Dall DeWeese, Harry Lee and William Langille, as well as their successors, who worked for so many years to protect the refuge lands that we all enjoy today. On Sept. 29 we will recognize this history at our 60th birthday celebration. Festivities will occur from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Road, and everyone is invited.

Gary Titus is the wilderness ranger and historian at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.