Kenai National Wildlife Refuge head biologist encounters the 'Alaska Contradiction'

by John Morton

I am now four months into my new post as the supervisory fish and wildlife biologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. In that brief time I have sold and bought a house and have experienced many of the concerns that long-time residents have been grappling with for years.

My wife Leslie and I checked out the quality of the schools for our two daughters. We looked at health services and real estate prices. We looked at the road system and what it would take to live outside of town and still make a reasonable daily commute to Soldotna. We looked where the health clubs and supermarkets were located and where to buy books, hardware, and sporting goods.

Like most folks, we wanted to live in a nice place and still have access to all of the amenities that the Kenai-Soldotna area provides. Essentially, we looked at the Kenai Peninsula as any resident and parent would, evaluating the issues that frame and impact our quality of life.

At the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I work with a great group of dedicated, well-trained biologists and managers to maintain the ecological integrity of a mostly intact natural system that sprawls over 2 million acres. A big chunk of this area—1.3 million acres—qualifies as wilderness, both by Congress designation and by the fact that wolves and brown bears and wolverines continue to make their home there.

It's obviously a wonderful place to experience and to live close to, and it goes a long way toward explaining why the human population on the peninsula has increased 22% in the past decade. There are only superlatives to describe the wilderness resources on refuge.

But it also strikes me that this is a wilderness under siege, and herein lies the contradiction. There is the long history of oil and gas activities, increasing development along the Sterling Highway corridor and on private lands south of the Caribou Hills. We have expanding highways and more traffic, concerns about water quality in the Kenai River, and extremely high levels of recreational activity and tourism. The white spruce forests show the effects of a massive spruce beetle epidemic, and signs like malformed black-capped chickadees and wood frogs suggest that something is not quite right with Mother Nature.

This is the contradiction that I face as a private citizen and public servant. It's similar to how our society as a whole deals with nature and natural resources: I want my cake and I want to eat it, too. Put another way, how do you manage a refuge that is mostly wilderness but is being impacted by what most folks would call "Lower 48 issues?"

Strictly speaking, I am not a manager and I don't make the final judgment calls. Nevertheless, as a refuge biologist, my job is to provide the best scientific information for keeping a reasonable balance between the wilderness and our human needs and interests. And as I look back over my varied career as a well-traveled wildlife biologist, I see that most of my work has focused on studying the effects of humans and wildlife on one another.

In my last job, at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland, I worked on projects to control the damage that introduced rodents, called "nutria," were inflicting on tidal marshes. (Nutrias were introduced in the 1940s from South America to boost the sagging fur trade.)

In the Mariana Islands, I studied endemic bird species that were endangered because of the accidental introduction of the brown tree snake in military equipment salvaged from other South Pacific islands after World War II.

In Vermont, I evaluated the impacts of human development on hemlock and white cedar stands that were used as winter yards by white-tailed deer.

In Wisconsin, I wrote a handbook on enhancement techniques to reduce the impacts of the lock-and-dam system on fish and wildlife resources of the upper Mississippi River.

In northern Mexico, I returned to study a population of hook-billed kites, only to find that what had been native scrub habitat the year before was now row crops as far as the eye could see.

In California, I studied how bird depredation reduced commercial grape yield in Napa Valley vineyards.

In the Ecuadorian rainforest, I worked with the Cofan Indians to study white-lipped peccaries, and saw how localized hunting forced howlers and organ-grinder monkeys to switch their feeding from day to night. Similarly, while studying the wintering ecology of American black ducks on Virginia's coast, I found that their use of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge was dictated by hunting and boating activity in the adjacent saltmarsh.

In the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, I studied how aircraft overflights had the potential to reduce the accumulation of pre-migratory fat on snow geese.

In the North Pacific and Bering Sea, I monitored the incidental take of Dall's porpoises and seabirds by Japanese salmon driftnets. Out of Barrow and Deadhorse, I flew aerial surveys over the Chukchi Sea to assess how bowhead whales responded to offshore oil rigs during the fall migration.

All of this work fascinated me so much, I eventually earned a doctorate in wildlife ecology, studying the effects that human recreation was having on sanderlings and other shorebirds wintering at Assateague Island National Seashore.

The point of these examples is not to show how well my chosen profession has treated me. (In truth, I spend a lot more time nowadays in front of a computer than I like to admit.)

Rather, my point is that interactions between humans and wildlife take a lot of different forms in different places. Many of these interactions can become conflicts, but the good news is that there can be creative solutions for many of them.

In the details every wildlife-human interaction is unique. We have different levels of knowledge about each system, different cultural perspectives, different species, different players, and different societal values.

Nevertheless, there is a commonality among these situations. It comes down to what we humans are willing to give up in order to maintain a certain quality of life, for both our fellow creatures and ourselves.

Nobody has a lock on the "right" answer. The best solutions I've seen often arise from a hodge-podge of research, management, regulations, agencies, grassroots environmental groups, sportsmen's clubs, bird-watching groups, concerned citizens, and Chambers of Commerce.

And, in the short time that I've been on the Kenai, I've seen some good collaborative problem solving underway, whether it be a moratorium on the number of commercial fishing guides or working out the best alternative for the Cooper Landing bypass.

Everybody has a different perspective on what makes the Kenai Peninsula a nice place to live. What is critically important is that people think about what makes it nice, remembering what originally attracted them to this place, and why they continue to stay.

I'm thrilled, as a private citizen, as a wildlife biologist, and as a civil servant, to be part of the process that is working to keep the Kenai one of the best places to live.

What a great place to be at the start of the New Year!

John Morton is the new supervisory biologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, taking over for retired supervisor Ted Bailey. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at http://kenai.fws.gov.