

Kenai Wilderness has long call

by Dave Kenagy

I had just spent a cold, memorable, winter working at Denali National Park. The Park in winter was very different than in summer—no people—just snow and quiet. Now it was April, and spring had begun with a freshness and clarity that only happens in the interior. Park visitors had not yet arrived, and except for the sounds of trickling water, wind in the trees, and the occasional gray jay or ptarmigan, the place had an eerie silence about it. It was like a land just being born. It was wild Alaska.

On my day off I went out into the Park, to Primrose Ridge, to photograph Dall sheep. When I returned to Park Headquarters there was a note waiting for me. I had gotten a phone call from Kotzebue. Would I like to work at Noatak National Preserve for the summer? Wow, would I!

There was only one hitch. Before I could call the Chief Ranger at Kotzebue, I got a call from Ranger Rick Johnston, at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Would I like to work in the Kenai Wilderness as a back-country ranger for the summer? Wow, would I!

Rick is a multi-talented fellow. But, if there is one exceptional talent Rick has, it is this: he's such a good talker he could sell leaves to trees. He sold me on the Refuge and the Kenai Wilderness. Instead of remaining a "Parkie," I became a "Refugee." That was 20 years ago.

I left Denali and headed down to the Kenai. I had been to the Kenai before, but just to visit, and I hadn't paid much attention to the topography and vegetation. I hadn't yet been on the "Canoe Trails," and now it would be my responsibility to patrol them and do the trail work. As I drove the Sterling Highway near Watson Lake, I looked up to the northwest, where I knew the "Canoe Trails" were located. All I could see were miles of stumpy little black spruce trees of the 1947 burn. My heart sank. Why had I given up the wilds of northwestern Alaska, and float trips on the Noatak River, for this? I had pictured the canoe lakes to be surrounded by handsome birch and white spruce, not wet tundra and scraggly black spruce.

Being the stoic that I am, I drove on. I would find out that summer that the Kenai Wilderness was even more incredible than Rick had described. The

high country took my breath away. The canoe system was sublime, even with all the garbage pick-up at the campsites. And, as I found to my delight, most of the canoe lakes were indeed surrounded by handsome birch and white spruce. I patrolled 1.3 million acres of wilderness to my heart's content, cleared trails, cleaned up trash, and got a good look at wild Alaska.

As I look back twenty years, there is much that has not changed about the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The wilderness that so delighted and inspired me 20 years ago is still here, and still wild and pristine. The Canoe System looks much the same, and has about the same number of visitors now as then. Even most areas outside the Kenai Wilderness are still characteristic of wild Alaska.

But, the surrounding communities have certainly changed. There were no traffic lights in Kenai or Soldotna when I arrived, and visitors pretty much abandoned the Kenai Peninsula once August rolled around. Sterling was not much more than a wide spot in the road. There were no big box stores. Traffic, even in the middle of summer, was tolerable. It's amazing how much small communities can change in 20 short years.

As you may know, this year is the 100th anniversary of the National Wildlife Refuge System. So, many of us here at the Refuge have been trying to peer into the future, and imagine what the Refuge might be like in another hundred years.

To aid in my peering, I did some research on population trends. The projections for the Kenai Peninsula for the next 20 years suggest an increase, but more modest than in the past; projections beyond 20 or 30 years are as murky as glacial runoff. Today, there are about 50,000 people living on the Peninsula: by 2023 there will likely be almost 70,000. During that same period the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna area is projected to grow from about 333,000 to about 425,000. Many of those folks will choose to spend their time on the Refuge, producing more traffic and crowding; and certainly more will visit the Kenai Wilderness. But, how about the next 40, or 80, or even 100 years? No one knows. Peering into the future is an exceptionally difficult task; I have given up.

As for the Kenai Wilderness, which was

Congressionally-designated in 1980, the picture is clearer. The wilderness we hike or canoe today shouldn't look much different to the hiker or canoeist 100 years from now. Congress has done a pretty good job of explaining the "why" and "what" of wilderness, so I'll give you their words from the Wilderness Act:

"In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness..."

Congress went on to describe the features that characterize wilderness:

"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 chapter an 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..."

I encourage you to experience the Kenai Wilderness, and since I cannot say it better than he, I'll let Edward Abbey, a champion of wild places, encourage

you even more: "So get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, encounter the grizz, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, that lovely, mysterious and awesome space." Amen.

My hope is that 100 years from now a ranger working somewhere in America, will get a call from a "Ranger Rick" here at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, asking, "Would you like to work in the Kenai Wilderness as a backcountry ranger for the summer?" I hope they have the same reaction I did; "Wow, would I!" I also hope that the Kenai Wilderness they see is still pristine, and full of wildlife, clean air and water, and the sights and sounds of wild Alaska.

Mark your calendars for August 2, 2003, when Kenai NWR and Alaska Maritime NWR host a Centennial Celebration of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The event is free to the public at the Alaska Fairgrounds in Ninilchik and lasts from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Attractions include speakers, movies, displays, and kid's activities sharing Alaska's refuges and wildlife. Live music and delicious food will also be provided.

Dave Kenagy is the Volunteer Coordinator at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and can assure you that an office with houseplants is no substitute for a wilderness experience. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.