

## A wolf conference that comes once a decade

by Elizabeth Jozwiak

I had the privilege to attend and present a paper at the 2003 World Wolf Congress. This was an international wolf conference that brought together scientists, researchers and educators from over 24 countries. More importantly, the conference provided a forum to assess the role of “leading edge” science in wolf ecology and management across the globe.

Not many people realize that wolves exist in other areas of the world, not only on the North American continent. Wolves can be found in the French Alps, Italy, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Portugal, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, and Mongolia. The conference was definitely an assemblage of a diverse group of people with varying values, attitudes, and expertise. It’s amazing however, that many of the attendees and presenters actually share similar challenges when working with wolves in a human dominated environment.

A wildlife biologist is faced with several issues while working with wolves. Managing healthy populations of wolves in areas open to harvest provides one set of challenges; managing for the persistence of wolves in protected areas (such as in Yellowstone National Park) provides another set of challenges.

One of the important “take home” messages from the conference was two-fold for me. While many people around the world view wolves as an integral component of the natural ecosystem and a wilderness icon, many other people fear wolves, or conflict with them because wolves impact their interests. When wolves live close to human settlements, the human-wolf relationship profoundly influences wolf management.

Consumptive users of wolves in Alaska and Canada such as trappers and hunters have a special interest in wolf management. Wolf pelts are sold commercially, and wolf trapping constitutes a source of income for some communities. Some sectors of the hunting community kill wolves to reduce their impact on prey populations. Livestock ranchers (in the lower 48 states) and sheep herders (Italy, Scandinavia, Poland) who occupy wolf ranges also have a special interest in wolf management because wolf depredation can impact their economies. More recently, people in the tourism industry have also developed an economic interest in wolves, and have raised a powerful voice for

wolf conservation.

So why attend a world wolf conference? Should we not stay focused on managing wolves here on the Kenai Peninsula? As a wildlife biologist, I need to look “outside the box” of our own specific situations to examine how other wolf managers are dealing with their respective challenges, which could “spark that creative light bulb” in our own management programs.

I was not the only Alaska representative at the conference. Layne Adams from USGS, Alaska Science Center in Anchorage, presented a paper on the importance of salmon (chum and chinook) as a food source to wolves in Denali National Park from summer to early winter. Recent studies have shown that wolves that inhabit coastal areas feed on salmon, and are an important food resource. Wolves in the Interior are thought to rely primarily on caribou and moose, with other food resources contributing very little to their diet. Through stable isotope analysis (looking at the bone carbon and nitrogen and from tissues of dead wolves) Layne was able to determine that salmon were also on the menu of Denali wolves.

Mark McNay, from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) in Fairbanks, presented a paper on the reproductive characteristics of heavily hunted and trapped wolf populations in Interior Alaska. Most wolf packs usually have one dominant breeding female which produces pups. Mark found that 40%-80% of secondary females were also found to be pregnant when they were examined with a portable field ultrasound scanner, and that pregnancy rates were highest after intensive trapping. Many of these secondary females contributed wolf pups to the pack, and pup survival among these multiple litter packs varied.

The paper that I presented at the conference discussed the response of wolves to changing harvest levels on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Wolves have been studied on the Refuge with the support of the ADF&G since 1976. I believe the Kenai Refuge has the longest running wolf monitoring program on any national wildlife refuge in the country.

While the Refuge’s efforts and objectives have changed throughout the last 27 years, we continue to monitor the health and population status of wolves

primarily with the use of radio telemetry. Earlier work with wolves in the 1970s and early 1980s by Rolf Peterson involved looking at the interaction of moose with this newly expanding wolf population on the Kenai Peninsula.

Our most recent focus has been to examine the response of wolves to a lower harvest in the 1990s and up to the present. Recent data suggest that wolf populations have not increased proportionally with the lower wolf harvest, as they did in 1970s and 1980s. Wolves appear to be at a low, but stable, density at this time on the Kenai.

At the conference I had the opportunity to discuss some of my thoughts and hypotheses as to what may be occurring on the Refuge that is limiting wolf population growth. Declining food sources, higher rates of

wolf dispersal, lower wolf pup survival, and the effects of disease were all competing theories that I discussed with colleagues at the conference.

All in all, I have an appreciation for the outstanding work that is being done by biologists in other parts of the world. I look forward to attending the next world wolf conference ten years from now!

More information on the World Wolf Congress is available at <http://www.worldwolfcongress.ca>.

*Elizabeth Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Liz has worked with wolves, lynx, and other furbearers on the Kenai Peninsula for over 15 years. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*