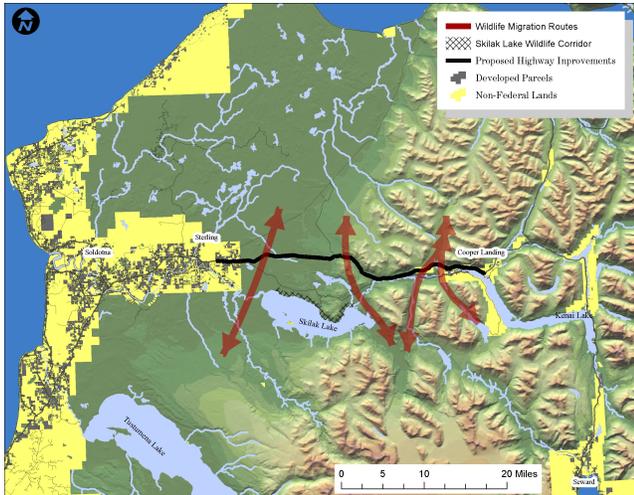


Splitting the Kenai: two halves don't make a whole

by John Morton and Rick Ernst



Increasing human development is slowly dividing the Kenai Peninsula into northern and southern halves, with reduced wildlife migration corridors connecting the two halves. USFWS/ Mark Laker

I read an interesting essay by Lance Petersen, called the Fragmentation of Kenai. Published in 1983, he bemoaned the loss of community that was the result of rapid population and economic growth after he moved to Kenai in 1953. Mr. Petersen was writing about the human community. But the same notion can be applied to wildlife populations, as they adapt to a world with a heavy human footprint.

When the Kenai National Moose Range (now the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge) was created in 1941, there was little to impede wildlife from moving around the peninsula. The Alaska Northern Railroad stretched from Seward to Turnagain Arm, a highway ran from Hope to Seward, and a narrow road connected Cooper Landing to Seward.

For the most part, the peninsula was still wide-open country for wildlife. As the raven flies, there were 65 miles of timbered country from the mouth of the Kenai River to the eastern shore of Kenai Lake (along the Seward Highway). The Kenai and Skilak Lakes are wide enough to be natural obstacles to most wildlife, but that still left 38 miles of a mostly unaltered landscape for wildlife to move north and south across the peninsula.

The Kenai began to really change when the Sterling Highway opened in the fall of 1950, connecting Seward and Hope to Homer. A year later, the last section of the Seward Highway, connecting Anchorage and Seward, was completed along Turnagain Arm. Fragmentation of the Kenai had begun in earnest.

Then in 1964, in response to a Public Land Order issued by the Bureau of Land Management, three townships west of Skilak Lake were removed from the Kenai National Moose Range. This area became the 6-mile wide development corridor that runs along the Sterling Highway from Soldotna almost to the Skilak Lake Loop Road.

Even at that time, it was recognized that this removal from Federal management was compromising the ability of wildlife to move north and south across the Kenai. An interagency report written in 1964 directed our attention to the remaining lands along the Sterling Highway that were still within the Moose Range. This report stressed that perhaps the most essential feature of this tract to moose is that of a migration corridor between the north and south sections of the Range; it is essential to retain the three-mile corridor to permit the unimpeded travel movement to and from their winter and summer ranges and through the winter area as required by forage and snow conditions. Elimination of this corridor would jeopardize the value of the Range for moose. This report was referring to the three mile stretch from the east end of the Sterling corridor to the Skilak Lake outlet (see map).

Now, four decades later, life has gotten tougher for wildlife. In 2006, more than a million vehicles traveled down even the remotest sections of the Sterling Highway. On average, that's 2 vehicles every minute of every hour of every day! Traffic volume of this magnitude helps translate to an average of 250 moose killed annually by vehicles, most of which are adult females or calves.

As many as 28 brown bears in a year have been killed in defense of life and property, many in the Sterling corridor that includes the subdivisions around the Mackey Lakes, Browns Lake and Robinson Loop Road. Over time, continued subdividing of private lands along the Sterling and Spur Highways will make

the area extending from Kenai to east of Sterling effectively impermeable to much wildlife. Satellite and GPS transmitters from collared moose and caribou indicate that both species already tend to avoid these areas.

Further east on the Sterling Highway, two new projects propose to widen the road from MP 45-58 and MP 58-79. In addition, there are plans underway to create a 100-unit subdivision in Cooper Landing. Cumulatively, these projects leave only two potential corridors without significant human interference: a 3.5-mile wide segment immediately west of the mouth of Skilak Lake and a four mile wide segment from the headwaters of Skilak Lake to the west end of the MP45-60 Project. These two corridors combined represent only 20% of the 38 miles historically available for north-south movement by wildlife!

The Refuge is clearly concerned about this gradual severing of the Kenai Peninsula into two distinct parts. In the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Management Plan, published this past January, we established a 0.5-mile wide travel corridor for wildlife along the north shore of Skilak Lake in which no new development (i.e., trails and campgrounds) will occur. This buffer connects the two corridors on either side of Skilak Lake (see map).

In the long term, there are no easy answers to bal-

ancing human and wildlife needs. The fragmentation of the Kenai, while a relatively new phenomenon in Alaska, is a problem that is at the forefront of environmental concerns elsewhere in much of North America. Although Mr. Petersen was writing about the town of Kenai, I think his last couple of lines ring true for the Kenai Peninsula: The changes I've witnessed in the past 20 years have been too complicated and too complete to allow Kenai to return to the kind of community it was in the early 50s... Geographically, it is still a good place to live. The sweeping sky and the solid mountains haven't changed. Kenai has. We'll have to be pretty proactive and progressive in our thinking and management to keep the peninsula a good place for people and wildlife.

John Morton is the Supervisory Fish & Wildlife Biologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He is also adjunct faculty at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Colorado State University. Rick Ernst is the pilot-biologist for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He is conducting a study to identify potential wildlife crossings between MP58-79 on the Sterling Highway. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.