

The important stuff?

by Robin West

The news these days seems to be filled with more than a few topics that make life a little less than pleasant: war on terror, world economic slowdown, corruption in politics, global warming... These things are changing countless lives—some in very real ways, and some in creating a seemingly constant drag down on the human spirit. As such, it gives one pause to reflect on what is important in our own lives. For most perhaps our core values involving faith, freedom, family, friends, and finances shape our frame of mind, but with all of that said, most of us also have very tangible things that give us the quality of life we desire. For me this has always been the love of wild places and wild things.

As a child I spent most of my free time wandering open fields; catching insects, frogs, and snakes; hunting; trapping; fishing; and camping. When I wasn't actually engaged in my outdoor pursuits I was often planning them, or simply day dreaming about the next adventure.

For me the love of the outdoors became a career, but it has also been much more than that. It has also been a lifestyle that has allowed me to find peace in God's creation; to feel alive and healthy climbing mountains, breathing fresh air, and enjoying the bounty of the land. It has provided me accomplishment in seeing new places and species, capturing unique photographs or just memories, and harvesting fish and game that I might pursue. It has provided me comfort with the warmth of the morning sun and the beauty of snow-capped mountains or a star-lit night. It has provided me joy with sharing a spectacular vista, sunset, or campfire with friends and family.

I know that many people share this connection to the land as I do; however, in this day of increasing urbanization and business I also believe that it is becoming less important for many. That is a shame. The simple rewards of spending time out-of-doors should not be cast aside. Children of all ages should learn all they can about the natural world—it provides a lifetime of opportunities. And it is always there, whether the Dow Jones Industrial average is up or down, wild places and the critters that call them home remain unchanged, as long as society continues to conserve and

protect them.

This is why I feel so strongly about taking care of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. It is more than a job. The Refuge symbolizes the quality of life for so many of the area's local residents and visitors alike. And while there will always be room for argument about the specifics of how an area is managed, taking care of the area for future generations is the paramount objective.

More to the point, I receive regular advice regarding increasing or decreasing hunting, fishing, or trapping opportunities, or increasing or decreasing motorized or other access options. Frankly, our human values don't always agree when it comes to how to recreate or use or protect wildlife. But where we can take solace is the general agreement that wildlife are important (whether you want to watch them, eat them, or just like knowing they are there) and as such protecting important wildlife habitats is crucial.

The United States can be proud of its National Wildlife Refuge System—a unique system of lands and waters set aside for the over 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species, and 200 species of fish that call them home. There are currently 545 national wildlife refuges in the United States—at least one in each of the 50 states—and one within an hour's drive of most major U.S. cities.

More than 40 million people visit the 98% of refuges that are open to the public to pursue one or more outdoor activities. The National Wildlife Refuge System can provide a peaceful interlude for an hour or two, or offer a week's long escape into true wilderness. If you have not discovered the value of spending time out-of-doors, or have been delinquent in recent time in shedding the cell phone and skipping the nightly news, I invite you out to the Kenai Refuge for a visit.

If you are planning a vacation Outside, or elsewhere in Alaska, consider checking out a refuge there during your visit. Seeing a manatee at Merritt Island NWR in Florida, or an alligator along the boardwalk in Okefenokee NWR in Georgia are easy add-ons to a trip to Disney World that are sure to create memories equal to a ride down Splash Mountain or the purchase of a mouse-ear hat souvenir!

Try bird watching on the Texas coast or bird hunting at any of the thousands of waterfowl production areas in the upper Midwest, or fishing at more than 260 refuges open to the sport. Outdoor opportunities aren't too bad right here at Kenai either! Check out our web site at <http://kenai.fws.gov/>.

So regardless of how the elections turn out or whether you have witnessed your retirement fund

evaporate in recent months, take the time to enjoy some important stuff—get outside and enjoy!

Robin West is the manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and enjoys the outdoors for both work and play. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.