

P.O. Box 64  
Denali Park, Alaska 99755  
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Paul Anderson, Superintendent  
Denali National Park and Preserve  
P.O. Box 9  
Denali National Park, Alaska 99755

ghaber@mtaonline.net

Sent as a PDF file via e-mail

Re: Wolves and people in Denali National Park

Dear Paul:

Several times over the past couple of years I have asked you to reconsider your policies concerning wolf-people interactions in Denali National Park, so far without much response. These policies are creating major risks not only for Denali wolves and the world-class scientific and visitor-viewing values they provide but also for park visitors.

Attached as a PDF file is an illustrated essay that again addresses the issue. This appears in the spring 2004 edition of the Friends of Animals magazine, which has a readership of more than 200,000 and is sent to many other organizations.

Your thinking about wolf-people interactions and advice to park visitors – including as presented in the joint NPS-Defenders of Wildlife visitor handout that appeared last summer – are based on only a small, selective portion of the pertinent scientific research on Denali wolves. Both are seriously deficient. The first three sections of the attached essay explain why and the fourth (“Better guidelines”) recommends policies and visitor advice that are more consistent with the research information.

Most urgently needed (“Better guidelines”) is an immediate ban on all dogs and other pets inside most of the park, especially in the Teklanika campground area. This area is used heavily by denning Toklat (East Fork) wolves. Many scientific publications have made the point that dogs provoke incidents of wolf aggression and predation and pose disease-related risks. Surely some of your biologists are familiar with these publications. If not, I will be happy to provide a list, including of several that refer to Denali wolf-dog interactions. Given the prominence of yearlings in the Toklat family group this spring, the potential for a problem may be higher than it has been for several years.

Each additional day that you allow Denali visitors to bring their dogs to Teklanika in particular represents another throw of the dice. The stakes in this gamble include the safety of park visitors and their pets as well as the irreplaceable scientific and other values of the 38-65-year-old Toklat family lineage of wolves. When the inevitable happens, it will be a clear matter of record that you and the National Park Service were amply warned.

There is widespread carelessness by biologists and others in the use of “habituated” to characterize fearless wolves, and I have been as careless as anyone. Supposedly scientists continue to improve their thinking, however. Events surrounding the arrival of the two Toklat newcomer males in 2001 and recent group turnovers in the eastern park were especially valuable as eye-openers for me, as noted in the attached essay. This and a better job of integrating behavioral observations from the past and from other areas prompted me to reconsider some of my assumptions about habituation and to recognize that its common usage does not do a very good job of explaining the people-related behavior of Denali wolves.

There is an important but commonly overlooked distinction between prolonged fixation and behavior (indifference, curiosity, investigative, etc) that is mostly an aside to other objectives. Fearless/“habituated” does not unquestionably equate to unnatural/“not wild.” This behavior is not new for Denali wolves. It has not shown any indication of evolving into serious aggression.

Dr. David Mech’s explanation of “habituated” and “wild” in a March 12, 2004 interview on KUAC Public Radio, Fairbanks pretty much also describes the basis for your policies. His explanation appears verbatim in Appendix I. It is a good illustration of circular, tautological thinking. I appreciate that he left the support for it at “most of us.” Per the attached essay, I think there is a better way of interpreting the available observations.

Finally, over recent years there have been frequent intimations and outright claims by some NPS staff and others about aggressive or otherwise “menacing” wolf behavior in Denali. I examined most of these claims by interviewing participants, witnesses, and/or NPS staff that investigated. I personally observed several of the highest-profile incidents. None involved aggressive, menacing, or any other such behavior. Some amounted to just the opposite. Appendix II provides two examples.

Let me know if you would like any additional details.

Sincerely,

Gordon C. Haber, Ph.D.

Attachment (PDF file)

cc: NPS Alaska Regional Director, others

### **Appendix I. Mech comments about wolf habituation and related**

On March 12, 2004, reporter Dan Bross interviewed Dr. David Mech about Denali wolves on KUAC Public Radio, Fairbanks. Here I excerpt Bross’ and Mech’s comments - ver-

batim and in their entirety (minus the “ahs,” etc of normal conversation) - about habituation of Denali wolves and what constitutes “wild,” “typical” behavior around people.

Bross:

“With the wolves in Denali there’s this concern that, because they coexist with tourists and others who make use of the park, that they’re no longer as wild as wolves that exist other places in Alaska.” What do you think about that assumption?”

Mech:

“By definition it’s true, right? I mean, ‘not as wild’ means that they’re habituated to people and that some wolves have become used to or accustomed to humans and therefore tend to have lost their fear of humans. So when they see a human, rather than run the other way, which most wolves do, these wolves will either just stand there and watch or maybe even approach the human. And that’s what a habituated wolf is. So that, automatically, is less wild than one that is not habituated.”

Bross:

“So how would you characterize typical wolf behavior?”

Mech:

“Wolves have been persecuted and harassed for so long that they have developed a fear of humans, and those are the ones that most of us call ‘wild’ wolves. In a small percentage of that area, like national parks, particularly parts of Denali, wolves have become re-accustomed to humans. That is, some of the wolves in the park, rather than having been shot and trapped, have become more accustomed to seeing humans and realizing that the tourists are not a danger to them. So they don’t run away. And those wolves we call ‘habituated’ to humans. And they, by definition, are less wild than those that have not become habituated.”

## **Appendix II. Examples of “menacing” wolf behavior toward people in Denali**

1. On August 9-12, 2000, seven Toklat adults and subadults and their four pups provided thousands of park visitors with an extraordinary wolf-viewing opportunity from within a few hundred feet of the Teklanika bridge as they killed a moose, confronted bears intent on taking it from them, and interacted with each other. They, the moose, and bears went about these activities for the most part in a natural way, virtually ignoring the dozens if not hundreds of visitors as well as buses and other vehicles that were present almost constantly during the daylight hours. Many thousands of pictures and lots of video were taken of this natural behavior, such as in the photographic essay, “Dance of Death,” published in the May 2004 issue of National Geographic Magazine.

At one point a Toklat yearling timidly approached the small pack that a photographer had set down on the road. An NPS employee snapped a picture as the wolf sniffed the pack briefly, and this has become NPS's primary icon of the entire, rich, mostly natural four-day event. This unrepresentative scene of a wolf sniffing a pack – rather than a selection from the thousands of pictures that show the prevailing natural wolf-moose-bear interactions - now appears regularly in slide shows and other material that NPS and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game disseminate in trying to characterize this event and fearless wolf behavior in general as unnatural and ominous.

2. Late on May 31, 2001, six Toklat wolves departed the natal den on a hunt along one of their routine travel routes, i.e., downriver and then northward along the park road past the Teklanika campground. At the campground entrance, three of the six diverted 150 yards or so into the campground and began circling a tent from only a few feet away. Inside were a Norwegian couple and their baby. They saw the wolves through the tent window but did not come outside. Within about ten minutes the wolves left, having done nothing more than circle the tent repeatedly, chew briefly on a toy truck, and carry off a sandal.

Several key NPS staff cited this incident to me as a good example of menacing, worrisome, unnatural wolf behavior. It was just the opposite. The Norwegian baby was screaming loudly at the time, as it had done for much of the previous day because of a stomach ailment. Its screaming could be heard from almost a half mile away and sounded much like a wounded animal or a bawling bear cub. It is surprising that only three of the six wolves investigated such a seemingly obvious prey possibility. At no time did they show the slightest hint of aggressive behavior while circling the tent – only intense curiosity as they evaluated the loud distress calling inside. It would have been easy for them to jump on the tent in an aggressive fury but they did not, plainly because they figured out that there were people inside. Chewing the toy truck and carrying off the sandal probably amounted to displacement activities, the kind of behavior that one sees commonly, especially on the part of juveniles, just after wolves are frustrated by a capable moose or something else.