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1. WILDLIFE: Groups seek shorter brown bear hunting season in Alaskan preserve

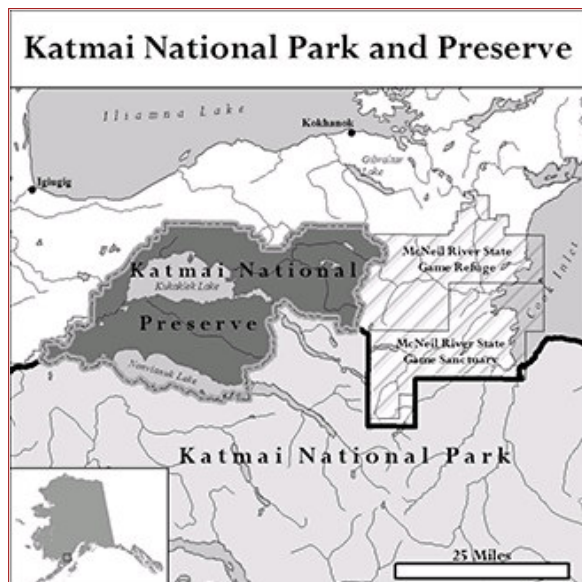
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Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- In contrast with most parts of the world, Alaska boasts a healthy population of brown bears. With approximately 35,000 brown bears, also called grizzlies, the challenge for state and federal resource managers is usually less about maintaining a stable population than trying to balance competing interests that favor either hunting or expanded bear viewing opportunities for a booming ecotourism industry.

The issue frequently comes to a head at the Katmai National Park and Preserve, run by the National Park Service, located about 250 miles southwest of Anchorage.

In the latest development, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) along with several bear guides have asked NPS's Alaska Region Director Marcia Blaszak to take emergency actions to shorten the upcoming hunting season in Katmai as a way to stave off what they believe is a troubling decline in the localized brown bear population. In an Aug. 16 [letter](#), NPCA's Alaska regional director Jim Stratton asked Blaszak to delay the start of hunting season from Oct. 1 to at least Oct. 7, and to expedite a comprehensive brown bear management plan for the park.



The Katmai National Park and Preserve is located about 250 miles southwest of Anchorage. Map courtesy of NPCA. [Click here for a larger version of the map.](#)

about 14 to 18 per year, NPCA said. During the 1985 to 2002 period, there were nine permitted hunts in the preserve, with an average harvest of about 7 bears per year.

By comparison, a 12 percent harvest experienced at Katmai over the past two years has resulted in as many as 35 bears being killed annually. Guided concession hunts, regulated by NPS rules, account for about 60 percent of the take, NPCA said.

Two of the bear guides who signed the NPCA letter, Ken Day and Chris Day, owners of Emerald Air Service, offered anecdotal evidence that in 1995 it was not uncommon to see 35 to 60 bears on a trip to such bear viewing areas as the Funnel, Moraine or Battle creek drainages of the Katmai preserve. But in 2006, the Days reported a daily count of one-third that number.

However, even though NPS cited similar figures when it petitioned the state Board of Game in February to shorten the hunting season, the agency has since changed its position, Quinley said. Based on more recent surveys conducted by state biologists, he said, "Bear populations in Katmai are healthy. We don't think emergency action is warranted."

Quinley said that NPS manages bears over a broad region, not just the local areas cited by NPCA. "We think that in the larger area

"In recent years, changes to the hunting patterns and regulations in the area have doubled the number of bears taken from the Katmai Preserve while at the same time the numbers of bears observed by local bear viewing guides has dropped significantly," Stratton wrote. "In this conflict between bears to hunt and bears to watch, we believe the current situation favors hunters and is contrary to the congressional mandate for Katmai bear management."

The letter was co-signed by representatives of several bear guide services that have built a steady business flying tourists into the preserve and other viewing areas, such as the nearby McNeil River State Game Sanctuary.

While admitting that the issue is a localized population problem rather than a regional concern, NPCA urged NPS to act on its own recommendations made to the state Board of Game earlier this year to implement a shorter hunting season. "No one is questioning whether hunting can occur or not," the letter continued. "We are not asking the Park Service to do anything more than it already requested of the state of Alaska."

Though the preserve is NPS property, bear hunting is managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game under rules adopted by the Board of Game, NPS spokesman John Quinley told *Land Letter*. Regional Director Blaszak was not available for comment.

Stratton also was unavailable to talk about the letter this week, but documents provided by NPCA indicate that a sustainable bear population would be about 140 to 156 per 1,000 square kilometers. With a "harvest guideline" of 6 percent -- similar to a rule of thumb used in the Kodiak area bear management plan -- the sustainable harvest at Katmai would be

population numbers are not declining," he said. "If we had in January all the information we have now, we probably would not have written the same letter to the board."

He said NPS will offer a formal response to the NPCA letter in September after its resident bear expert returns from the field.

Bear management an evolving science

Larry Van Daele, a biologist with Fish and Game who specializes in brown bears, emphasized that in Alaska and other parts of the North Pacific Rim, brown bears are very healthy. "Instead of an animal we're trying to bring back from the edge of extinction, most of us look at them as a resource to be maintained," he said during an interview with *Land Letter*.

Earlier this month, Van Daele headed up a brown bear workshop sponsored by the Anchorage-based Northern Forum. The summit brought together bear managers from the United States, Russia, Japan and other Arctic rim nations for field-level visits to Anchorage, Fairbanks and Denali National Park and to share ideas and plan joint studies.

"All around the Northern Hemisphere, bears are seen as something special," Van Daele said. For indigenous peoples, bears are often considered a liaison between the human and spiritual worlds and are an important part of subsistence cultures. For others, though, bears bring out what he called "two diverse human emotions" that influence management policies about hunting or protecting the bears. "As long as people compete with bears -- for cattle, moose or caribou -- people will want to get rid of the competition," he said. "Other folks want to save it. That will come into play regardless of location."

Van Daele cited Kodiak Island's \$4.5 million annual hunting industry as an important economic driver for the state, while at the same time acknowledging that non-hunting bear viewing trips to places like the Katmai Preserve and McNeil Sanctuary are a growing component of the local economy.

"We feel comfortable we can continue to support a burgeoning viewing industry," he said.

Natalie Novik, program coordinator for the Northern Forum's brown bear working group, said that one result of the recent event was "a concrete proposal to have Japanese officials come to Alaska to look at how bear viewing is conducted here."

Other practical outcomes of the international forum include a better understanding of management issues in different countries. On Japan's Hokkaido Island, for example, there is no hunting season for bears and the use of firearms is not allowed, Van Daele said. "Now, bears are coming into coastal areas and farmers are losing their crops." Japanese officials are very interested in "how to control the bear population when you cannot use hunters."

One idea might be to borrow a practice used near Moscow and St. Petersburg in Russia, where farmers sometime plant "sacrifice" crops specifically to draw bears away from the food growing areas. Others plant special crops as a lure for hunting. Other issues include increases in poaching or how increases in mining or energy development affect bear populations.

Another project in its early stages is to complete a genetic study of bear tissue samples from various regions to better understand where they originated and how they might be related. Van Daele said, for example, that Kodiak Island bears appear to have been genetically isolated for 12,000 years, while bears on the Kamchatka Peninsula of Russia "are related to all others."

Knowing more about these matters would be helpful in efforts to bolster a troubled bear population by introducing new blood from another habitat area, he suggested.

Yellowstone grizzlies still need help, group says

Separately this week, Defenders of Wildlife petitioned the Forest Service to ensure that Yellowstone grizzly bear habitat is preserved even though the bears are no longer protected under the federal Endangered Species Act (*Land Letter*, March 15).

Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife and a former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that while state and federal agencies have developed a "sound and comprehensive" Grizzly Bear conservation strategy, the Bush administration's efforts to roll back protections on National Forest lands bring uncertainty to the bear's long-term prospects.

"We are asking that the Forest Service take extra steps to ensure the grizzly bear's continued recovery and to fulfill its responsibility under the Conservation Strategy to preserve grizzly bear habitat," Clark said in a statement.

Defenders also expressed concern that efforts to weaken protections for roadless areas could threaten grizzly bear conservation programs. All six of the Yellowstone forests contain large expanses of roadless areas vital to the species. Defenders' petition requested that the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy and Forest Plan amendments be given the force and effect of law, and that road construction be prohibited on National Forest roadless areas within the greater Yellowstone area.

[Click here](#) to read the NPCA letter to NPS.



Brown bears at the Katmai National Preserve are at the crux of conflict between those who favor hunting and others who want to maintain or expand ecotourism in Alaska. Photo by Jim Stratton. Courtesy of the National Parks Conservation Association.