

WHEN WOLF HUNTING season opened in Alaska on August 1, it became legal in many national preserves for hunters to kill nursing mothers in dens with their pups. In October, when black bear hunting season begins, females settling down for hibernation with cubs can be targeted in portions of Denali National Preserve and Gates of the Arctic National Preserve. And in spring, when cubs and their mothers emerge, they too will be legal game.

Other previously banned hunting practices—including baiting bears with doughnuts, popcorn, or other human food—also are allowed now in Alaska’s national preserves.

These practices aren’t new. Many have been permitted for years across tracts of wilderness in the state, and some have been used for centuries by Alaska natives. But on National Park Service-managed lands—including national preserves, national parks, and national monuments—federal law had prohibited the most controversial hunting techniques.

On June 9, however, a final rule issued by the National Park Service said that the United States government may [no longer block hunters](#) from using those methods in Alaska’s national preserves. According to the Park Service, this is meant to bring federal regulations more closely in line with state ones.

Alaskan officials so far have granted permission for these controversial methods only in certain national preserves, but the rule change opens up all 10 of the state’s preserves (a total land area about the size of South Carolina) to the option of allowing them.

The announcement drew criticism from scientists, wildlife managers, and animal advocates, who say the new rule allows cruelty to animals and undermines the National Park Service’s conservation mission.

“Allowing the killing of bear cubs and wolf pups is appalling and goes against a basic convention of good hunting—the fair chase,” says William Ripple, an ecologist at Oregon State University, in Corvallis. “It’s not consistent with compassionate management in any way.” Fair

chase, a code adopted by many hunting organizations, entails ethical and sportsmanlike pursuit of wild game by ensuring that an animal has a reasonable chance of escape.

But Alaska state officials see it differently. “We look at it as more of an alignment of regulations between the Park Service and the state,” says Eddie Grasser, director of the division of wildlife conservation at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Ripple and others disagree with that interpretation. They acknowledge that the hunting rule change may not threaten Alaska’s overall populations of bears and wolves, but they express concern that it undermines the National Park Service’s mission to preserve and protect nature—not just in Alaska, but possibly throughout the U.S.

“This [rule] sets a dangerous precedent,” Ripple says. “It has implications for the potential exploitation of wildlife in federal protected areas of the lower 48 states.”

His concerns reflect those of many biologists and wildlife managers who fear that it could encourage other states to lobby the federal government to open their nationally protected areas to controversial practices inconsistent with federal policies.

“What about the potential for killing cougar kittens in federal preserves in the state of Utah?” Ripple says. “Or bobcats, coyotes, wolves, and bears? There’s all kinds of predators that live in preserves in the lower 48 states.”

Managed for hunters

Alaska’s wildlife legislation is unique in the United States, if not the world. The state’s [Intensive Management Law of 1994 mandates](#) that certain predator species be managed to ensure that populations of moose, caribou, and deer “remain large enough to allow for adequate and sustained harvest.” For many Alaskans, wild game is a vital food source, second only to fish. Subsistence users annually exploit an

estimated [36.9 million pounds](#) of wild foods, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

The state's management goals contrast sharply with what federal law establishes for lands overseen by the National Park Service. Those areas are to be managed for conservation and for enjoyment by the American public in a way that will "leave them unimpaired" for future generations. In national preserves, the law says, [hunting and fishing may be allowed](#) only if it doesn't threaten their natural resources.

National preserves in Alaska have long permitted hunting and fishing, but "what is new here is the inability of [the National Park Service] to manage national preserve lands in Alaska...as conservation areas rather than as 'pastures' to generate bushmeat for Alaskans," says Sterling Miller, a retired bear research biologist from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. "It's degrading not just to predators but to moose, caribou and deer, who are now increasingly valued only for the calories they produce."

Federally protected national parks, preserves, forests, refuges, and monuments are by definition public lands held in trust by the federal government for the benefit of all Americans, whose taxes pay for their maintenance and management.

"The National Park Service was founded over a hundred years ago on the principle of caring for our nation's treasures unimpaired for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations," says Sally Jewell, who was secretary of the interior during the Obama administration. The new rule change "is ill-advised and inconsistent with the tradition of subsistence and recreational hunters as conservationists, who appreciate the need to maintain nature's balance."

Alaska's management approach in theory could promote habitat improvement, Miller says, but its implementation has focused almost entirely on reducing the number of animals—especially wolves—that prey on moose, caribou, and deer. Wolf hunting seasons have grown longer, and kill numbers have increased. Over time, the state has implemented specific predator control plans with the goal of killing

more wolves in certain areas, including allowing hunters to use a plane or helicopter to herd wolves into an open space such as a frozen lake, then land the aircraft to shoot the exhausted animals.

The intensive management law also has been applied to reducing brown and grizzly bear numbers, although bears mainly have been affected by the more [general liberalization of hunting regulations](#). This includes waivers on fees to hunt bears, allowance of baiting, year-long hunting seasons, increased numbers of animals a hunter can kill annually, and the legalization of commercial sales of hides and skulls. The intent, again, was to increase populations of hooved animals for hunters' benefit, because bears sometimes predate on young moose and caribou. As a result, the number of brown bears killed by hunters has [doubled](#) from 850 a year in 1980 to 1,700 in 2013.

Because of their place at the top of the food chain, predators are [keystone species](#), crucial to the functioning and structure of ecosystems. [Research from around the world shows](#) that removing predators can cause a cascade of problems, including changes in everything from the populations of other plant and animal species to how diseases behave in ecosystems and how much carbon ecosystems absorb.

“Recent scientific studies have demonstrated the fundamental importance of wolves and bears in stabilizing ecosystems,” Ripple says. “A significant reduction of large carnivores can trigger a chain of events causing ecosystem degradation.” ([Read about how the return of wolves to Yellowstone helped strengthen elk herds.](#))

Legislative flip-flopping

Throughout the U.S., management of federal lands often is coordinated cooperatively between state and federal authorities. For years, Alaska authorities didn't push for national preserves to permit the most aggressive forms of hunting—some of which previously were illegal under state law as well. That began to change in the early 2000s, when Alaska's governor, Frank Murkowski, started pressing harder to

implement the state's intensive management law and reduce predators in national preserves.

The National Park Service [issued a rule](#) in 2015 resisting parts of that idea by specifically forbidding such things as killing mothers with babies, shooting swimming caribou from boats, and using dogs to hunt bears.

In 2017, Alaska filed a lawsuit protesting that change, arguing that the Park Service had to adopt Alaska state regulations for managing preserves. Alaska, says bear biologist Sterling Miller, was “not willing to cede that the Park Service has any authority but to lay down and play dead to whatever the state wants them to do.”

The next year, the Trump administration began dismantling the 2015 rule. The National Park Service published a [new environmental assessment](#), which concluded that while the changes to hunting regulations might affect some individual animals, family groups, or packs, it did not expect hunters to adopt the controversial hunting methods widely enough to have significant effects on populations.

The 2015 rule was removed in October 2019, but that change wasn't made public until June 2020, with no explanation for the delay. The news drew [harsh rebukes](#), including [a letter](#) to the Department of the Interior from the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, a nonprofit organization made up of 1,800 current, former, and retired National Park Service employees.

The “awful” new 2020 rule “is an affront to the Park Service mission and to all [its] employees who have served during the past 40 years to administer and protect the resources and values of national preserves in Alaska,” the coalition members wrote. “To proceed with this rule, ignoring the scientific information and significant legal and policy concerns expressed in this letter, would be unconscionable.” ([Further reading: In 2017, Congress overturned a similar rule affecting Alaska's national wildlife refuges.](#))

Don Striker, acting Alaska regional director at the National Park Service, told National Geographic in a written statement that the June 9 rule provides more consistency between state and federal lands and simplifies rules for local hunters. “The 2015 hunting prohibitions were not required to ensure natural populations of wildlife in our federally managed areas,” he wrote. “The National Park Service has determined that removing them will not result in significant impacts to park resources.”

Cascading effects

Almost none of the success stories Alaska regularly cites in support of its wildlife management practices have been borne out, Miller says. The state, for example, partly attributes a [2 to 4 percent annual increase](#) of one caribou population to its wolf reduction efforts. But in 2017, biologists with Alaska Department of Fish and Game published a peer-reviewed study [that found no evidence](#) linking increased caribou to wolf reduction, likely because not enough wolves (834 between 2004 and 2017, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game) were killed to have an effect. The lead author of the paper, Rod Boertje, says the caribou population was already increasing before wolf control started.

“There’s other scientists that would disagree with that,” Alaska Department of Fish and Game’s Eddie Grasser says of the research findings. “The fact of the matter is, when wolf control started is when the [caribou] population went back up.”

Several studies across the U.S. have found that in most cases, predator reduction doesn’t increase prey populations in the long term. Moreover, it also can harm entire ecosystems by allowing herbivore populations to grow out of control. In a paper in *Biological Conservation*, Ripple noted that [the disappearance or reduction of large predators](#) in Olympic, Yosemite, Yellowstone, Zion, and Wind Cave National Parks resulted in major changes to plant communities and began to transform areas into entirely different habitats.

On the other hand, in 1995 and 1996, when grey wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park, the ecosystem began to revert to normal. The number of elk decreased, some woody plants started growing taller, and the number of beavers increased. This suggests that reestablishing populations of predators in places they've been extirpated could be a helpful restoration tool.

“I think the biggest problem is that Alaskans have been deceived about whether reducing large carnivores actually does provide benefits in terms of increased harvest of moose and caribou,” Miller says. “They’ve been sold a bill of goods.”

Any effects the new regulation may have on wildlife will be difficult to discern, he adds, because federal and state officials don't track the number of animals hunted in a way that records where they were killed—within national preserves or elsewhere. Also, no data are available about how many people might take advantage of the newly permitted hunting methods. In August, [a public opinion survey](#) of 984 Alaskans revealed that 68 percent oppose hunters in national preserves being allowed to kill wolf pups in their dens, kill hibernating bears, and bait bears with human food.

Grasser also doesn't believe the new hunting methods will have wide appeal. “Most people in Alaska are like me,” he says. “We hunt based on...fair chase. I've never baited bears, I've never denned anything, and I've never shot a caribou swimming across the river.”

But some biologists and wildlife managers remain concerned about the effect the Trump administration's rule change could have on Alaska, even if it doesn't kick off a chain reaction of rule changes that threaten animals in other states. With the exception of northern Canada and Russia, few other places in the world compare to Alaska's sprawling wilderness, says John Schoen, a wildlife biologist now retired from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

“There is no other state in our nation that still has vast, intact landscapes that support all of their original species, communities, and

ecological processes,” Schoen says. “These areas are national interest lands belonging to all Americans, not just Alaska resident hunters.”