

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Big Game Glut in the National Parks



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Controversy about hunting in national parks is not unique to North America—an observation I made during a recent web search in preparation for a hunt in Australia.

Up popped several articles about a kerfuffle in New South Wales (NSW) over a government plan to augment management of feral and over-abundant mammals through public hunting in national parks. A huge outcry ensued, with impacts ranging from the disbanding of the NSW Game Council, to stricter controls on the use of hunter-volunteers in national park management.

The same tensions exist here in North America, reflecting a long tradition of no hunting in the national parks, even those with an over-abundance of ungulates (a diverse grouping of large mammals that includes elk, moose, deer, and bison). The bans make sense from a historical perspective. The earliest national parks, such as Yellowstone in the U.S. and Wood Buffalo in Canada, were established as a last refuge for iconic ungulates, such as bison and elk, which were sliding toward extinction. Hunting bans were seen as essential for the survival of imperiled species. The bans were predicated on the notion that within the national parks, especially the large ones, ungulate populations can best be managed by just letting nature take its course. While appealing from a philosophical standpoint, the concept isn't feasible in most cases because the national parks are not the ecologically complete, balanced, and self-sustaining systems that are assumed in the hands-off approach. Many factors affecting ungulate populations may necessitate management intervention in the national parks. Examples include the absence of apex (top of the food chain) predators; the introduction and spread of diseases; changes in wildfire regimes and associated habitat effects; and regrettable management decisions, such as the introduction of mountain goats into Olympic National Park.

What does the science tell us about ungulate management in the

national parks? The Wildlife Society assembled a team of experts to review the available research on this topic. Their report “Ungulate Management in the National Parks of the U.S. and Canada” (Technical Review 12-05 issued December 2012), included these biological findings:

- Natural regulation within most national parks will not prevent ungulates from reaching and sustaining densities that are incompatible with preservation or restoration of native flora and fauna, natural processes, or historical landscapes.
- Herbivory significantly influences park vegetation as ungulate density approaches biological carrying capacity.
- Flexible and adaptive ungulate management in the short and long term will be needed to account for imprecise population estimates and the dynamics of ungulate populations, park environments, and stakeholder interests.
- Animal movement across park boundaries impacts both internal and external agency efforts to manage ungulate overpopulation.

Technical Review 12-05 considers various options for controlling ungulate abundance in national parks, including the biological, policy, management, and social considerations of hunting. Visit wildlife.org to download a copy for personal use or to

purchase multiple printed copies for sharing.

Hunting is such an important management tool for ungulates elsewhere; might it also find a place in our national parks? This is beyond the idea stage for Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland, Canada, where serious declines in vegetation and songbird communities were attributed to an over-abundance of moose. Three years ago, 20 percent of the park was opened to moose hunting. This was expanded to 40 percent and nearly 90 percent in subsequent years along with increases in hunting licenses issued.

What about the U.S. National Park System (NPS)? It may surprise some readers that hunting is widespread on many NPS lands. A briefing paper distributed during the June 17-18, 2014, public meeting of the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council in Cody, Wyoming, provides a very helpful overview. Of 401 units in the NPS, hunting is a mandated recreational activity in 59 of them—meaning that the National Park Service may not close them to hunting. Additionally there are five NPS units where Congress has authorized agency discretion to allow hunting; of these, three are presently open to hunting. In all, roughly 24 million acres of the 84 million acres of NPS lands are open to hunting, with the majority in Alaska. The NPS lands that typically allow hunting include the national recreation areas, national seashores and lakeshores, national scenic rivers, and national preserves.

In contrast, recreational hunting is not allowed in the national parks. However, the pressing need to manage ungulate populations is stimulating new thinking. Recently an approach using skilled volunteers was implemented in Theodore Roosevelt National Park (North Dakota) and Rocky Mountain National Park (Colorado) to assist in reducing elk populations, and additional units are being considered. A good signal of changing winds would be the willingness of NPS scientists and managers to more widely discuss this matter of hunting in the parks.

Have I piqued your interest? Then for sure you will want to read the B&C Professor's Corner essay by Bill Porter in this issue of *Fair Chase*. Stay tuned! ■

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Ungulate Management in National Parks of the United States and Canada



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