

WOLF PROTECTION OUTSIDE DENALI - A SHORT HISTORY

1939-2009 In 1939, Adolph Murie begins his pioneering research on Denali Park wolves, culminating in his classic study, "The Wolves of Mt. McKinley," in 1944. In the late 1960s Gordon Haber begins his 40+ year career studying park wolf families, first as an employee, later as an independent. In 1986 L. David Mech begins a long-running wolf research project in Denali. Use of telemetry collars begins during this period. Mech and colleagues publish "The Wolves of Denali" in 1998. Over the years, the practice of collaring, though controversial, leads to important knowledge of wolf movements.

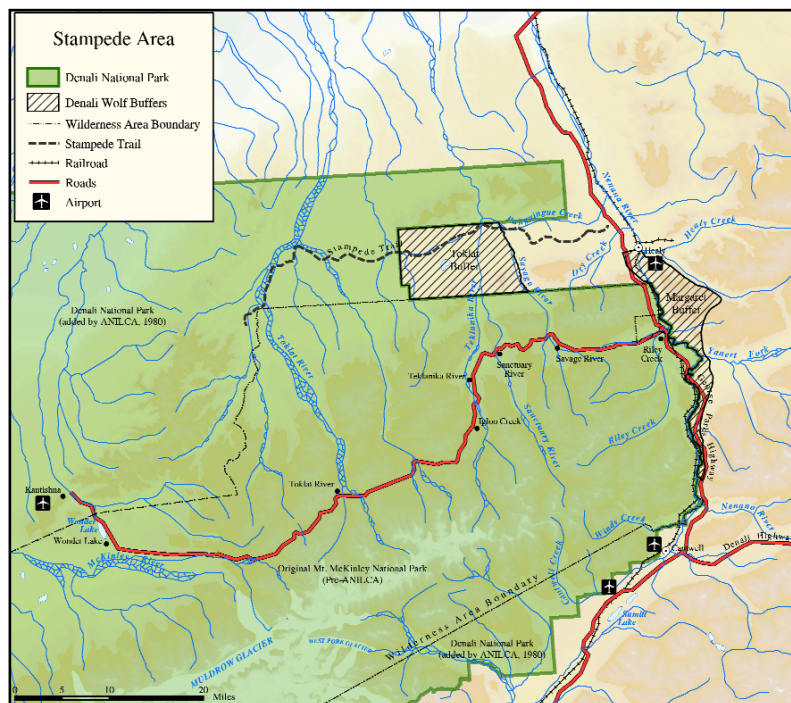
1986 The **General Management Plan** for recently enlarged and renamed Denali National Park identifies the Wolf Townships north of Denali as important habitat for Denali Park wolves, and states (page 98), "*The National Park Service will seek a land exchange with the state of Alaska to place the "wolf townships" inside the northeast park boundary. These lands were recognized by Congress as important habitat for park caribou and wolf populations, and they are also used by park bears and moose. Acquisition of these townships is needed to protect the natural ranges of these populations from incompatible development and sport hunting.*" The exchange was even recommended in an early version of the Tanana Basin Area Plan, the state of Alaska's major planning document for that area. Although inclusion of these townships within Denali National Park no longer seems to be a priority for the National Park Service, they continue to be recognized as vital to park wolves and caribou, especially in the winter.

1992 The Alaska Board of Game considers establishing a 600 square mile no harvest wolf buffer around Denali Park but rescinds this action when plans to engage in predator control elsewhere in the state are tabled.

2000 Continued pressure is placed on the Board of Game by statewide and national conservation organizations to establish wolf buffer zones around Denali's borders. At its March 2000 meeting, the BOG establishes a Citizens Advisory Committee to examine the issue and report back in the fall. The group, composed of Marty Caress, Carl Jack, George Matz, Justin Ripley, Kneeland Taylor, Mike Tinker and Lori Quackenbush, meets three times and cannot reach consensus. Three of the members, Matz, Taylor and Ripley, recommend a large buffer zone. At the November 2000 meeting, the BOG establishes only a very small, 19 square mile buffer zone within the western wolf townships.

2001 In May 2001, the BOG enlarges the small buffer approved in the fall to one covering all lands west of the Savage River and south of the Stampede Road. Conservation organizations continue to advocate for extension of buffer zones to more effectively cover the ranges of well known and observed Denali Park packs, including Toklat, Savage and Mt. Margaret families.

2002 At its October 2002 meeting, the Board of Game enlarges the Stampede closure and adds some areas east of the Parks Highway to the buffer zones around Denali, to protect some part of the Mt. Margaret wolf family range outside the park. The eastern boundary is made to coincide with the route of the Fairbanks-Anchorage electric intertie in this area.



Wolf (or Stampede) Townships, showing the extent of Denali wolf buffers at the end of the year 2002. Map compiled by Ecotrust

WOLF BUFFERS - A SHORT HISTORY

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2002

In October 2002, independent wolf biologist Gordon Haber publishes a paper entitled “Delineating a Protective Buffer Zone for Eastern Denali Wolves.” The zone would include the entire extent of the Wolf (or Stampede) Townships and a large area north and east of the park.

In November 2002, Frank Murkowski is elected Governor of Alaska, replacing Tony Knowles. In succeeding years, the state of Alaska accelerates its programs of predator control for both wolves and bears, including aerial hunting of wolves. The climate remains hostile toward wolf buffer zones around Denali.

2004

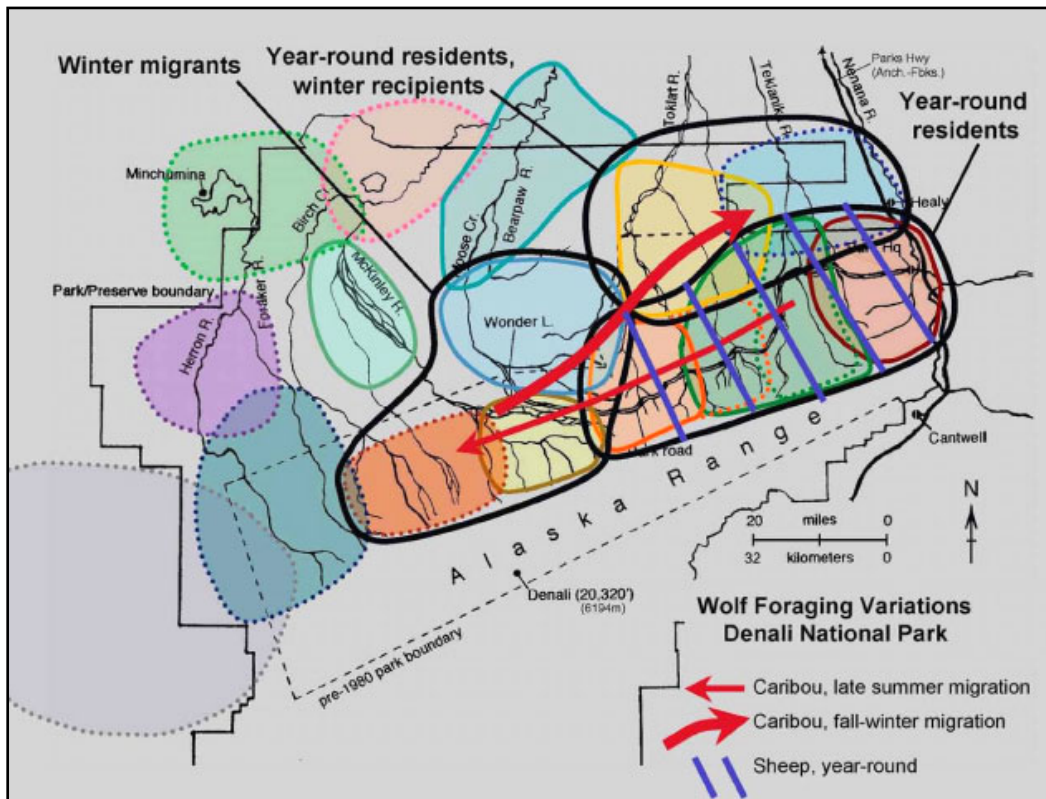
At the March 2004 Alaska Board of Game meeting, the group considers eliminating the Denali wolf buffers. In the end, the Board of Game, which authorized a number of new predator control initiatives at this meeting, decides to make a gesture of balance by retaining the Denali wolf buffers, with a small decrease in the size of the eastern buffer zone. In addition, the BOG institutes a moratorium of six years on further discussion of wolf buffers. The Denali wolf buffer zones will sunset in 2010.

2006

Sarah Palin is elected Governor of Alaska. During her tenure wolf and bear predator control is expanded and bear baiting programs are initiated in Unit 16 just south of Denali National Park. Palin also authorizes shooting wolves from helicopters and institutes a bounty on wolves in certain areas.

2007

Independent biologist Gordon Haber’s paper, “Wolf Foraging and Related Social Variations in Denali National Park,” is published in *Alaska Park Science*, a compendium of research papers. In this article he makes the point that not only are the Wolf Townships important habitat for nearby wolf packs, but also for groups that migrate to the area from far west in the park. The map below makes this clear.



“Wolves respond to differing winter foraging circumstances across three large areas of Denali National Park. In the eastern area, they remain primarily within year-round territories where they are able to hunt sheep as well as moose after most caribou leave.

In the central area where there are no sheep and lower moose densities, they migrate northeastward with caribou, resulting in high competition and strife with the year-round northeastern residents and other migrant groups. Territories of 15 groups of wolves as of April 2006 are shown; the seven with dotted boundaries are somewhat speculative due to recent interruptions in radio-collar contact. The dotted green (Toklat/East Fork) and orange (Toklat West/Grant Creek) boundaries in the eastern area represent a contraction and expansion of territories following the trapping and shooting losses of the experienced Toklat adults in 2005.”

Gordon Haber

Map showing extraterritorial forays of wolves into the Wolf Townships, from “Wolf Foraging and Related Social Variations in Denali National Park,” by Gordon Haber.

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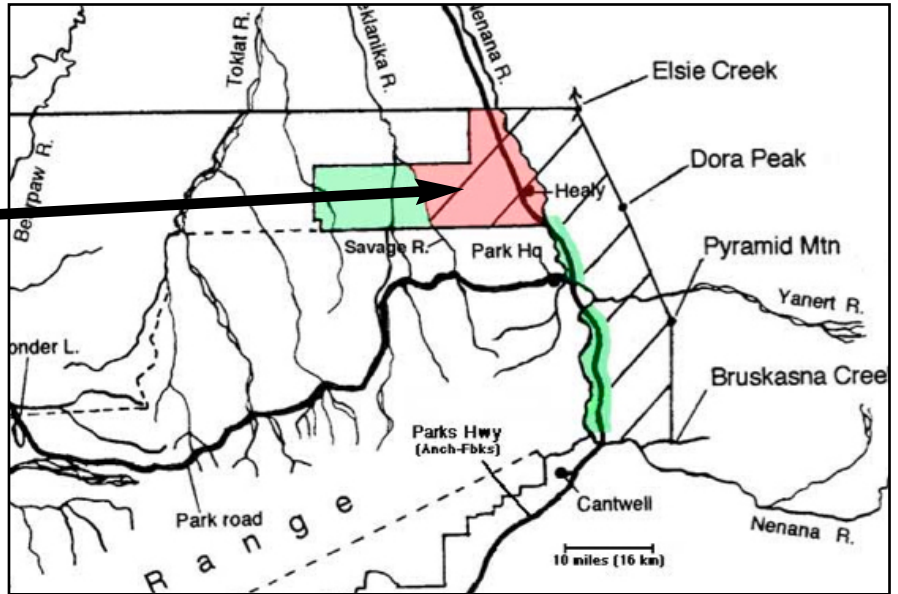
2008

UAA Professor Rick Steiner and Gordon Haber propose legislation that would amend the current Intensive Management Law (passed in 1994) to require that any intensive management proposal be subject to rigorous scientific peer review and comment prior to adoption by the Board of Game. The Intensive Management Law gives priority to human consumption and under this law, wildlife is managed for abundance of prey species such as moose and caribou. This strategy contrasts with the National Park Service, whose strategy is to manage for natural and healthy wildlife populations.

2008

Steiner and Haber write to the Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game Denby Lloyd, requesting an immediate closure of the area marked in pink on the map, to protect park wolves from continued trapping. The pink area is accessible to the Parks Highway and the community of Healy, increasing the vulnerability of wolves who travel there during winter.

(To see the full letter, visit Haber's website, <http://www.alaskawolves.org>, and go to the October 29, 2008 entry in the Blog Archive.)

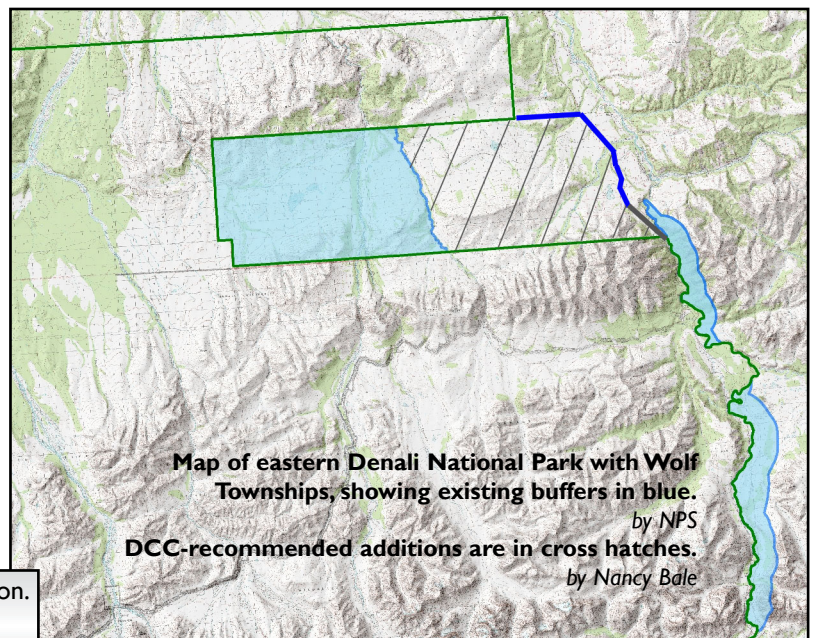


On the map above, existing no wolf hunting-trapping buffers are shown in green. *map by Gordon Haber, posted on www.alaskawolves.org*

2009

The Denali Citizens Council board meets over the weekend of November 14-15th. After considerable deliberation, we decide to write a proposal for the Spring 2010 Board of Game meeting, advocating retention of the existing no wolf hunting-trapping buffers (shown in blue below) and adding the remaining area of the Wolf Townships up to the Parks Highway (shown with cross hatches). This proposal will be filed with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game by the December 4, 2009 deadline and will be considered at the Spring 2010 Board of Game meeting. If no action is taken, all buffer zones will expire.

Nan Eagleson, DCC Board member and also a member of the Middle Nenana Fish and Game Advisory Committee, introduced the attached map and our proposal at the Nov. 16, 2009 AC meeting. There was active discussion at this meeting. In addition, DCC presented a petition with more than 80 signatures in support of retaining or expanding the buffer zones. The petition now has more than 90 signatures.



Our petition supporting Denali wolf buffers is still in circulation. You may sign it at the link below.
<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/Denaliwolfbuffers/>