

Alexander Archipelago Wolves



Photo by Steve Gilbertson



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The following is from the excellent publication by John Schoen and David Person (2007):

As a result of the isolated and naturally fragmented geography of Southeast, the Alexander Archipelago wolf (*Canis lupus ligoni*) is potentially more sensitive to human activity and habitat disturbance than elsewhere in the state. This greater sensitivity is particularly a concern in the southern archipelago where deer populations are strongly influenced by the loss and fragmentation of old-growth forest habitat.

Wolves are classified in Alaska as both furbearers and big-game species and can be harvested both by trapping and hunting. Since the mid-1980s, the average annual wolf harvest for Southeast was 173 animals. Approximately 70% of the harvest is from trapping or snaring and 30% from hunting. During this time, the average annual harvests were 52 wolves for the mainland and 121 wolves for the islands. The area consisting of Prince of Wales and adjacent islands consistently has the highest annual harvest of wolves in Southeast, averaging 75 wolves. Harvest exceeded 100 wolves for several years between 1990 and 1999. However, harvest reported to ADFG declined significantly after 2000. On the southern islands transportation by highway and off-highway vehicles is used for more than 40% of the harvest.

About 296,000 acres have been logged on Prince of Wales and adjacent Islands. As young clearcuts close over, habitat quality will be diminished and deer numbers will decline. Declining deer populations will stimulate more pressure by local hunters and trappers for reducing wolf numbers. The expanding road system will further increase hunting and trapping pressure on local wolf populations. Person et al. (1996) documented

wolf mortality on Prince of Wales Island greater than 45% during some years. An expanding road system will enhance human access and increase both legal and illegal hunting and trapping of wolves in a region where enforcement is difficult. Therefore, wolf populations on Prince of Wales and adjacent islands will face two significant problems: declining abundance of deer and increasing risk of intensive and unsustainable hunting and trapping mortality.

The wolf population in Southeast likely numbers fewer than 1,000 animals. This population is further subdivided into mainland and island populations, potentially increasing the risks of maintaining viability for some population segments.

Conservation measures necessary to maintain viable and productive wolf populations in the southern archipelago should include (within each biogeographic province where wolves occur) the maintenance of large blocks of high-quality deer habitat, including medium and large-tree old growth at lower elevations. These reserves should also prohibit or minimize road access to prevent overharvest of local wolf populations. In some areas with extensive logging and road infrastructure, road access may need to be closed and forest restoration activities initiated.

To many people, both in Alaska and the lower 48 states, Alaska wolves represent a symbol of wilderness and ecosystem integrity. In some of the lower 48 states, wolf populations are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act and in others they were recovered but at great expense and effort. Alaska has the opportunity and responsibility to avoid the mistakes that lead to this situation in the lower 48 states. Because of its large area requirements and ecological position as a top-level carnivore, the wolf represents an important umbrella species for maintaining ecosystem integrity throughout its range in Southeast. And because of its vulnerability to cumulative human activities, the wolf also serves as an indicator of wildland values. These attributes justify identifying the wolf as a focal species for ecosystem management throughout its range in Southeast and the Tongass National Forest.



Logging roads on the Kasaan Peninsula of Prince of Wales Is. The extensive Prince of Wales road system has increased hunting and trapping pressure on wolves (John Schoen photo).

The Alexander Archipelago wolf, the subspecies occurring in Southeast, is smaller and darker than other wolf populations in Alaska and more restricted in distribution (John Hyde photo).



For More Information

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