



# Perceptions of Elk and Vegetation Management

## Question: What do visitors know and think about how elk, willow, and aspen are managed in the park?

The large elk population has been a major factor in the decline of willow and aspen stands in Rocky Mountain National Park. In 2008, after years of researching alternatives, consulting with other government agencies, and soliciting comments from the public, the National Park Service adopted a long-term Elk and Vegetation Management Plan that included fencing around some willow and aspen stands and culling to maintain the winter elk population in a range from 1,600 to 2,100. Discussions about the alternatives raised awareness that people were more likely to agree with the plan if they understood the ecological need for it.



Willow browsed by elk, 1985.

## Project: Use a questionnaire to survey visitors about elk and related management issues in the park.

Working with park staff and the NPS Social Science unit, Colorado State University staff developed a questionnaire that was mailed to 615 randomly selected park visitors in October 2011 who agreed to participate. The responses of the 440 people who returned the questionnaire within three months were included in the survey results. Of the respondents, 82% had visited the park at least twice and two-thirds were Colorado residents.

## Results: Most respondents were unaware of the concerns about elk, willow, and aspen.

- Their primary reasons for visiting the park were to view the scenery (84%) and wildlife (79%).
- More than half said they did not know that elk browsing on young aspen prevents the stands from regrowing (63%) and elk were over-grazing the willows (64%).
- Asked to rate the condition of the park's aspen and willow from 1 (extremely poor) to 7 (extremely good), some said they didn't know (14% for aspen and 32% for willow). Both aspen and willow received an average score of 5.6 from respondents who rated them.
- When asked if "RMNP has too many elk for their winter habitat to support," 56% said they did not know. Of those who expressed an opinion, 24% said it was "never" or "rarely" true, 31% that it was "usually" or "always" true.
- 58% did not know that "limited culling (shooting) is an approved elk management method."
- The more days that visitors had spent in the park in the last three years and the more exposure they had to communications about the elk and vegetation management plan, the better they were likely to understand the plan.
- In an open-ended question about changes noticed in the park since their previous visit, the change most often mentioned (by 60 of the 183 respondents) was the fences.
- To a later question that asked about the fences, 77% remembered seeing them; 19% agreed that the fences "detracted from my park experience," including 11% who "slightly agreed" and 3% who "strongly agreed."



Elk enclosure to protect aspen in the park, 2009.