

news & views



Handling wolves on Isle Royale

“The attention given to [handling wolves on Isle Royale (volume 20(2):14–18)] is commendable and in the spirit of the federal agency whose principles are most similar to my own. It is hoped that the basic ‘hands off/management of human visitation only’ principle will be adopted by the other public land management agencies.

On the other hand, it is hoped that the National Park Service has or will adopt the principle of public involvement in policy—as have some other public land management agencies. It seems to me deplorable and out of spirit with NPS principles that no public seemed to be involved in this issue on Isle Royale. If this is true ... why is that?”

—Michael J. Riegert
Stetsonville, WI

I first wish to assure Mr. Riegert that the National Park Service (NPS) and Isle Royale National Park value the comments we receive from the public and that we make every effort to routinely invite the public to participate in our planning and decision-making efforts. For example, at Isle Royale we recently completed a general management plan, during which we hosted 10 public meetings and issued six detailed newsletters for the purpose of gathering public input into the planning process. As a result, hundreds of written comments from the public were received and considered. Presently, we are developing a wilderness and back-country management plan that has provided ample

opportunities for public input. A draft plan will soon be made available to the public for review and comment. Not only is public involvement required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, it is simply good business to seek input from interested and knowledgeable citizens.

Wolf handling at Isle Royale began in the late 1980s, after extensive peer review by scientists and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for administering the Endangered Species Act. Under the NPS Management Policies in place at that time, non-destructive research and monitoring activities were considered a “categorical exclusion.” Categorical exclusions are actions that, under normal circumstances, are not considered major federal actions and that have no measurable impacts on the human environment. By definition, categorical exclusions are excluded from further NEPA review and do not require public involvement in the decision-making process. Staff of the National Park Service felt the application of the categorical exclusion was appropriate for this particular monitoring activity because wolf handling techniques and protocols for handling were well established and had the concurrence of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1999, when the scientific review of the existing handling program was being conducted, the same categorical exclusion was applied. The park was not required to include the public in the evaluation, nor had any indication from any of the interested groups that they wanted to be included in the process. The review panel carefully considered all alternatives and felt that the decision made would best serve the wolf population at Isle Royale.

Lest this all sounds too bureaucratic, I also add that, at Isle Royale, there is no topic of more public interest than that of the wolf population and our wolf research program. In reality, the public, while not through a formal public process, is indeed involved in the program on a continual basis simply due to the program’s high popularity, visitor curiosity on the topic, and the easy access to the researchers involved in the project.

And as an update, a recommendation made in 1999 to pursue other means of obtaining genetic material from the wolves is now in progress. A research project has been funded to examine wolf scat as a viable source of genetic material. That answer may be available by late 2003.

—Jack Oelfke
Isle Royale National Park