

Al Lovaas: 1953-1993 - A Professional Obituary

By Ross Kavanagh

In April of this year the NPS Alaska Region lost, through retirement, a highly valued employee, a hardy stump of a Regional Chief Scientist/Chief, Natural Resources Division with deep roots in the fields of wildlife management and ecological research. Though professionally dead, Al Lovaas, with his less cranky half, Nancy, is physically alive, well, and well watered in his new home in Hot Springs, SD, and is even said to be growing a few inches.

His long and distinguished 40-year career is worth at least a brief review: 1953-Graduated SD State U, BS in wildlife management; 1953-55-U.S. Army, tour in Germany; 1957-Graduated MT State U, MS in wildlife management; 1957-59, Wildlife Biologist, MT Dept. of Fish and Game; 1960-61-Mammalogist, Canadian Wildlife Serv., Edmonton, Alberta; 1962-63-Research Biologist, MT Dept. of Fish and Game, Gallatin Canyon, working on joint elk project funded by USFS, NPS, and MT Dpt of F&G; 1964-65-District Game Manager, MT Dpt of F&G, Great Falls, MT; 1966-70-Regional Biologist, NPS Midwest Reg., Omaha, NE; 1970-75-Research Biologist, Wind Cave NP, SD; 1975-80-Regional Chief Scientist, NPS Midwest Region, Omaha; 1981-93-Regional Chief Scientist/Chief, Natural Resources Div., NPS Alaska Region, Anchorage.

Al was a popular employee in the Alaska Region and won a certain renown as an occasional writer for *Park Science*. Whenever he had an article printed in *Park Science*, the editor could always look forward to frantic letters to the editor immediately afterwards.

Al never aspired to every new-fangled computer contraption for his personal office. He was often found, pencil poised over yellow legal pad, solemnly regarding his electric pencil sharpener as the epitome of high technology. (He was often heard to say "Computers are but a passing fad.")

What He Stood For

Al was particularly interested in improving human resource management within the NPS. He was a strong advocate of professionalism, including the creation, upgrading, and/or redescription of professional resource management/research positions, and revision of selection criteria and prerequisite training for new superintendents and other new top NPS managers. In effect, Al championed change within the NPS.



Letter from Lovaas

August 4, 1993

... Would you believe I haven't garnered even one eagle yet? Only a couple of birds...but sure lots of bogies and double (and higher) bogies, plus a few pars. My excuse is I hardly golfed at all during my 12 Alaskan years. Have bought a sailboat and ordered a new outboard for my Boston Whaler fishing boat. I'm finding that playing is almost as much work as working!

I've fallen in with some evil 70-year-old companions and we golf every weekday morning. Yesterday I lost 70 cents but today I made 40 cents. Got to start keeping track for IRS purposes. Course, today I paid for the coffee (30 cents).

*(Excerpt from a letter
to the editor.)*

A man with high, positive standards always has similarly strong dislikes and Al was no exception.

His Gripes

Employee attitudes were important to him. His pet peeve, at least in the early days of post-ANILCA (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act) Alaska, was NPS employees who ignored mandates of Congress because they didn't agree with them. These

employees felt that sport hunting in Alaskan preserves and subsistence hunting in new Alaskan parks, preserves, and monuments was inappropriate and that hunters were less than highly valued visitors to NPS-managed lands. He felt that those NPS employees should try to change the law and transfer to areas where hunting is prohibited, but should willingly carry out congressional mandates. To him, that was the mark of a true professional.

His Pleasures and Irritations

While in Alaska, a point of satisfaction for Al was his role in solidifying relationships with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. In addition, he was most proud of the world-class wolf and caribou research done by Layne Adams and crew (begun by Frank Singer), an ambitious effort to elucidate the workings of a truly natural ecosystem.

Al felt that better understanding of these workings can have immense implications for NPS resource management everywhere, with wolves present or in their absence, often for many years. To have some NPS employees scoff at the value of such research and oppose its long-term funding was personally irritating—even demoralizing to him. Al argued that as predators at the top of the food chain, wolves directly or indirectly affect entire ecosystems, including vegetation, soil, water, fish, and birds as well as their mammalian prey species.

His Integrity

Al will be sorely missed in the Alaska Region (for at least a year or two). He once commented to me that a past Regional Director told him he could always be counted upon for totally honest advice and recommendations uncolored by what he thought the Regional Director wanted to hear. To me, that statement best describes Al and his professional career, and has since become one of the key standards I strive to apply to my own career.

Although he received letters of appreciation during his career, interestingly enough Al, with his direct, sometimes blunt approach, never received any special awards or financial bonuses from management during his 28 year sojourn with the NPS. Those who know him well do not wonder why.

Have a great retirement Al, and we all wish you the best!

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