

ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA MEETING PROVIDES A FORUM FOR DISCUSSING NPS WILDLIFE POLICIES

By MIKE BRITTEN

LAST AUGUST, I ATTENDED the 81st Annual Combined Meeting of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) in Providence, Rhode Island. ESA was joined in this meeting by the Society for Conservation Biology, the American Society of Naturalists, the Association for Tropical Biology, and the North American Chapter of the Society for Ecological Modeling. It was by far the largest professional meeting I had ever attended with nearly 3,000 registered participants and approximately 2,000 scientific presentations.

I was disappointed to see only about 10 other NPS staff in attendance. While some of the presentations reported on basic research, many described applied research and were very relevant to national park management. The theme of the meeting, "Ecologists and Biologists as Problem Solvers," focused presentation on the utility of applied research. I wonder if the lack of NPS involvement was due to the timing of the meeting and how much was because NPS managers traditionally rank attendance at professional meetings as a low priority.

NPS presentations included: "Potential impacts of recreational use on high-elevation heather populations" by R.M. Rochefort and D.L. Peterson; "An examination of annual grass control methods for use on the Lawrence Memorial Grassland Preserve" by S.T. Gibbons and B. Youtie; and my presentation (along with P.L. Kennedy and S. Ambrose) on "Migration routes and wintering areas of peregrine falcons determined by satellite telemetry." Many other presentations covered work in national parks done by outside researchers. (Also featured was an excellent poster presentation on exotic plant invasion and ecosystem features at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota by S.M. Ogle and W.A. Reiners. This presentation won the 1995 Braun Award for best student presen-

tation and was excellent. The work examined the habitat associations of various exotic species and developed predictions for the spread of the exotics.)

WILDLIFE POLICIES REVIEWED

A 2-hour panel presentation and discussion on "Wildlife management in the U.S. national park system: the self-regulation theory revisited" was a highlight for NPS participants. Unfortunately, it was held in the evening and only 100 people attended (the daytime presentations averaged much larger audiences even though 15 or more sessions often took place concurrently). The presentation began with a brief introduction by NPS Associate Director, Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, Mike Soukup and was followed by three case studies on the NPS natural regulation policy. Jerry Wright of the National Biological Service, University of Idaho CPSU, summarized the presentations, and then opened the discussion to the audience for a second hour.

Brian Underwood (National Biological Service, SUNY-Syracuse CPSU) described the proliferation of white-tailed deer populations in smaller eastern units of the national park system and resulting conflicts with park neighbors and state wildlife management objectives. NPS managers in these units are operating on a much more local scale than state wildlife managers, which contributes to the problem (caused by habitat alteration and lack of native predators). The second example from Isle Royale National Park, Michigan, was presented by Rolf Peterson of Michigan Technological University. He described the isolated and unstable moose-wolf system in the park that he and others have studied for 38 years. The current wolf population is "genetically challenged" and Peterson predicts extinction within the next few years; he is also very pessimistic about the potential for a natural recolonization of the island (due in part to urbanization on the mainland). Furthermore, Peterson worries that NPS man-

agement policies discourage restoration. The final case study was presented by NPS Intermountain Field Area Associate Field Director, Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, Dan Huff who described the history and controversy over natural regulation on the northern range of Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. NPS management of ungulates on the northern range has included shooting 4,600+ elk (more than half of the herd) in 1962, on one extreme, to the current natural regulation policy (which includes monitoring of ungulate populations, range conditions, and erosion, and more than 25 recent and ongoing studies on the northern range). Huff concluded that it is appropriate for the National Park Service to monitor and study the area as a natural experiment with intervention a possibility if monitoring indicated that irreversible changes are occurring.

The ensuing discussions illustrated the wide range of positions ecologists and wildlife biologists hold on the "natural process" regulation of wildlife populations in parks. At times, the debate became polarized but, overall, some excellent points were raised. Possibly the most important was that NPS managers should consider the scope of their management objectives (usually local) compared to the scope of management objectives of other wildlife and land managers (usually regional) to help understand and avoid conflicts. National Park Service resources can only benefit, in my opinion, when park managers seek to understand the current debate and range of positions in ecological management. The ESA annual meetings are a good place to seek this knowledge.

2

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