

ParkScope

NEWS & NOTES

Too Much of a Good Thing?

Visitors to Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park can blindly point a camera in nearly any direction and capture a handful of elk in a picture-postcard image without the aid of a telephoto lens. The thousands of elk scattered across the mountainous terrain and the neighboring community of Estes Park certainly do their share for visitors' photo albums, but the health of individual animals is suffering, and the herd's numbers are taking a toll on native vegetation and other wildlife that simply can't compete.

The problem has been a long time coming. About 100 years ago, elk had

Elk overpopulation in Rocky Mountain National Park is taking a toll on the ecosystem, and the results can't be ignored any longer.

nearly vanished from the region, but in 1913 the species was reintroduced, largely for the sake of sport hunters. Wolves and grizzlies had already been eliminated from the region, and the creation of the park two years later quickly helped

reestablish a healthy population and then some. From 1943 to 1968, a culling program kept their numbers in check, but public outcry finally brought it to an end, leaving hunting on adjacent public lands the only way to slow the inevitable. Over the ensuing years, continued development in the region ate up prime elk habitat. The result? Today more than 4,000 elk live in and around the park, an area that's able to support about 2,500 ungulates by most accounts.

"This is the typical problem you would expect in an environment without any hunting or any large predators," says Steve Torbit, director of the National Wildlife Federation's Rocky Mountain Natural Resource Center in Colorado. "Elk numbers have exploded in recent years, and the problems aren't unique to Rocky Mountain—Yellowstone and Grand Teton have had some of the same issues. And we haven't had a severe winter since 1984, so elk simply aren't dying off naturally." Meanwhile, staggering development has turned prime elk habitat into prime acreage for million-dollar homes.

"Residents in the area really notice the elk on their lawns," says Mary Kay

More than 4,000 elk live in and around Rocky Mountain National Park.

Watry, acting wildlife program manager at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. “But Estes Park is a community based on tourism, so there are plenty of business owners who love the fact that the elk draw tourists.”

“One thing we noticed in our public outreach process is that the majority of people really seem to understand that something needed to be done,” says Kyle Patterson, another spokesperson for Rocky Mountain National Park. “But when it got time to decide *what* needed to be done, the suggestions were all over the board.”

As part of the scoping process, the park presented a 600-page document outlining the problems and potential solutions for public comment. Four primary solutions were presented, ranging from continuing current management practices to alternatives including birth control, reintroduction of wolves, and a cull conducted by government agencies.

Elk in many western parks have thrived in the absence of predators.

Birth control and wolf reintroduction would require a sizable investment of resources, and neither addresses short-term concerns, so the Park Service’s preferred approach emphasizes culling the herd. The work would most likely be performed by sharpshooters during evening hours to limit the impact to visitors. Fencing would be used to redistribute the elk and protect vegetation, and wolves might be introduced in latter stages of the comprehensive 20-year pro-

gram, estimated to cost as much as \$18 million.

Some factions have suggested a public hunt would serve the same purposes with a lower price tag. But it’s a solution that introduces its own set of obstacles, and one that may not improve matters at all. Hunting is illegal in national parks, so an act of Congress would be necessary to waive that rule, setting a troubling precedent for parks nationwide. And contrary to popular belief, the

time and cost associated with administering a hunt would be significant. Many hunters prefer to mount six-point bulls above their mantle rather than cows, which must be targeted for effective population control. Because chronic wasting disease affects many of the animals, strict and costly measures would need to be put in place to prevent hunters from taking diseased meat.

Although the culling of the herd seems the most direct and practical way to address the issue, many wildlife lovers have a hard time embracing any plan that involves killing animals.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the luxury of managing the park for one species,” says Patterson. “We can’t just look out for the elk—those riparian communities with aspen and willow support strong biodiversity in other species, and we need to consider the songbirds and cavity nesters, the butterflies and other insects. Beaver are an

extremely important part of the equation, too, and they’re not coming back to the park because they simply can’t compete with the elk.”

“Extensive damage to sensitive plant communities in the park is already well documented, and could soon lead to the loss of critical habitat if the elk population remains unchecked,” says Bill Knight, director of NPCA’s Center for the State of the Parks. “The long-term health of the herd itself ultimately depends on the health of the ecosystem.”

Clearly, there are no easy solutions, but the challenges go beyond park boundaries. The park can’t be managed as a “biological island.” Cooperation between the Park Service and several state and federal wildlife agencies is crucial. The only way elk and other wildlife will thrive is if the park is managed as one important link in the Rocky Mountain ecosystem.

—*Scott Kirkwood*

News in Brief

Sleeping Bear Dunes, MI—In August, the National Parks Travelers Club held its third annual meeting at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore (below). The group’s founder, Michael Brown, is just one of 100 people bound by a shared passion for the natural beauty and historical significance of the National Park System. In 1986, Eastern National corporation introduced the park passport program, and since then thousands of park lovers have launched “short detours” to secure a stamp that proves they were there. Sound familiar? If so, learn more about the group by visiting www.parkstamps.org.



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