

Elk Management in Theodore Roosevelt National Park

In 1985, National Park Service employees trapped 47 elk at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota and transplanted them to Theodore Roosevelt National Park in southwestern North Dakota.

Today, those 47 seed elk and possibly other elk from the state have multiplied to approximately 1,000 animals that live at least part-time in the park's 46,000-acre south unit. A few hundred additional elk live primarily outside the park in the surrounding area.

The thousand or so elk considered park residents is nearly three times the Park Service's population objective. Twice in the past the elk population expanded beyond the objective of 360 animals, and the Park Service reduced the population by capturing approximately 200 elk each time. These elk were then transplanted out of state – one group went to Kentucky and the other to tribal lands in South Dakota.

Since 2002, however, the Park Service has not been able to transplant elk because of chronic wasting disease testing requirements. During that time, the park elk population has continued to expand, and the Park Service has had to develop a different plan for reducing and then maintaining elk numbers.

Throughout development of this plan, North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials have agreed with the Park Service's contention that the elk population warrants reduction. The past two years the Department has more than doubled the number of elk hunting permits in units surrounding the park, giving hunters a chance to help the effort when some elk are out of the park. However, the Department has steadfastly maintained that elk harvest outside the park will not control elk numbers inside the park.

On the other hand, Game and Fish has always believed that the elk are state resources and therefore state citizens should be directly involved in the population management process inside park boundaries. Department administrators do not support any of the slate of options the Park Service is now considering because there is no alternative that allows people a chance to participate and keep a portion of the elk meat.

In addition, the Department views the Park Service alternatives as too expensive, too complex and not sustainable over time.

In December, the Park Service released its draft Elk Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement listing alternatives for addressing the park's elk population. The Park Service is now accepting public comments on the document, and will continue accepting comments through March 19, 2009. The various ways to provide comments are listed at the end of this piece.

Once the comments are considered, the Park Service has said it will release its final plan likely toward the end of this year, with implementation likely beginning in 2010.

NORTH DAKOTA ELK HISTORY

Into the early 1800s elk lived throughout much of North Dakota. As European settlement progressed, however, elk numbers declined. By the late 1880s they were scarce, and then eventually disappeared from the state, except for occasional transients.

In 1927 the state built a 400-acre preserve in the Turtle Mountains and stocked it with five elk from Sullys Hill National Game Preserve near Devils Lake. Within 10 years the preserve had 50 elk, but the population eventually declined because of poaching or escape. The fence was removed in 1963 and the remaining elk either died off or moved on.

In 1941, a service club at Killdeer worked to obtain 25 elk from Yellowstone National Park. These animals were released near the Killdeer Mountains and thrived for a few years before eventually disappearing.

The Game and Fish Department started getting reports of elk in the Pembina Hills in the state's north-eastern corner in the early 1970s. These elk likely migrated in from Canada.

The next development in North Dakota's elk population involved transplants from Wind Cave in South Dakota. In early 1977, 51 animals either escaped or were released from a holding pen on the Fort Berthold Reservation, where they were awaiting transplant to remote reservation lands, and joined the few remaining elk in the Killdeer area.

Remnants of this group eventually settled in the northern badlands and near the Killdeer Mountains. In 1984 the Game and Fish Department established the first hunting season on this population.

Since then, this northern badlands elk population has continued to expand its range. At the same time, enough elk began to explore beyond the boundaries of the park so that a hunting season was warranted in that area as well, starting in 1997. What was once two small hunting units is now three units that cover much of southwestern North Dakota.

In just the last two years, Game and Fish has increased the number of licenses in these western units from just over 200 to nearly 500. In addition, another month was added to the elk hunting season in the two units – E3 and E4 – that surround the park. For the most part, this additional hunting pressure was a response to landowner concerns about rising elk numbers in the area.

Some of this additional harvest involves animals that spend much of their time in the park and only wander out occasionally, others go back and forth freely, and still others spend little or no time in the park. That's why it's difficult to measure how much the additional licenses have reduced park elk numbers.

The only way to completely address the park elk population is reduction while the animals are in the park. The park's draft elk management plan includes several

alternatives under consideration for accomplishing that. They are:

Alternative A: No Action

While not a practical solution to the problem, an alternative of “no action” is required of all Environmental Impact Statements and has to be included as part of the document.

Alternative B: Direct Reduction with Firearms

Direct reduction would be carried out by qualified federal employees and authorized agents, which could include private contractors or skilled volunteers. Skilled volunteers would be supervised by NPS personnel and would shoot elk as directed. They might be called on to shoot any number of elk as opportunity allowed, but would not be able to keep any of the meat. Under this alternative, approximately 250 to 300 elk would be removed from the park each year for five years until the population objective is reached. As much of the elk meat as possible would be salvaged and donated.

Alternative C: Roundup and Euthanasia

Helicopters would be used to herd elk to the park’s fenced handling facility. If the park could contract with a willing commercial processor, the elk would be taken there and the animals killed and processed for donation. Under this scenario, the Park Service estimates it could accomplish its entire population reduction of animals within 22 days, assuming a necessary reduction of approximately 800 elk.

Alternative D: Testing and Translocation

While the threat of chronic wasting disease has prevented the park from transplanting elk, it is possible if enough animals in the herd are tested so it is clear that no CWD is present. Assuming a population of 1,000 animals, 368 would have to be rounded up, killed and tested. If no CWD was found, then park elk could be transplanted, assuming a willing recipient, such as another state, would take the animals and bear the cost of testing and transporting them. Transplants could take place for three years before CWD testing was again required.

Alternative E: Hunting Outside the Park

Under this alternative, NPS employees would manipulate the park fence to allow elk to easily move outside the park, and at the same time would try to disperse animals outside the park with methods up to and possibly including herding with helicopters. Licensed hunters would then be able to take elk as part of a season established by the Game and Fish Department. An estimated 275 elk per year for five years would have to be removed under this scenario.

Alternative F: Fertility Control

This alternative is valid only if a viable fertility control agent is developed at some point during the 15-year scope of the elk management plan. Currently, such a control agent does not exist. If this alternative did become feasible, it would only be used for population

maintenance once initial reduction was achieved by one of the other methods.

ALTERNATIVES NOT CONSIDERED

During the three-year process leading up to release of the draft elk management plan, the Park Service considered many other ideas to reduce the elk population that did not make the list of final alternatives. These included such things as removal of all elk from the park, transplanting without determining CWD prevalence, moving the elk to the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, and reintroduction of natural elk predators such as grizzly bear or gray wolves.

Two other alternatives not up for final consideration included unsupervised public hunting within the park, and the Game and Fish Department proposal to allow certified volunteer sharpshooters.

The plan offered by Game and Fish is somewhat similar to Alternative B: Direct Reduction with Firearms, except that the certified volunteer sharpshooters would have less oversight, could take one elk per person, and be able to keep part or all of the meat from the elk they harvested. It is this distinction – keeping the meat – that qualifies the Game and Fish proposal as “hunting,” which the Park Service believes it cannot authorize without a Congressional change in legislation.

In its official comments on the park elk management plan, Game and Fish will continue to push for its proposal to involve citizens who could keep a portion of the meat in exchange for providing considerable time and expense to help the park remove elk. It is a proposal that greatly reduces the federal government’s potential costs, both initially and on a continuing basis.

In a news release issued January 6, North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan said that if federal legislation is needed to advance the Game and Fish Department’s proposal, then he would pursue that avenue.

What do you think? Information on providing comments regarding the elk plan is listed below.

To view a complete copy of the elk management plan, or provide comments electronically, visit the website <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/thro>, and follow the elk plan links.

Copies of the draft EIS/elk management plan are also available by writing to: Superintendent, Theodore Roosevelt National Park, P.O. Box 7, Medora, North Dakota, 58645-0007.

Public comments are also accepted via letter to Superintendent Valerie Naylor at the address above, via fax to (701) 623-4840, or hand delivered to park headquarters in Medora.

The NPS is also planning a series of public meetings to provide project information and accept comments and input. As of January 30 the dates and locations of those meetings had not been announced.

When these meetings are finalized, the Game and Fish Department will post the list on its website at gf.nd.gov.