ALASKA

THE MAGAZINE OF LIFE ON THE LAST FRONTIER

AUGUST 1994

THE PASSION & POLITICS OF KILLING WOLVES

Boating Over the Aleutian Range

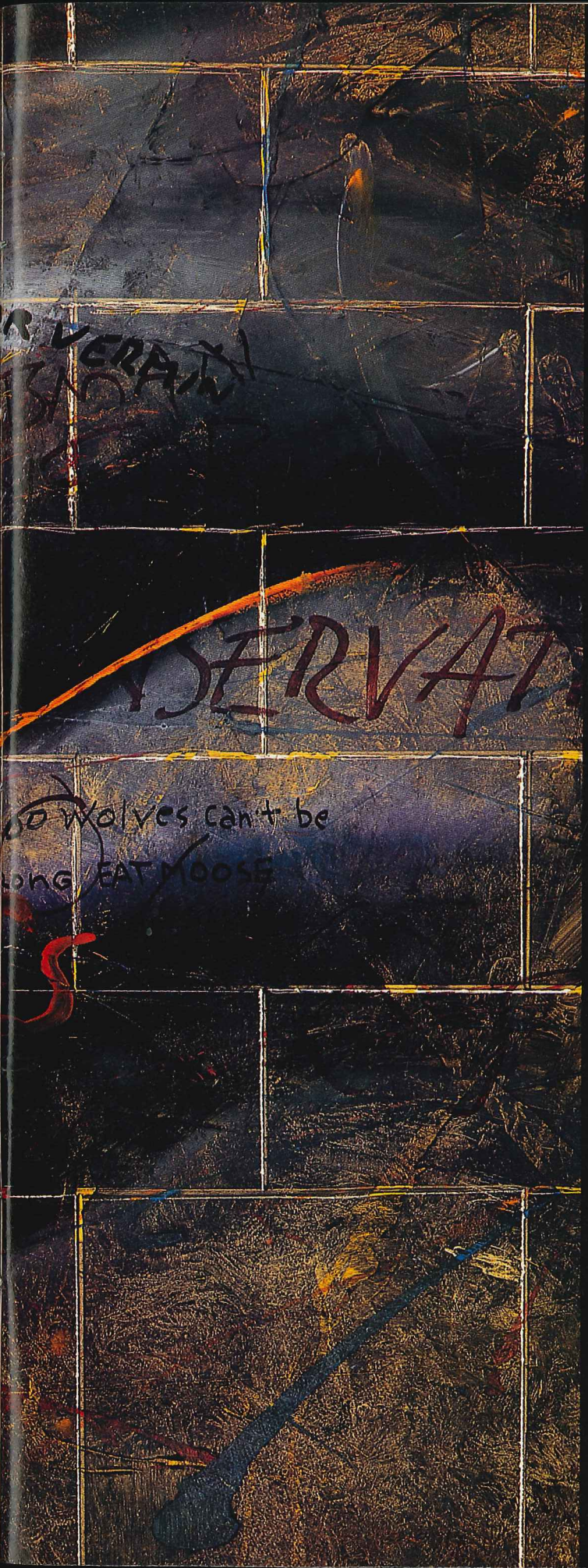
Fabulous Fungi

Alaska's Lone Ranger – Unmasked

$2.95 US / $3.50 CAN

08>
01176
0 140219 3


BARBARIANS
HUMANA
M.ARISman



Wolf Wars

A report from the front lines of Alaska's great wolf-kill debate.

By Kris Capps

When Sandra Arnold first heard that Alaska planned to kill wolves by shooting them from airplanes, she fled her college classroom in Washington state, ran into a nearby bathroom and burst into tears.

"I felt completely powerless," says Arnold, an environmental studies student at the time. "I knew it was wrong. Everything about it was wrong."

She wasn't alone in her reaction. Thousands of letters of protest poured in to the governor and state Fish and Game offices.

"How I hate you all," penned a writer from Kenosha, Wis., to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. "You're crazy and sadistic. You're not hunters. You're barbarians. I will never visit Alaska."

In a postcard, H. Lindsey of New York compared the killing of wolves to the killing of tourists in Florida: "Both are underhanded, willful, incomprehensible acts." Another letter demanded: "You are making fools of yourselves in front of the whole world! Is that what you want?"

On the other side of the issue, Fairbanksan Marc Thompson called opponents "wolf huggers" and encouraged the department to ignore its critics. He wrote, "Their ideals and beliefs are not based on reality, but on a Disneyland concept of fuzzy-wuzzy, cute little animals who talk and wear clothes."

Thompson was one of the few—1 percent to 5 percent—who wrote to support the hunt. Most of the letters delivered to the Fairbanks Fish and Game office came from cities outside Alaska, like Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco. In letters to Alaska newspapers and in meetings around the state, supporters of the wolf kill—primarily Alaskans—graphically described how wolves indiscriminately kill their prey, taking down a moose, ripping chunks of flesh from its rump while the animal is still alive.

Mary Bishop is one longtime Alaskan who strongly stands behind moderate wolf control. She raised three boys on moose meat.

"I certainly don't want to go out and kill all the wolves," she says, adding, "I know it's not hurting the environment to kill some wolves."

"Predators really do make a dent in the population," Bishop says.

Since 1961, the Bishop family has lived on the fish and game they've collected themselves. She rarely visits the meat counter at the local grocery store.

"For me, it's an argument between people who know they are environmentally correct and people who know they are politically correct," she says. "Then, there's the animal rights people. That's a whole other side in itself."

It's a battle over wildness, driven by the perception that Alaska is tampering with something precious.

AL GRILLO

Kids help make the case on both sides of the issue. **Above:** *A sidewalk "Howl-In," protesting Alaska's plan to kill 200 wolves in the Interior, finds 3-year-old Michaela Wilson howling in chorus with wolf-hybrid Yetta and owner Wendy Moe.* **Right:** *The 1993 Wolf Summit, held in Fairbanks, drew strong voices from both sides of the issue. Outside the site, Toney Thompson joins the picket line.*

From his office in Minnesota, 2,300 miles from Alaska, internationally recognized wolf expert David Mech watches the battle unfold.

If people think the wolves should be killed, Mech is seen as their protector. If people think the wolves should be saved, he is seen as their nemesis. It doesn't matter that he has nothing to do with the Alaska program. Considered one of the foremost authorities on wolves, his status is such that both sides want him to endorse their position. Instead, he directs his energy toward places where wolves are endangered.

That's not the case in Alaska, and the state plans over three years to kill up to 200 wolves in a certain area so that the number of caribou there will as much as double by 1998. That will boost the number of caribou for sport hunters.

This past winter, the department killed 98 wolves, at a cost of about $1,000 per wolf. (Opponents claim the cost was closer to $2,000 per wolf.) The program, reviewed annually by the Board of Game, could continue for two more years, or until the Delta-area caribou herd grows from its current size of 4,000 animals to between 6,000 and 8,000 animals.

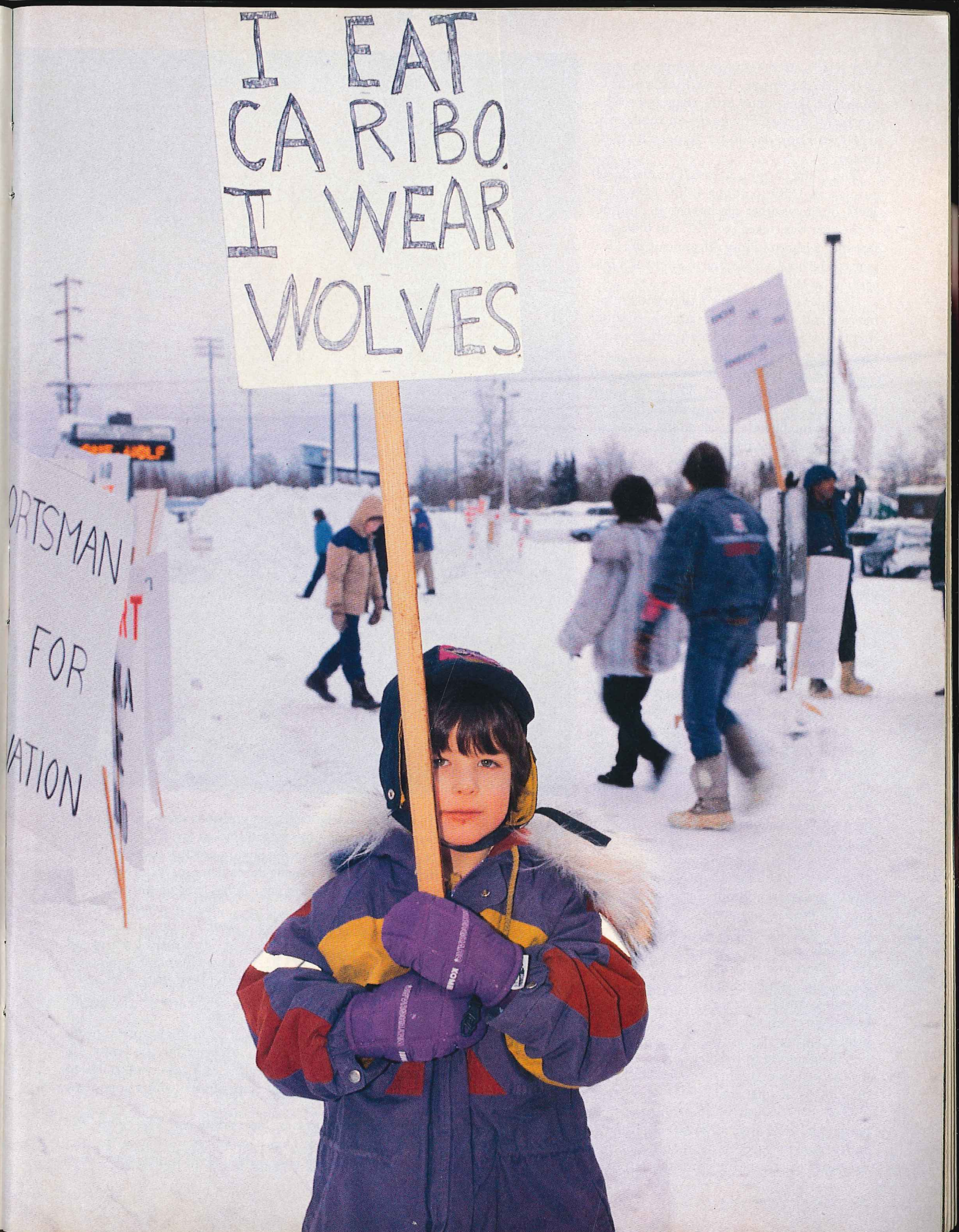
Since Alaska wolves were not in danger of extinction, Mech took no action. His position did not go unnoticed, and he too received some hate mail.

"This letter calls me a pimp," he says, sifting through the paperwork on his desk. "This one calls me a wolf-loving Jew. I'm not Jewish, but that's not the point. It's intended as a derogatory comment. I've lived with it for 35 years. Sometimes the vilification comes from anti-wolf people. Now, it's pro-wolf people."

Controversy over the wolf kill will likely continue as well, for this is not just a disagreement over wolves. It's a battle over wildness, driven by the perception that Alaska is tampering with something precious. Many people believe the state needs to preserve wolves—if not for Alaskans, then for the rest of a nation where they no longer roam.

The controversy began when the state Board of Game approved a plan to kill 300 to 400 wolves in early 1993 and up to 300 in subsequent years. Overwhelming objection, including 160,000 letters of protest and a threatened boycott against the state's tourism industry, prompted the governor to cancel that plan.

Six months later, the board approved a scaled-down plan to kill two-thirds of the estimated 300 wolves in an area the size of


I EAT
CARIBO.
I WEAR
WOLVES
ORTSMAN
FOR
VATION

New Jersey, stretching from Fairbanks south to the Alaska Range. The killing would be done from the ground using traps and snares, not from the air. The goal—to reduce the area's wolf population by 50 percent to 75 percent.

The Delta caribou herd fell from 10,700 animals in 1989 to about 4,000 animals in 1993, due to weather and predation. Hunting in the area was closed in 1991, but biologists fear that without killing off some of the local wolves, the herd will decline to 2,000 or 3,000 caribou by 1996.

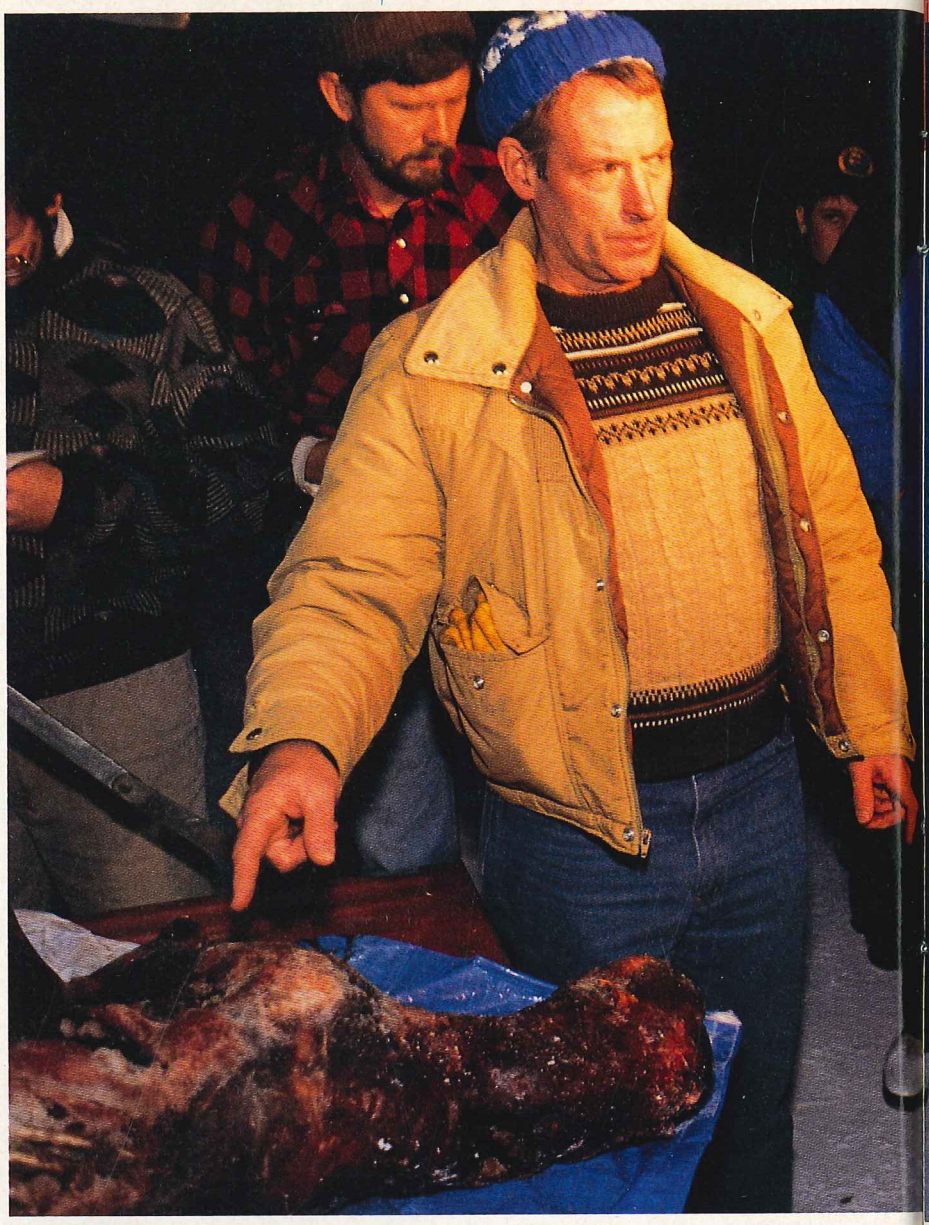
The idea of killing wolves to increase numbers of caribou so that sport hunters can shoot them later did not sit well with many people, especially in the Lower 48.

Opponents leaped to defend the wolf, and revived the tourism boycott. The battle began anew, and the wolf took on many faces—a beautiful, intelligent, social animal or an evil, wily and wicked predator.

"Wolves are animals of mythic proportion," says Nancy Lethcoe, a private tour operator in Valdez, who opposes killing the wolves. "The wolf stands for wide-open spaces, land of opportunity, a time when the future was all ahead of us as a country. People see those options have vanished in other areas, but the feeling still remains in Alaska."

People need to know that wild places like Alaska exist, according to Jim Young, of the Sierra Club's Anchorage office. "When you hear about threats to wolves," he says, "that's a threat that expands beyond the threat to the wolf. It's a whole threat to wilderness."

Once maligned as evil, wolves now are considered a sign of a healthy ecosystem, according to Priscilla Feral, director of the Connecticut-based Friends of Animals. That's a sure sign that people are changing their attitudes about wolves, she says. "People are outraged by this messing-with-nature scheme."



Sandra Arnold, the student so distraught by news of the wolf kill, now works for the Alaska Wildlife Alliance in Anchorage, a 2,000-member non-profit organization. "Alaska mentality is still that wildlife is a commodity," she says. "Harvest is, in the words of the Legislature, the highest and best use. People don't agree with that anymore. In Los Angeles, knowing it exists may be the highest and best use.

"Slaughtering wolves in Alaska just goes against the grain of progressive, modern thought about what wildlife is."

Tell that to Dean Wilson, a fur trader and trapper in Fairbanks, who grew up in a Native village that depended on moose and caribou for food. As far as he is concerned, killing wolves is necessary to ensure the continuation of life as he knows it.

He remembers when villagers practiced their own brand of wolf control. Every spring, villagers tracked down a certain number of wolf dens and killed the pups, a practice since outlawed. "This new concept of managing the predator so we can harvest the prey, this isn't new," Wilson says. "It has gone on for a century."

Wilson doesn't hate the wolf. Far from it.

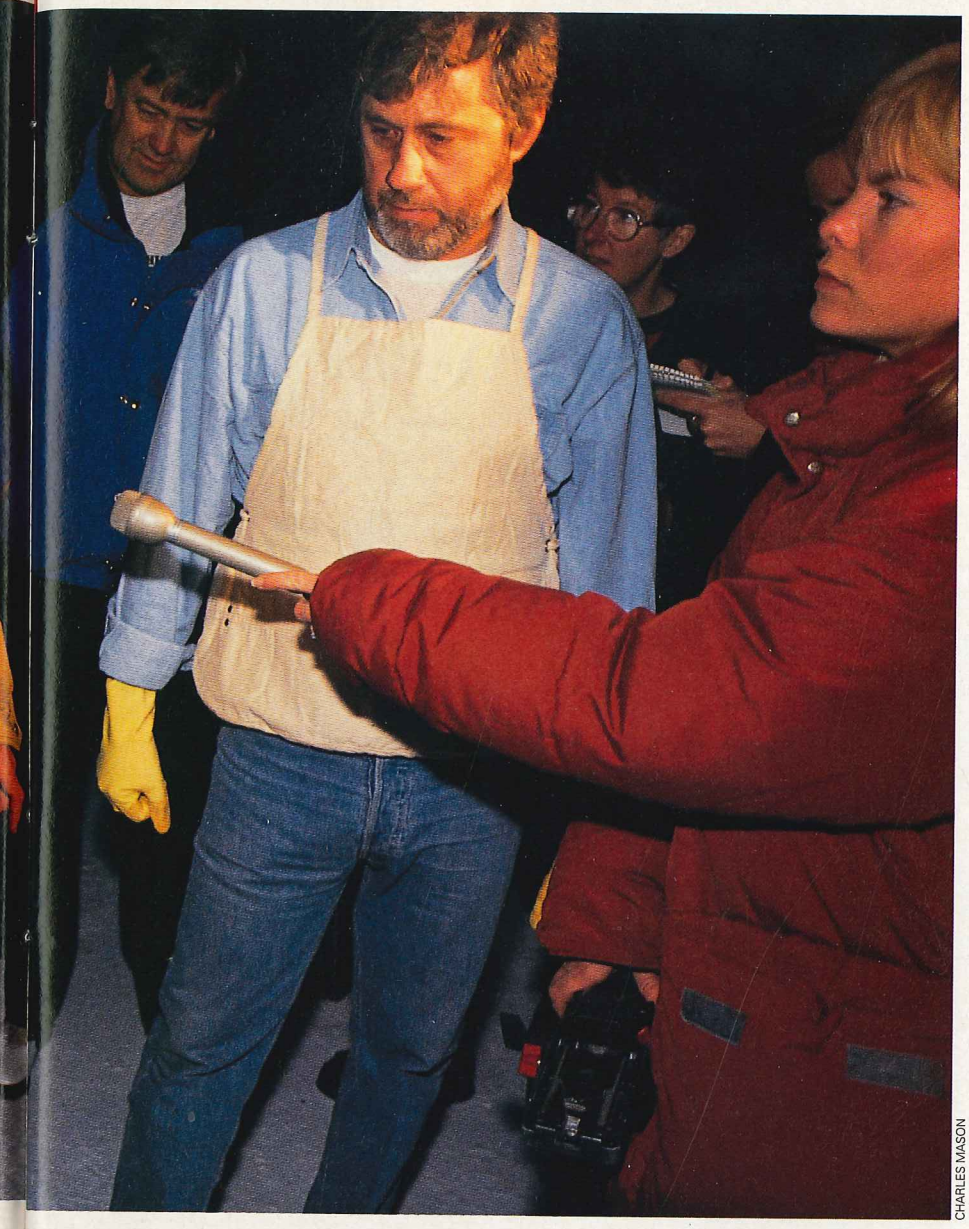
"It would be one sad day in history if we ever lost our last wolf," he says. "Thank God we're far from that."

> "If a wolf escapes being killed by state biologists, it will probably die in one of two ways—either it will starve, or it will be killed by other wolves."

Although wolves are endangered in the Lower 48, the population appears to be healthy in Alaska, with 6,000 to 7,000 animals—if you believe state figures, which opponents do not.

"They have no stats, they have opinions," says Feral. "We understand the opinion. They hate wolves."

Bob Stephenson, who has dedicated his professional life to



CHARLES MASON

Interior trapper Mike Coombs met with the media outside the state Fish and Game office in Fairbanks to display a wolf carcass that he claimed was shot. At right is Gordon Haber, a biologist under contract with the Connecticut-based Friends of Animals, which has been critical of the state's wolf-kill operation. Although Haber had planned to turn the carcass over to federal wildlife officials, it was seized as evidence by the Alaska State Troopers. Further analysis showed the animal died from wounds sustained in an attack, probably by other wolves.

The government in Yukon Territory, Canada, killed 61 wolves in 1993 near Whitehorse. They were shot from the air, in the second year of an 8- to 10-year wolf control program. Little was heard about it in the national press, although a Canadian group called Friends of Wolves shut down the Yukon Legislature for a day when protesters chained themselves together with bicycle locks at the capitol.

"There's a lot of complacency here," says Chuck Tobin, a reporter for the *Whitehorse Star*. "Criticism here is much more a challenge of the scientific information. It's not as emotional as in the United States."

In Minnesota, the only other state with a self-sustaining wolf population, authorities trapped, then shot 130 wolves out of a total population of 2,000 in 1993, as part of an ongoing depredation program. The trapped wolves had developed a taste for turkey and sheep.

Wolves in Minnesota are classified as threatened, not endangered. There is strong sentiment in the state to protect its wolves; public opposition killed an attempt a few years ago to start a sport-trapping season for wolves.

While the national media didn't fuss over the wolf-kill programs in Minnesota or the Yukon, the same can't be said for Alaska's plan.

"Saving wolves and exploiting the romance of wolves is a huge commercial business," says Stephenson, the state biologist in Fairbanks. "The big environmental groups are centered in the U.S. Alaska's wolves are sexier than Canada's wolves."

Also, people seem to more readily accept wolves being killed for destroying livestock in Minnesota, than wolves being killed in Alaska to benefit hunters, according to Mech. "It's a lot easier to build a case against Alaska wolf control," he says. "They're capitalizing on the Alaska mystique."

Mech is chairman and Stephenson is a member of the Wolf Specialist Group, of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Both men wonder why wolf supporters aren't concentrating their efforts on where wolves are in imminent danger of extinction. Mech says, "The wolf needs their attention in places like Scandinavia, where there are maybe 25 wolves between Norway and Sweden—or places like Idaho and the state of Washington."

Instead, the battle focuses on Alaska from large public forums to much smaller, private ones.

A hand-scribbled note posted on the bulletin board of the

studying wolves for the department for 22 years, disagrees.

"There are few of us who are really hardened to killing wolves or who like anything about it," he says. "It's not good work. It's hard work."

The individual biologists who kill the wolves have never been identified. The state keeps their names secret because of threats made against them. Some threats warned that they would face the wrath of the Almighty. A few threats were turned over to Alaska State Troopers for investigation.

"We know where your aircraft are," hinted one message. Another said, "It will take you or your families dying to bring attention to this." A New Jersey photographer was indicted for calling the governor's office and threatening to kill one member of Walter Hickel's family for every wolf the state killed.

Animal rights activists believe Alaska state biologists fabricate these threats to deflect attention from their own actions. "They're the ones doing the violence," Feral points out.

She says her office received some "illiterate and pornographic" mail from its opponents, but no life-threatening letters.

All this because of the romance of wolves. But not all wolves.

post office at Denali National Park last November said, "Of 54 wolves killed to date by ADF&G 'control' hunters, four were pups of the Yanert River pack. Caribou now on the river may attract park wolves to Yanert snares."

The next day, someone had scrawled across the notice: "GOOD!"

A note in the Cantwell Cafe, 20 miles south of Denali, took a lighthearted look at the issue and joked: "Eliminate the Alaska mosquito. Put Fish and Game in charge."

But for people affected by a tourism boycott of the state, the topic is no laughing matter. The business people hurt the worst, ironically, are small, eco-tour companies that oppose killing wolves.

Nancy and Jim Lethcoe run sailing charters in Prince William Sound. "When the boycott went down, there were no inquiries, no bookings," says Nancy. "Once the boycott was over and attention was off, bookings took off."

Lethcoe is director of the Alaska Wilderness, Recreation and Tourism Association, which includes 230 members statewide. Recently, her group and the Sierra Club ran newspaper advertisements encouraging tourists to support Alaska businesses that oppose the wolf-control program.

The anticipated boycott never really affected larger companies, and Princess Tours, one of Alaska's largest tour companies, expects a record 1994 season.

Early in the year, the company continued to receive letters of protest. But, says Tom Dow of Princess' Seattle office, "The letters are mostly emotional. It's not a letter saying 'We've done careful research about the pattern of population cycles in the caribou herd.' The call to action is an emotional one."

For the governor's office, the stream of protest has been continuous. "To us, it's just been one long boycott," says Jackie Brown of the office, which has tried to respond in writing to each letter. "It's a tough battle because no one wants to hear the state's point of view."

Yet, for all the letters of protest, the state still receives far more requests for its official Vacation Planner. Normally, Alaska sends out 450,000 Vacation Planners by the end of June. In mid-March, the state had mailed 433,277 Vacation Planners—right on schedule despite the wolf kill.

Cathie Harms of the Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks, who answers many of the letters from wolf-kill opponents, sighs at the "us against them" message in letter after letter. "Every emotion I ever heard from the Lower 48, I've heard from people in Alaska and from people in Fish and Game," she says. "We are not an island of wolf-killers."

But program opponents make no such distinctions.

"I got one telephone call from a woman who was so angry, she could barely speak," Harms recalls. "She told me I was the vilest, most disgusting creature on the planet.

"There are a tremendous number of people who hate us because of the wrong information," Harms says. She sends out a fact sheet on the reasoning and goals of the program. Does it do any good? Hard telling.

"People who do not feel there are facts to justify a program like this don't necessarily calm down, but they do understand we are in a position of being forced to make a compromise," says Harms. "We have no choice. We work for people who don't want wolves. We work for people who do want wolves. I've told many people, 'We don't have the luxury of only agreeing with you.'"

The individual biologists who kill the wolves have never been identified. The state keeps their names secret because of threats made against them.

GEOFFREY ORTH

The 1993 Wolf Summit at Alaskaland in Fairbanks gave biologists a forum to explain how game management decisions are made. Speakers against the wolf-kill took the podium as well. **Left:** *Unlike its cousins in the Lower 48, wild Alaskan wolves are not an endangered species.*

Mech of Minnesota says facts get lost in the controversy. "If a wolf escapes being killed by state biologists, it will probably die in one of two ways—either it will starve, or it will be killed by other wolves," he says. "Those are the two main causes of natural wolf fatalities. Most people don't realize that."

The emotional battle over the wolf is probably a good thing, says Cathie Harms. "Apathy is a sign that we could lose something. The fact that people are concerned about wildlife is very good."

The focus on wolves in Alaska may irritate Alaskans who think Outsiders should mind their own business, but Priscilla Feral of Friends of Animals wants to remind locals that they don't own the wolves. The rest of the country sees Alaska as the last wild place, and killing wolves here is not acceptable, for whatever reason.

"The wolves belong to themselves," Feral says. "They've been persecuted for centuries. It's time to end this kind of ignorant war. Americans want the wolves restored. They want them back in nature."

In the long run, Stephenson figures, killing a couple hundred wolves in Alaska won't mean much for the wolf's survival. The wolves will rebound, and in the long term, they'll come out of this just fine—better than anyone imagines, he says. "Wolves will be here long after we are gone." ★

Denali Park free-lance writer Kris Capps is a frequent contributor to Alaska *magazine.*

CRAIG BRANDT