

# **SUSTAINING ALASKA'S WILDLIFE**

**ALASKA WILDLIFE ALLIANCE  
STRATEGIC PLAN  
2020-2030**





# A VOICE FOR WILDLIFE

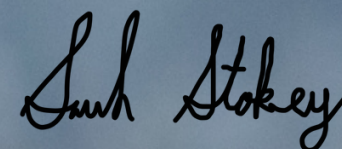
## A letter from the Board

Alaska is one of the few places on Earth where wildlife roam wild lands. Historical efforts to conquer frontiers have often sacrificed wildlife and their habitats for economic gain. When Alaska became a state, we thought to do something different. Our constitution recognizes that fish, forests, wildlife, grasslands, and all other replenishable resources belong to all Alaskans and were to be maintained in perpetuity and abundance. Strong words and a good sentiment, but what was promised on paper is rarely delivered.

The Alaska Wildlife Alliance was organized in 1978 by Alaskans who recognized wildlife's intrinsic values, and sought to safeguard their biodiversity and abundance. Members of our organization cherish the wildlife and the wild places that we have in Alaska. We recognize that wildlife need a voice and we willingly embrace that responsibility.

The board and staff of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance have crafted this strategic plan with an eye toward how our organization can be that voice. Our strategy to ensure sound and ethical management of wildlife by public agencies, develop an environmentally informed citizenry, and coordinate an aggressive response to the cascading effects of a warming climate supports our unique mission. This plan is intended to be a living document that will determine future actions and priorities of our organization. Further, it emphasizes the role that the Alaska Wildlife Alliance has in ensuring wildlife are forever a part of Alaska.

Signed,



Sarah Stokey  
Board President  
September, 2020





A person is swimming underwater, looking up towards the surface. In the background, a large, white iceberg floats on the water's surface. The water is a deep blue, and there are some bubbles and light reflections visible. The overall scene is serene and evokes a sense of nature and exploration.

## **VISION**

We envision a future in which Alaska's wildlife are valued, Alaska's ecosystems are healthy, and biodiversity is sustained.

## **MISSION**

The Alaska Wildlife Alliance is committed to the protection of Alaska's wildlife for its intrinsic value, as well as for the benefit of present and future generations of Alaskans. We advocate for healthy ecosystems, scientifically and ethically managed to protect our wildlife in an increasingly dynamic world.

## **THE GAP WE FILL**

The Alaska Wildlife Alliance is the only statewide Alaska-founded 501(c)3 organization dedicated solely to the protection of Alaska's wildlife. As a home-grown organization, we have the trust and connections to track cultural, biological and political changes on the ground. Since 1978, we have listened to and amplified the voices of Alaskans, enabling our nimble network to inform wildlife management policies and mobilize to protect Alaska's biodiversity.



# OUR HISTORY

Alaska Wildlife Alliance (AWA) was founded in 1978 by a group of Alaskans concerned about degrading ecosystems in the modern era. Our Alaska-based organization was originally founded to identify, research and monitor issues affecting marine mammals and endangered species, increase public understanding of environmental issues, and develop programs to aid in the protection of marine mammals and other endangered species.

In the 1990s and 2000s, AWA published the quarterly magazine *The Spirit*, later renamed *Echoes*. Over time, AWA expanded its focus beyond solely endangered species to become a leader in monitoring and influencing state wildlife management policies. In the mid 90s, Alaska Governor Wally Hickel's sentiments -- that “you can’t let nature run wild” -- marked a shift in Alaska’s wildlife management to focus on artificially maximizing game (deer, caribou, moose) by institutionalizing the killing of predators, such as bears and wolves. Our organization earned notoriety through persistent leadership in efforts to counter this shift by advocating for ecosystem-based management, curtailing aerial wolf hunting, restricting predator control programs, and protecting and restoring Alaska’s endangered species. To this day, our tagline is “letting nature run wild.” Stephen Wells, AWA Executive Director at the time, emphasized that “protecting wildlife and their habitat is the bottom line for us. We are not anti-hunting, but we are against extreme forms of wildlife management.”

In more recent years, AWA has allied with other environmental organizations to litigate exploiting public lands and waters in Alaska by extraction industries, and has been represented in over 12 major lawsuits. AWA has been referenced in Alaska State and US Congressional hearings, as well as featured in the the New York Times, the Guardian, NBC News, and local Alaska news outlets. We are known across the state for monthly *Wildlife Wednesday* programs, newsletters and Action Alerts, and as a voice for wildlife.



# OUR GOALS



ENSURE SCIENTIFICALLY  
SOUND & HUMANE  
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT



DEVELOP A NOVEL  
CLIMATE CHANGE  
ADAPTATION PROGRAM



INFORM ALASKA'S  
CITIZENRY TO SPEAK UP  
FOR WILDLIFE



## GOAL 1: ENSURE STATE AND FEDERAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ARE GROUNDED IN SCIENCE AND DO NOT SACRIFICE ECOSYSTEM HEALTH OR LEGALIZE INHUMANE HARVEST

*Wildlife management decisions in Alaska are made by politically appointed Boards that are heavily influenced by consumptive commercial lobbies. We embrace the responsibility of monitoring wildlife policies and practices around the state to ensure they reflect a balanced, biologically-sound approach.*







# OUR STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE GOAL 1

## SHIFT THE WILDLIFE PARADIGM

**Have a regular presence** at local and state-wide wildlife management meetings, and develop AWA chapters across Alaska to increase capacity.

**Build strategic alliances** to diversify management values, representation, and ground-up advocacy in partnership with Alaska Natives and others.

**Publish position papers** to promote ecosystem-based thought leadership.

**Facilitate alternative and inclusive governance models** such as co-management, cooperative management, and caucusing.

## COORDINATE RESPONSES TO THREATS

**Seek relief** from policies that impact wildlife, violate ecosystem-based management, unfairly limit/intimidate public involvement, or result in biological and/or subsistence resource emergencies.

**Conduct regulatory analyses** to determine management trends.

**Submit public comments and fact sheets** to ensure that wildlife management decisions are based on valid data, and hold agencies accountable for decisions made on the basis of poor population field studies or unrealistic assumptions of harvest levels.





## Goal 1 in Action

### Protecting Alaska's Parks from Extreme Sport Hunting Practices

Conflict over how the State of Alaska manages predators has been a trademark issue for Alaska Wildlife Alliance. The Alaska Board of Game permits a plethora of ways to kill bears and wolves to ensure enough moose, caribou and other game are available for hunters. However, there is little scientific evidence that increasing hunts on predators sustainably increases the abundance of game, and in fact jeopardizes ecosystem health when predators are removed. We believe wildlife management must take an ecosystem-based approach that considers the benefits of predator-prey relationships and does not scapegoat predators when game species may actually be suffering from habitat change and fragmentation, disease, overharvest, pollution, climate change, and other stressors.

For years, Alaska Wildlife Alliance and allies mobilized to ban extreme sport hunting practices on Alaska's National Parks and Preserves. On October 23, 2015, those efforts materialized. The National Park Service published a rule that prohibited certain sport hunting practices on Parklands that are otherwise permitted on state lands, such as blinding black bears with flashlights and shooting at den sites, hunting swimming caribou, and killing wolves and pups while they den.

The victory was short-lived. On September 15, 2017, then Department of Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke signed Secretarial Order 3356 to overturn the 2015 rule and reinstate extreme killing practices on federal lands. We mobilized fact sheets, testified, developed comment campaigns, and organized events to gather public opposition to the change. The rule was opposed by a bipartisan group of 79 members of Congress, including Rep. Jackson Lee of Texas who cited AWA's efforts and statements extensively in her testimony.

Despite the submission of over 170,000 comments nationwide, of which most opposed the rule change, the National Park Service published new rules in June 2020 that reverse the bans. The rules give trophy hunters and outfitters the opportunity to kill wolves and coyotes, including pups, during the season when mothers wean their young; use dogs to hunt bears; bait grizzly bears with doughnuts soaked in bacon grease; use spotlights to blind and shoot hibernating black bear mothers and their cubs in their dens; and gun down swimming caribou from motorboats.

Alaska Wildlife Alliance is once again fighting to keep these sport hunting practices out of Alaska's National Parks. Represented by Trustees for Alaska, AWA is challenging the legality of these practices on federal lands in court. Further, we continue to testify, file Public Information Requests, gather public comments, influence decision makers, and educate Alaskans on State predator management practices so we may shift the wildlife paradigm to sustainable, ecosystem based practices across Alaska.



## GOAL 2: DEVELOP A NOVEL, FRONTLINE ADAPTATION PROGRAM FOR SUSTAINING BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM HEALTH IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING CLIMATE

*As the human population grows, our impacts on wildlife intensify. Alaska's climate is warming at three times the rate of the Lower 48. Our wildlife respond to climatic changes at different rates, which leads to species extinctions, novel assemblages and degraded ecosystems. We support land conservation efforts to maintain connectivity at different spatial scales and allow natural adaptation. However, conventional single-species management is inadequate, especially given the magnitude of expected changes ahead. In addition to land conservation, we promote novel approaches for facilitating adaptation to ecological transformations.*





# OUR STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE GOAL 2



INFORM ALASKAN PUBLIC POLICY TO RECOGNIZE CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENSURE THAT IT IS CONSIDERED IN ALL WILDLIFE AND HABITAT DECISIONS

**Create and coordinate alliance-based working groups** to spearhead this strategy, “cross pollinate” ideas, and build public support and consensus.

**Advocate for climate change models** to be considered in all state wildlife management policies, plans, and working groups.

**Educate decision makers** on climate change impacts to wildlife, ecosystem health, biodiversity, and environmental justice.

COLLABORATIVELY DEVELOP INNOVATIVE CLIMATE ADAPTATION PLANS ACROSS ALASKA THAT ARE FOUNDED IN ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT

**Promote decision frameworks** that demand ecosystem and landscape-scaled context in the development of community adaptation plans.

**Promote field experiments** to validate modeled ecological trajectories before they happen.

**Build alliances to facilitate the development of pilot studies** that demonstrate climate change adaptation approaches. Pilot studies showcase novel ways of solving a management problem, demonstrating ecological and economic feasibility before scaling up.





## Goal 2 in Action

### Facilitating Ecosystem Transformation on the Western Kenai Peninsula

The Kenai Peninsula juts into the Gulf of Alaska, connected to mainland Alaska by a 10-mile wide isthmus. The 6,000-ft high Kenai Mountains separate two biomes: the northern extent of the Sitka spruce coastal rainforest to the east and the southwestern extent of the white and black spruce boreal forest to the west. The mountains create a rain-shadow on the western peninsula that exacerbates global warming; here, annual available water has decreased 62% in just five decades! Both biomes will continue warming, but the eastern peninsula is forecasted to remain a rainforest through the end of this century while the western side will likely transition to mixed hardwood forests and grasslands.

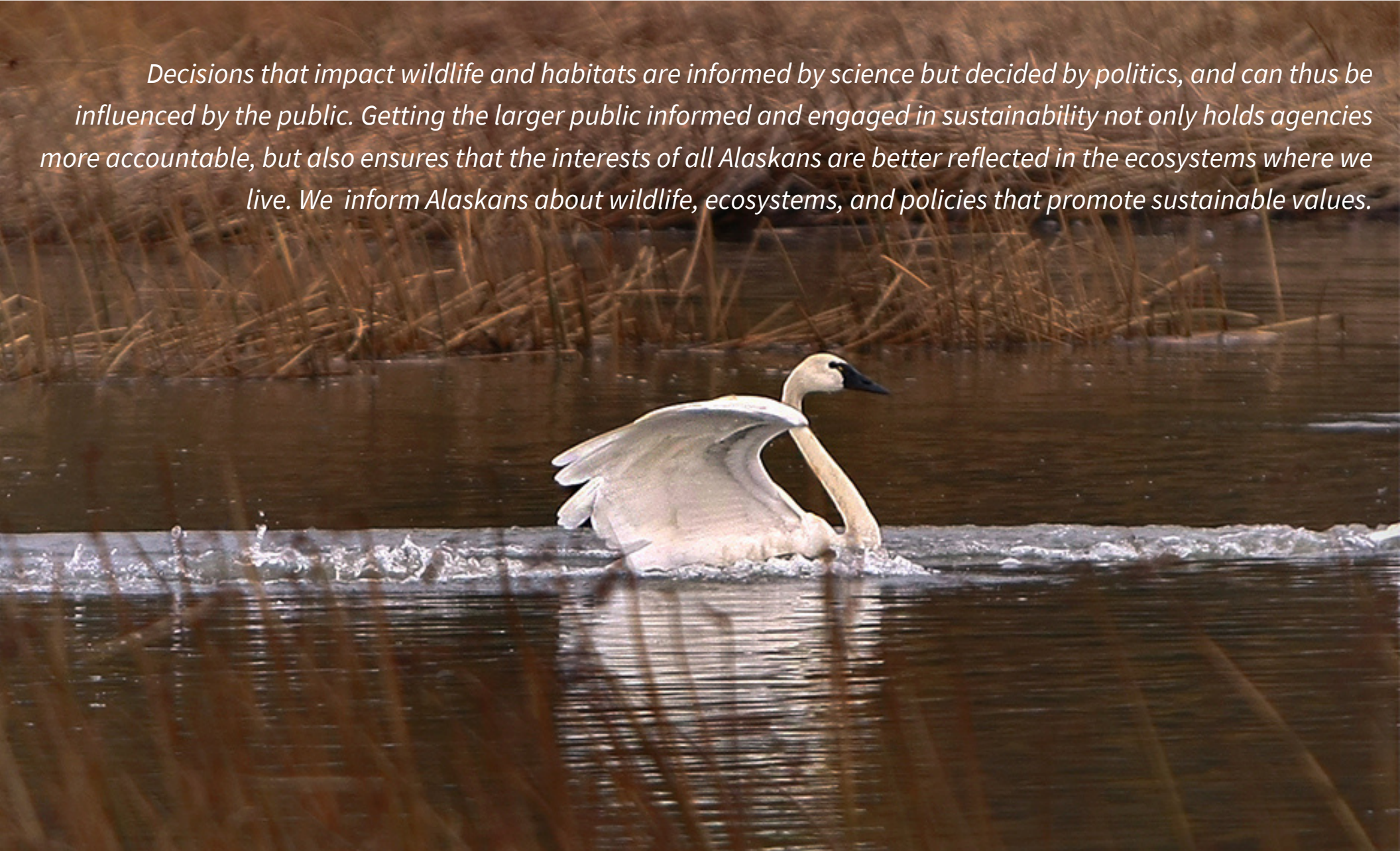
Unseen by most of the public, 40,000 acres of mature white spruce in upper Deep Creek have converted to a *Calamagrostis* grassland in response to an unprecedented spruce bark beetle outbreak during the 1990s, followed by the 60,000-acre Caribou Hills Fire in 2007. Lightning strikes, once rare on the peninsula, have ignited fires with increasing frequency during the past two decades and, for the first time, a lightning-caused grassland fire occurred in 2019. Extensive grasslands have not existed in this area for at least 20,000 years, when large grazers like woolly mammoths and steppe bison roamed Beringia.

This novel grassland is developing without the benefit of contemporary large grazers. Instead, this depauperate ecosystem is being populated by over 100 nonnative plant and earthworm species of mostly Eurasian origin, by planted nonnative lodgepole pine, and by feral ring-necked pheasants. Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is considering the option to direct change by introducing bison or other large grazers to promote more age - and species - diverse grasslands. The Alaska Wildlife Alliance has an opportunity to facilitate needed pilot studies on adjacent nonfederal lands.



## GOAL 3: BUILD A GRASSROOTS NETWORK OF INFORMED ALASKANS WHO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS AND SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

*Decisions that impact wildlife and habitats are informed by science but decided by politics, and can thus be influenced by the public. Getting the larger public informed and engaged in sustainability not only holds agencies more accountable, but also ensures that the interests of all Alaskans are better reflected in the ecosystems where we live. We inform Alaskans about wildlife, ecosystems, and policies that promote sustainable values.*





# OUR STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE GOAL 3



**Expand our membership** to reach a greater number of Alaskans, especially those living in rural parts of our state, and conduct regular meetings. Support and develop new, inclusive AWA chapters across Alaska.

**Educate Alaskans** on wildlife and ecosystem issues through *Wildlife Wednesday* presentations, tabling, and hosting advocacy events. Publish a monthly newsletter with local wildlife and ecosystem news, Action Alerts, and volunteer opportunities.

**Develop and promote citizen science opportunities** to monitor wildlife and provide meaningful engagement for Alaskans in wildlife research and conservation.

**Increase coexistence efforts** between people and wildlife. Support wildlife friendly waste management strategies and bolster programs to expand electric fencing and application of other non-lethal wildlife deterrents.







## Goal 3 in Action

### How Citizen Science Helps Recover Endangered Whales

There are five populations of beluga whales that live in the cold waters of Alaska. The Cook Inlet population is the smallest. Since the 1970s, the number of Cook Inlet beluga whales has declined by over 75%, and nearly 50% in the mid-1990s.

In the late 1990s, the Alaska Wildlife Alliance petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service to list the Cook Inlet beluga whales under the Endangered Species Act. The effort, mobilized by a broad coalition of organizations, took years, but the Cook Inlet Beluga whales finally achieved endangered species designation in 2008.

Despite increased protections under the designation, this endangered population has failed to recover as predicted, and the reasons are still unknown. The latest population surveys estimate that only 279 Cook Inlet beluga whales remain from a population once numbering 1,300 individuals. Scientists need more information on movements, demographics, and behaviors of these whales, but don't have adequate resources. Communities around Cook Inlet were concerned about the whales and, together with local partners, we saw an opportunity. In 2019, we co-founded the Alaska Beluga Monitoring Partnership, a citizen science program, with Defenders of Wildlife, Beluga Whale Alliance, and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

In our first season, the partnership conducted 269 sessions totaling 545 hours of volunteer monitoring across Cook Inlet. Volunteers observed beluga age (adult or calf), tide, location, and exposure to human activities such as dredging, and watercrafts. These data are shared with National Marine Fisheries Service and Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Photo-ID Project databases, and were published and presented at the Alaska Marine Science Symposium in January 2020.

This is an important step in understanding endangered Cook Inlet beluga whale recovery, and we are eager to continue to monitoring sessions in 2020 and beyond.



# ALASKA WILDLIFE ALLIANCE

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