

SCOT

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Congressman wants continued protection for bears, habitat

Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson (D-Lufkin) has called upon the 90-member Congressional Sportsmen Caucus to adopt an issue this year., the preservation



Wilson

of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge on Kodiak Island in the Gulf of Alaska.

In a letter to the caucus Wilson noted the role sportsmen and environmentalists played in the creation of the refuge. He said commercial development, mainly cattle ranching, was threatening the existence of the huge Kodiak brown bears back in the 1930s, and in 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt declared 70 percent of the mountainous archipelago a refuge.

President Eisenhower amended that order to tighten restrictions against all commercial development of bear habitat.

Wilson wrote that, "The nearly two million acre Kodiak refuge has been an outstanding success story...and the giant bears are thriving..." But he noted that the threat of development has again raised its head.

"Twenty years ago," he wrote, "Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act which inadvertently raised the possibility of Native villages within the refuge having to commercially develop prime bear habitat in order to fulfill the economic self-sufficiency mandate of the ANCSA. The federal government correctly did not wish to duplicate the failed reservation policy in Alaska, and instead told the Natives to use their lands as commercial assets. The Native corporations which own these refuge lands (in-holdings) do not want to develop them, but they may have no choice," Wilson said. "Such development would mean the tragic loss of one of the world's most spectacular wilderness regions."

But solutions exist, Wilson contends. Both the Submerged Lands Act and previous Native efforts point to acquiring Native in-holdings through purchase and exchange. "The land where these giants of nature roam should not be parcelled into private lots that would deny the bears their critical habitat along some of the best salmon streams in the world."

Wilson also views the Native issue as one of fundamental fairness: "The time for speaking with a forked tongue to Native

Americans should be long past. We can't grant Kodiak Natives their aboriginal homelands to provide for the economic future of their people and at the same time restrict how they use the lands because it is a bear refuge."



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THREAT OF THE LOSS OF KODIAK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

HON. CHARLES WILSON

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, October 22, 1990

Mr. WILSON. Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw attention to an environmental issue that has not received many headlines, but which goes to the core of what public policy can mean to preserving American wilderness.

I am speaking of the threat of the loss of a remarkable national treasure, the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. During the 1930's, environmental groups and sportsmen first became aware of the uniqueness of the Kodiak bear population, and how the world's largest bears faced decline due to the loss of habitat from commercial development.

Environmentalists and sportsmen joined forces in an effort to persuade President Franklin D. Roosevelt to create a refuge for this marvel of nature by protecting the land where giants roamed. In 1941, president Roosevelt, an ardent sportsman, signed Executive Order 8857, creating the nearly 2 million acre Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge " * * for the purpose of protecting the natural feeding and breeding range of the Kodiak bear * * "

During the 1950's it became evident that the development restrictions within FDR's Executive order were not drawn tightly enough. Continued ranching along the lush, but narrow shorelines led to increased bear/cattle conflicts which led to the destruction of bears by ranchers. In 1958, President Eisenhower's Department of Interior adopted Public Land Order 1636 abolishing all cattle grazing and other incompatible uses within the refuge.

In 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act [ANCSA] to settle aboriginal claims of Alaska's Native population to their traditional lands. ANCSA

created native corporations as private businesses to select and manage lands adjacent to their villages. Because a number of villages were located within the boundaries of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the corporations had no choice but to select lands which were part of the bear refuge.

Under ANCSA, Congress mandated these villages to become economically self sufficient through use and development of their lands.

As a result of this policy inconsistency in dealing with private inholdings within the Kodiak refuge, the Kodiak bear population once again faces the prospect of rapid decline.

The Kodiak Native Corp. leaders and shareholders see the commercial development of their refuge inholdings as a last resort, but also as an inevitable outcome if actions are not taken to have the United States reacquire ownership of these lands.

The Department of Interior has evidenced their desire to obtain title to these inholdings by proposing to the Kodiak Native Corp. an exchange of other Federal lands of equal value for these vital Kodiak inholdings. Although that proposal was not workable due to the nature of other Federal lands involved, the concept of Federal reacquisition of these crucial Kodiak inholdings through a land exchange remains wholly viable and alive.

I am hopeful that the congressional sportsmen caucus can play a role in discovering alternative means of reacquiring the world's best brown bear habitat, and placing these lands under the control of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in exchange for fair value granted to the Kodiak Native Corp.

It will be all the more significant for Congress to accomplish this result next year, on the 50th anniversary of President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive order creating the Kodiak bear refuge.