

OPINION: Subsistence court appeal could resolve decades of dual management problems in Alaska

A recent opinion piece in the Anchorage Daily News by Tom Kizzia ("The last refuge") draws a flawed historical parallel by equating Alaska Native organizations' reliance on federal intervention for rural subsistence priorities with Indigenous tribes siding with distant powers against colonial settlers.

This analogy distorts the current debate over Alaska's fish and wildlife management. Safari Club International (SCI) — a leading wildlife conservation organization — submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) that reinforces the rural subsistence priority created under Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) while also upholding equal access guaranteed under the Alaska Constitution, restoring science-based management by the state on all lands and preventing federal overreach that fragments conservation efforts.

As a retired Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) wildlife biologist with nearly 30 years managing game in Alaska, a former chairman of the Alaska Board of Game and current president of the Kenai Peninsula Chapter of SCI, I've dedicated my life to science-based wildlife management that benefits all Alaskans and, importantly, provides a state subsistence preference. The SCI proposal isn't about denying subsistence — it's about sound conservation driven by the best data and rejecting federal overreach that creates confusion and harms our shared resources that do not recognize political boundaries.

The "dual management system" has caused decades of headaches: conflicting rules on the same lands and waterways, bewildered hunters and fishermen, poor enforcement and outright damage to fish and wildlife populations. On the Kuskokwim River, federal boards apply rural priorities in fragments, while the state uses comprehensive ADF&G science to safeguard runs for everyone. State fish and wildlife management — as guaranteed by the Statehood Act and supported by the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation — puts conservation first and delivers fair opportunity for hundreds of thousands of Alaskans and our visitors, representing a diverse mix of people and geographies. SCI's focused petition to DOI eliminates redundancy, aligns with ADF&G expertise and ensures decisions are grounded in science. Dual management has failed, and we demand management that sustains abundant populations for all hunters.

Make no mistake: The SCI Kenai Chapter fully respects ANILCA's rural priority and stands firmly with rural subsistence hunters. Many members are subsistence users themselves. This past year, we teamed up with the SCI Alaska Chapter and aided storm-displaced Yup'ik families from Kipnuk, providing hunts near Anchorage and hosting a wild game feast for more than 200 people. As best said by my friend and colleague, John Sturgeon, "Safari Club and subsistence people are much closer than most realize — we're all hunters." And I would add, hunters, regardless of ethnicity or place of residence, should be mutually supportive of a well-managed resource.

The current situation of federal closures of huge areas to nonrural Alaskans, often lacking scientific basis, only shrinks participation and the funding that keeps wildlife thriving. True fairness means one unified, data-driven system under the state — providing for subsistence under state and federal law. This will result in plenty of salmon for rural subsistence harvest and game for rural and urban households as well as the guided opportunities that support rural jobs.

Alaska's story is complex, but our path forward is clear: Alaskans uniting for sustainable management, not divisive narratives. Our Kenai Chapter of SCI will continue advocating for policies that ensure Alaska's wildlife remains abundant for every Alaskan who relies on it.

Ted Spraker is a retired Alaska Department of Fish and Game wildlife biologist. He served 18 years on the Alaska Board of Game and is a former chairman of the board and the current president of the Kenai Peninsula Chapter of Safari Club International.

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