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Rick Sinnott

## What's cost of development on dwindling moose population?

Rick Sinnott | Apr 26, 2012


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Have you ever visited some part of Anchorage that you haven't frequented for a month or so, only to discover a new hotel, office building, or subdivision arising from a freshly cleared patch of woods? Every time a new building, road, or parking lot is built in Anchorage, moose lose a little bit of living space.

I've always said that Anchorage is people habitat. I live in a house, too, so it's not fair to expect everyone else to live in moss-covered mounds in the woods. But Anchorage is different from other cities, and one of the features making our city unique is the wildlife living around us. No other city the size of Anchorage is adorned with hundreds of free-ranging moose. Anchorage wouldn't be Anchorage without its urban moose. They are so ubiquitous that some of us take them for granted.

A recent project on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER) will allow land managers to calculate the cost of development on moose. Ultimately, the technique could be employed throughout the Anchorage area. Preliminary results were presented in Anchorage at the annual meeting of the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society. Joe Welch, a graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, is spearheading the research. Perry Barboza and Don Spalinger, both experts on wildlife nutrition with the University of Alaska, are advising. Sean Farley, a wildlife physiologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is also supervising the work. JBER secured funding for the study.

### Brief history of moose in Anchorage

Before Anchorage was established, [moose were scarce in upper Cook Inlet](#), according to Wilfred Osgood, a biologist with the federal Division of Biological Survey who collected bird and mammal sightings and specimens in 1900. Osgood interviewed Dena'ina elders who told him moose had only recently appeared on the west side of Cook Inlet. No moose were there when they were boys. The mature forest in the area was a mix of deciduous trees, mostly birch and cottonwood, and spruce.

A mature forest is not ideal moose habitat. However, about the same time as Osgood's visit, a period of explosive population growth was triggered by widespread regeneration of woody vegetation. The regrowth resulted from wildfires set by miners and the Alaska Railroad, followed by settlers and the military who cleared large tracts of mature forest.

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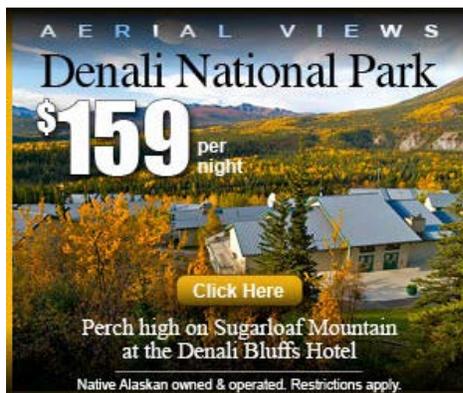
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After decades of complete protection, except from poachers, moose numbers in the Anchorage area probably peaked in the early 1950s. The first closely monitored hunt was held in 1954. Since then moose have been harvested to maintain their population at a level the habitat can support.

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s saw more clearing throughout the Anchorage Bowl, Eagle River, and Chugiak as the growing city



shouldered aside natural habitats. In some cases, sites were cleared but nothing was built for years; the resulting patches of young trees and shrubs proved better moose habitat than the native old-growth forest. However, beginning in the 1990s the amount of available moose habitat appears to have declined faster than new habitat was created by the regeneration of cleared areas. Anchorage has fewer moose now than it did two decades ago.

The founding of Anchorage created shrubby habitat welcomed by the now-familiar urban moose. But Anchorage's welcome mat is shrinking. Ultimately, the nutritional model developed by Welch and his advisors will help measure the rate of shrinkage and predict the results of future development on moose.

### Constructing the model

In the simplest terms, the nutritional model is based on what a moose requires nutritionally and the quantity and quality of forage in the area. But a lot of fieldwork was needed to fine-tune the model for local conditions.

Welch and his advisors captured, collected samples from, and radio-collared 19 adult female moose on JBER from 2009 to 2011. These moose were observed and recaptured periodically to take more samples. Moose pellets were collected to ascertain what the moose were eating.

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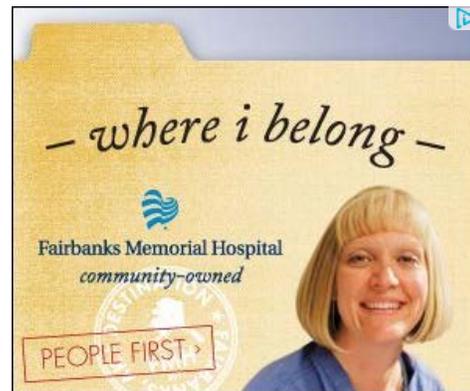
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### Comments

by [villageboy](#) | April 27, 2012 - 9:18am

Zidar - I don't think it's taboo.

Talk about it all you want.

Write a piece in the Dispatch about population control.

The problem, from my perspective is that you'll unleash a firestorm of opposition.

But, it'll be an interesting discussion topic for sure.

I oppose population control (unless voluntary) so, I know I would enjoy the dialogue.

On another note - Rick Sinnott, very nice article. Its good to see you writing a positive piece about moose and looking at interesting research in our city.