

From: Scott Sundberg [mailto:sunny@skiseaba.com]

Sent: Thursday, January 06, 2011 1:07 PM

To: Eric Holle

Cc: Rob Golberg; joe@joeordonez.com; sean@alaskamountainguides.com; seandog@alaskaheliskiing.com; weis@aptalaska.net; Daymondhoffman@yahoo.com; mearnest@haines.ak.us; jhill@haines.ak.us; jcozzi@haines.ak.us

Subject: Re: Heli-skiing Working Group

Eric,

It is clearly evident that you actually have no idea what you are talking about. You are and will always be known in this community as a nay sayer and renegade biologist. You have tried to shut down everything that is motorized that has had some negligible impact on the landscape in this community. There is no evidence that goats, bears, wolverine or salmon populations have decreased from any commercially related tour that is and has been operated in the past. But you always chime in "what about the wildlife." The simple truth is the wildlife are fine.

In the Chugach Powder Guides environmental assessment they found way to mitigate any potential impact to wildlife, they didn't shut down the heliski industry, they expanded it by 100% in both area and number of clients allowed.

This is part of the mitigation plan quoted from the successful FEIS:

Wildlife Impact Issues

1. Helicopters will maintain a 1/2-mile horizontal (ground level) or 1,500 feet above ground level (AGL) from all observed wildlife. *
2. Helicopters will not hover, circle, or harass any species of wildlife in any way.
3. CPG will adhere to the No-Fly Zones, which identify mountain goat and Dall's sheep concentration areas (See No-Fly Zone Maps, Appendix B). No-Fly Zones are based on a separation distance of 1,500 feet from important habitat. The ADFG will be consulted by the Forest Service before any alteration of zone boundaries to less than 1,500 feet.
4. CPG will provide mountain goat, Dall's sheep, and other wildlife sightings to the Glacier Ranger District. The District will provide CPG with incidental wildlife observation forms to be filled out daily. These forms are to be submitted annually upon completion of the permit season. Unique wildlife sightings, such as wolves, wolverines, or brown bears, will be reported during the next business day.

Commercially Guided Helicopter Skiing—FEIS

Chapter 2 Alternatives -- page 2-30

5. If a brown bear or wolverine den is located (either by CPG or during wildlife observation flights), CPG will maintain a 1/2 mile horizontal (ground level) or 1,500 AGL separation during their operations. *
6. CPG will not ski or conduct any activity within 330 feet of known bald eagle nests.
7. Helicopter flights will not fly within 1/4-mile horizontal distance or 1,500 AGL of any active bald eagle or goshawk nest. When it is not known whether the nest is active, helicopter flights will avoid the nest*. The Glacier Ranger District will provide CPG an updated bald eagle and goshawk nest map prior to each season.

We are asking for more areas, because during the time of year we are in the area using it, the wildlife is not. We are done before nanny goats and sows head to kidding areas, and spring foliage respectively. May is the crucial month,, not February -April. And in April we generally operate at 4-7,000 feet above sea level, there are no nannies, or sows at this elevation then.

ADF n G and the BLM have been working cooperatively as the BLM is preparing its NEPA for the Ring of Fire. The best science to date allows flight distances closer than 1 mile to critical habitat, (suggested by Anthony Crupi) and allows for more area under the BLM alternatives, since the state's area is mostly General Use, for commercial recreation including fixed wing, and helicopter assisted tours.

The borough needs to frankly stay out of managing wildlife until there is a clear and concise link to the activity and its measurable impacts on wildlife in this area. At this point there is no evidence that Heliskiing in Haines, or Skagway, has attributed to any mortality regarding goats, bears, wolverine, lynx or any other animal you might use as a scape goat, pardon the pun.

Also to suggest that we are not looking for wildlife is a naive statement. While we are flying to and from our heliski terrain, we do try to spot wildlife and often have success. Our clients would love to see any wildlife that is not in its protective habitat. When wildlife are visible it generally means wildlife are either on the move, or are perfectly contained in their safety cushion. This is in fact when we see them and we take precaution to avoid harassment and view them at a distance.

All pilots are obligated under their license to not harass wildlife, if they did they could lose their license which in turn is their livelihood.

I am tired of hearing this argument that if a goat hears a heli a half mile away it may stop eating, drop its unborn kid, and move three ranges to the west. It simply does not occur.

And if the state were to take the potential gps info that heli-skiing is going to generate, and have hard data based science behind the output, and correlate it with the 23 tagged goats, you might get to see pertinent information regarding how goats interact, if at all, to helicopters in proximity to them. This is especially true if they are not visible.

SEABA is willing to work directly with ADFnG and BLM biologists, jointly, not separate, to supply log info since the information will be proprietary to the companies and the borough, and has already sent introductory emails to ADFNG, in December, regarding this program.

We are not concerned about the relationship between goats and helicopters because we know from NFS service studies in Juneau that goats become habitual to the noise, or any noise or activity that does not harm them in perpetuity. We are mainly concerned with the continual misinformation campaign the people like Eric Holle and other local residents wage to remove this industry, and others, from this community.

I think you would find that the goats are very secure in their domain, and displacement and mortality rates would be negligible.

It doesn't take a biologist to know animals, it takes people that have been observing them in their natural environment under so called commercial pressures to discover the truths.

I have a degree in environment science, I study snow and climate. I certainly could not tell anyone for certain why natural processes are constantly in flux. Most of the time biologists are doing their best to understand the species, it is not an exact science, and until there truly is a problem and direct correlation, then I believe we can abide by BLM, State, and NFS system wildlife mitigation standards and peacefully coexist with the animals in their environment.

I mean even Joe Ordonez could tell you that the 500 people he takes to the Chilkoot corridor every summer doesn't displace the bears at 100 feet, why would a helicopter at 1/2 mile.

I think that this is Eric Holly's way of saying, stay out of my backyard, I was here first.

look forward to more sensible and fact filled conversations.

Scott

On Mon, Jan 3, 2011 at 4:08 PM, Eric Holle <banjorebop@yahoo.com> wrote:
Dear Working Group and Assembly Members:

Having observed the Heli-skiing Working Group meeting of Tuesday, Dec. 28, I would like to offer some constructive criticism. I should first mention that I have been a skier for fifty years, and involved in wildlife conservation for my entire adult life, often at a professional level. I have lived in Haines twenty one years and been involved in the helicopter skiing controversy since its inception.

First, I would like to commend the working group for taking on what is undoubtedly a challenging, confusing and sometimes frustrating task. I further commend you on making progress in resolving some issues, such as flight path verification by GPS, clearly an essential element to any long range plan. Other issues need further work. The topic of "skier days" versus "clients per operator" should be shelved. It is a clear attempt to confuse the public and end up with far more user days than currently allowed. For example, if one client skis ten days then that one "client per company" equals ten skier days. Five hundred clients could easily become five thousand skier days by a different name. Such a change in terminology should be dropped.

Any increase in skier days almost requires, by definition, an increase in usable area, because the industry is selling untracked ski terrain to its clients. There would be few objections to an increase in skier days if such an increase did not affect residential homes, recreational backcountry users, or wildlife. However, that is not the case. Any changes to the existing map should only be done cautiously and with the full consent of all stakeholders, including conservationists, wildlife professionals, residents, and local backcountry users. Changes to the map should consider closing some sensitive areas to helicopter skiing at the same time that new areas are opened. The burden of proof that no harm will be done by changing the existing map should be on the industry.

It appears that the "progress" made on modifying the existing map has to do with minimizing noise impacts to residential homes while expanding areas used by the industry. At what point will the working group incorporate information from Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game wildlife managers and from local backcountry telemark skiers, snowboarders, ski touring enthusiasts, snowshoers, etc, who would lose some of their favorite areas to the industry? To my knowledge, the working group has not solicited this essential information. Relying solely on anecdotal information from the industry regarding use of areas by sensitive wildlife or by local recreationists will produce inaccurate information. For example, wildlife professionals flying aerial goat surveys in our area estimate that they see only about 60% of the animals present. (Kevin White, pers. comm.) A heli-skiing pilot, focused on entertaining their clients, would see far fewer animals. Industry statements regarding backcountry use by local residents are equally suspect.

Concerns about negative impacts to our local wildlife from this industry are

serious. In his Nov. 21, 2008 letter to Scott Sundberg of SEABA, Area Management Biologist Ryan Scott states clearly that ". . .additional helicopter activity in the areas requested may significantly impact local goat populations. At this time, we do not have information to support recommending additional helicopter skiing areas." In a letter to the Haines Borough Assembly dated Jan. 12, 2010 Ryan states "The impact of an additional 200 skier days is unknown. However, it is important that any additional days be constrained to existing authorized skiing areas as depicted on the Haines Borough Helicopter-supported Recreation Areas map, and to the time periods listed on the map." On Nov. 23, 2010, Asst. Area Management Biologist Anthony Crupi re-emphasized ADF&G concerns in a letter to the Haines Borough Heliskiing Work Group Members. He states that "The current . . .(2005) map indicates that flight corridors and allowed areas transit several kidding areas, and . . .consideration of additional landings will result in additional helicopter activity near these areas and may impact the long term population trend. Kidding areas should be avoided between May-June 15." Due to the large number of goats observed in the Porcupine Mountain area during recent aerial surveys (Kevin White, pers. comm.), the Working Group should consider discontinuing heli-skiing in this area.

The Group should also solicit recommendations from ADF&G regarding impact to denning brown and black bears. There are known areas around Haines with high concentrations of dens. On May 4, 2010, my wife, myself, and two other skiers saw clear evidence of heli-skiing and landing within 200 meters of an active bear den in Haska Creek. This den was so evident that it is unfathomable how a pilot could have not seen it, which leads to the conclusion that they chose to ignore it. Further heli-skiing in this active bear denning area should be disallowed.

To summarize, once again I applaud the efforts of the Working Group and hope that you are successful in balancing the economic needs of the heli-skiing industry with valley residents, local recreationists and our extremely precious and valuable wildlife. I re-emphasize that if the industry wishes to expand, the burden of proof of causing no harm falls on their shoulders, not those of the public.

Sincerely,
Eric Holle