

The Good, Bad and Ugly, Depending on Your Perspective

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Prior to the arrival of European settlers, the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) was once distributed throughout North America (Nowak 1995). European settlers arrived in the New World with negative perceptions of the wolf, based on fairy tales and religious beliefs. In addition to being regarded as a threat to personal safety, the wolf was perceived to be a threat to livestock and as competition with human hunters for wild ungulates (Young 1944, Fritts et al. 2003). These conflicts and the historic, public hatred of wolves resulted in extirpation of wolf populations in the western United States by 1930 (Mech 1970).

The gray wolf was declared an endangered species in 1974 under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), a powerful law enacted in 1973, and their recovery became the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Wolf restoration in the western United States began in 1986 when a pack that originated in Canada denned in Glacier National Park (Ream et al. 1989). Wolves from Canada were introduced into Yellowstone National Park (YNP) and into central Idaho in 1995 and 1996 to accelerate restoration (Bangs and Fritts 1996, Fritts et al. 1997). The wolf population grew to over 1,000 wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains (NRM) of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming by 2005 (Sime and Bangs 2006). Many people opposed wolf restoration because of concerns about human safety, potential land-use restrictions, livestock depredations and competition with hunters for wild ungulates. Resolving conflicts, both perceived and real, between wolves and people has been the primary focus of the wolf-management program (Bangs et al. 2001).

When wolves were reintroduced to central Idaho and YNP, special regulations were established that offered more flexible, lethal take options than normally were allowed for federally listed species (Bangs and Fritts 1996, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1994). The special regulations were further liberalized and expanded in 2005 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005). Landowners can shoot wolves attacking and chasing their livestock, their livestock herding and guarding animals, and their dogs. These regulations apply to private property and to federal grazing allotments. In addition, authority to implement federal

regulations could be transferred to Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, provided states submitted acceptable state wolf management plans to the USFWS that demonstrated adequate regulatory mechanisms for the long-term viability of wolves. Provisions within the regulations would allow the states and tribes to lethally take wolves in order to resolve significant ungulate-management issues but only after submitting a scientific, written proposal to the USFWS that had undergone peer and public review. The USFWS will only approve wolf take for ungulate management after it determines that the proposal is scientifically supported and reasoned and that it does not compromise wolf recovery.

Idaho and Montana wrote wolf-management plans that were approved by the USFWS. Montana's plan designates the wolf as a nongame species in need of management and received positive public reviews as a model approach. The Idaho Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, in its executive summary, contains House Joint Memorial No. 5, passed in 2001 by the state legislature, demanding that wolf recovery in Idaho be discontinued immediately and that wolves be removed from the state by whatever means necessary. The professional integrity of Idaho's wolf management plan is compromised by such statements. To further complicate matters, on January 11, 2007, newly elected Idaho Governor C. L. "Butch" Otter told *Associated Press* that he suggested that hunters, after delisting, killed 550 gray wolves in Idaho, leaving about 100 wolves, or 10 packs. Otter said, "I'm prepared to bid for that first ticket to shoot a wolf myself" (Alderman 2007:1).

Wyoming prepared a wolf-management plan that was not approved by the USFWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006). Wyoming proposed a wolf-management plan that would designate the wolf as a trophy animal in the northwest corner of the state—almost exclusively in YNP, Grand Teton National Park and contiguous wilderness areas—and as a predator elsewhere. The USFWS rejected the plan because state law (which classifies wolves as predators) and the plan are not sufficient in combination to conserve Wyoming's portion of a recovered NRM wolf population. Wyoming has taken legal action challenging the USFWS decision. The USFWS has not requested wolf-management plans from any tribe in the NRM, and any future delisting action is unlikely to be dependent on wolf management on tribal lands.

A news release by the Deputy Secretary of U.S. Department of the Interior on January 29, 2007, announced that the USFWS is removing the western Great Lakes population from the federal list of threatened and endangered

species and is proposing to remove the NRM population of gray wolves from the list as well. If Wyoming's plan is not approved before the USFWS publishes a final rule on the NRM delisting proposal, the USFWS will continue to provide ESA protection to wolves in the significant portion of their range in Wyoming (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2007).

An understanding of the public's perception of wolves was vital to developing an effective wolf- restoration program. Wolves are symbols representing a range of issues, with the perception of the importance of the species varying among various demographic and socioeconomic groups (Kellert 1985; McNaught 1987, Bath and Buchanan 1989; Bath and Phillips 1990; Bath 1991). Few wildlife issues are so driven by misconceptions that have so little basis in biological fact.

In 1978, approximately 50 percent of the public in the NRM region were found to like, and 30 percent to dislike, the wolf (Kellert 1985). Thirty-eight surveys conducted between 1972 and 2000 reported that a majority (51 percent) of people showed positive attitudes toward wolves, and 60 percent supported wolf restoration (Brown-Nunez and Taylor 2002, Williams et al. 2002). Survey respondents who held positive attitudes toward wolves were younger, college-educated, higher income, lived in urban areas and exhibited good factual knowledge about wolves. Negative attitudes toward wolves were expressed by livestock producers, rural residents, older and less-educated respondents. Support for wolves was based on a variety of ecological, aesthetic and outdoor recreation-related reasons. Negative attitudes reflected a fear and dislike of wolves, a loss of livestock and pets, and a possible reduction in big-game populations. Generally, people with the most positive attitudes toward wolves were those who have the least experience with them. Members of the public most likely to encounter wolves or to perceive being affected by them have the least favorable attitude toward them (Fritts et al. 1995).

Prior to wolf reintroduction in the NRM, critics predicted that children would be killed at bus stops, livestock herds would be slaughtered, ungulate herds would be decimated and that, despite all of this, wolves would be invisible to those who wished to see them. So far, no one has been killed by wolves in the United States. Since 1987, wolf depredation caused about 0.04 percent and 0.01 percent of all annual cattle and sheep losses in the NRM (Bangs et al. 2005), respectively. Eighty-three domestic dogs (mostly guard dogs and hunting hounds) have been reported killed during the same period (Bangs et al. 2005). Visitor surveys

indicate conservatively that 325,000 YNP visitors saw wolves in 2005 (Duffield et al. 2006).

The relationship between wolves and big-game populations in the NRM has erupted into a national debate. Hunters, guides, outfitters, and the state and national organizations representing them have become vocal about their concerns that unregulated wolf populations are decimating ungulate populations in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The publicity generated in national newspapers, magazines, the Internet, radio and television has fueled a growing public debate between recreationalists and wolf advocates. “The wolf is an example of science ending up at the doorstep of public opinion, and public drama” Royster (2004:1) stated.

Wolves are the most controversial animal in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming because they prey on large ungulates, including white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), mule deer (*O. hemionus*), elk (*Cervus elaphus*) and moose (*Alces alces*). The restoration of ungulate populations by hunters and state game agencies was one of the most remarkable achievements of modern wildlife management, and, without it, wolf restoration would have been impossible. Understanding how wolves affect ungulates, from a scientific standpoint, is still under investigation, but a few facts are known: the average adult wolf eats more than 9 pounds (4 kg) of prey per day, and wolf predation may or may not reduce ungulate populations and hunter opportunity, depending on a wide number of variables (Boyce 1995, Kunkel 1997, Mech and Peterson 2003, Smith et al. 2004). Wolf predation on ungulates varies seasonally. Discovering exactly how wolves affect ungulates is complicated by the presence of other large predators, as well as winter severity, fire suppression, drought and hunting.

A herd of migratory elk that range from YNP to a northern winter range outside the park is the subject of intense study to discover factors influencing the herd’s progressive population decline. The herd has fluctuated between 10,287 during 1990 to 1991, to 19,359 during 1993 to 1994, to 6,738 elk (not sightability corrected by 30 percent factor) during the winter of 2006 to 2007. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) administers an antlerless late hunt to help manage elk numbers and has removed an average of 1,400 elk annually since 1988. While the herd’s current size results from a variety of natural and human-caused factors, including hunting, wolf predation is often credited as the major cause of the herd’s decline. “This decrease in counted elk likely reflects the continuing effects of predation by wolves and other large carnivores, as well as decreased detection

of elk within Yellowstone due to anti-predation behaviors such as smaller group sizes, increased dispersion of groups and increased use of forested habitats, making them more difficult to locate” (Yellowstone National Park and Northern Yellowstone Cooperative Wildlife Working Group 2007:1) according to P. J. White, biologist for YNP. In the same news release Tom Lemke, a biologist for FWP is quoted: “In an effort to reduce hunter mortality on female elk, FWP has reduced the number of antlerless Late Elk Hunt permits over the last several years. For the last two years only 100 antlerless permits have been issued” (Yellowstone National Park and Northern Yellowstone Cooperative Wildlife Working Group 2007:1). He added, “from a winter elk management perspective we are currently meeting State Elk Plan population objectives. The number of elk wintering north of Yellowstone Park has been within objectives since 2003” (Yellowstone National Park and Northern Yellowstone Cooperative Wildlife Working Group 2007:1)

Research overwhelmingly concludes that no two predator-prey systems are alike and that the same system changes over time. Estimating impacts of wolves on big game is not clear-cut. Recent studies in YNP, primarily on elk, present opposing views on whether wolf predation is compensatory, additive or a combination of the two (Vucetich et al. 2005, White and Garrot 2005, Varley and Boyce 2006). If prey are at or above their carrying capacity where habitat resources are limited, wolf predation is often termed compensatory. In other words, the wolves may be killing prey that might otherwise not survive for reasons such as drought, disease or starvation. Where prey are below their carrying capacity and habitat resources exceed the survival needs of the prey, wolf predation can be termed additive because wolves may kill prey that otherwise would survive.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game determined that wolves were having an unacceptable impact on wild ungulate populations in game management units (GMUs) 10 and 12 in the Lolo Zone in northern Idaho, and it has formally proposed a plan to reduce wolves there (Idaho Department of Fish and Game 2006). The GMUs 10, 12 and 17 have declining elk populations as a result of inadequate cow survival and recruitment. Data for GMU 17 does not exist because of logistical difficulties of capturing and monitoring elk in federally designated wilderness. Idaho proposed to reduce the wolf population in the Lolo Zone by no more than 43 of 58 wolves (75 percent) during the first year of the study and to maintain the population at 25 to 40 percent of preremoval wolf

abundance for 5 years. The USFWS rejected Idaho's proposed plan, saying scientific data gathered by the state did not justify the action (Miller 2006). Jim Peek, a retired professor of wildlife biology and a member of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation board of directors said that, "at this point there is very little evidence that the presence of wolves has caused a decline in elk numbers anywhere, especially in Central Idaho" (Benson 2007:1). He went on to say, it's too early to tell how much wolves will influence elk populations in the long run and that while there may be "some lower levels of elk, it won't be a big deal from the standpoint of a hunter" (Benson 2007:1).

Wyoming currently is seeking to reduce wolf numbers to protect big-game herds from excessive killing by wolves while litigation over their unacceptable wolf-management plan continues. A bill in the Wyoming legislature proposes killing wolves that are: (1) impacting big game, (2) moving elk off of feedgrounds and (3) causing "mixing between livestock and ungulates" or causing "wild ungulates to pose safety hazards on state public highways" (Royster 2007:1). The USFWS has responded that changes needed in federal rules to accomplish the request could take as long as the delisting process.

While science, politics and public opinion determine the timetable for delisting and state management of wolves, most regular citizens follow the laws of the land. Fringe elements, like the Idaho Antiwolf Coalition, advocate the removal of all wolves from Idaho by whatever means necessary to the extent allowed by law. The group is raising money to sue for the removal of wolves and its spokesman, Ron Gillet, is quoted in the *Idaho Statesman*: "If we don't come out the way we expect, I can't guarantee there won't be civil disobedience. We are not going to lose our wildlife because of some liberal judge" (Barker 2004:1). One antiwolf activist in Idaho even provided instructions on how to poison wolves on his Website and was later charged in federal court with placing poison baits with intent to kill wolves (Barker 2005). Instead of killing wolves, the poison killed wildlife and sickened at least one dog. Results of this court case are still pending. In Wyoming, more than a dozen dogs have died from poison aimed at wolves.

The pandemonium resulting from the collision of wolf biology and wolf politics continues to play out in the national media. Delisting of wolves could be delayed by wolf-advocacy organizations filing lawsuits and demanding assurances from Idaho and Wyoming that wolves will have adequate protection. Wyoming has been the subject of ridicule in the press as the most prowolf state of them all because the state's uncompromising position on wolves prevents the

delisting process from moving forward while allowing wolves to reproduce and expand their range (Schneider 2006). Today, 12 years after their reintroduction, the public is still extremely divided over the presence of wolves.

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