

The Profanity Peak Pack: Loss of wolves and academic freedom

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The recent killing of six members of the Profanity Peak wolf pack in NE Washington in retribution for the loss of a few cattle is emblematic of what is wrong with public land policy. As I write, trappers are out to kill the remaining pack members.

What is significant about the destruction of this pack is that the Profanity Peak wolves roamed national forest lands. These are our lands. They belong to all Americans and are part of our national patrimony.

Even if the Profanity Peak Pack were not being slaughtered, it's important to note that the mere presence of livestock negatively impacts wolves whether they are shot or otherwise killed—something that many livestock supporters are loath to acknowledge.

Domestic livestock consume forage that would otherwise support the native prey of wolves like elk. More domestic animals, means fewer elk.

In essence, domestic livestock grazing public lands are compromising the food resources of public wildlife so that ranchers can turn a private profit.

Worse for wolves, especially wolves confined to a den area because of pups as was the case in the Profanity Peak Pack, when domestic cattle are moved onto our public lands, it creates a social displacement of elk. In other words, elk avoid areas actively being grazed by livestock. If the livestock are grazing lands near a den site, then the wolves automatically have fewer elk to take and must travel further to find their dinner.

If you place cattle within a dozen miles of a wolf pack you are essentially putting the livestock “right on top” of the wolves. And if the presence of cattle forces native prey like elk to abandon the area, can anyone blame the wolves if they resort to killing a domestic animal once in a while?

The loss of the Profanity Peak Pack begs the question of whether any livestock grazing should be permitted in this area. It is obviously good wolf habitat—except of course for the presence of domestic animals.

What is particularly egregious about the on-going slaughter of the Profanity Peak Pack is that it was essentially a preventable conflict. Had the rancher, whose cows invaded the wolf pack's territory, been required to use other public lands, or better yet, simply lease private pasture, there would have been no livestock losses, hence wolf deaths.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS ALSO BEING SLAUGHTERED

But the loss of the Profanity Peak Pack as terrible as it may be, has had an additional effect upon the public's right to understand the circumstances behind the wolf slaughter. Washington State University has sought to silence one of its researchers, Associate Professor Robert Wielgus. Wielgus is a much respected and published predator ecologist whose on-going research has challenged traditional ideas about predator management.

Wielgus had been studying the Profanity Peak pack and cattle interactions. There were radio collars on both wolves and livestock, so he had a pretty good notion of their locations. In an article published by the Seattle Times on Aug. 25, 2016, Dr. Wielgus stated that a particular livestock operator had “elected to put his livestock directly on top of (the wolves') den site; we have pictures of cows swamping it...”

This caused an immediate uproar from Washington State University and the College of Agricultural, Human, and

Natural Resources Sciences and an attempt to discredit Dr. Wielgus. The University declared in a press release: “Some of Dr. Wielgus’ statements in regard to this controversial issue have been both inaccurate and inappropriate. As such, they have contributed substantially to the growing anger and confusion about this significant wildlife management issue and have unfairly jeopardized the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Wolf Advisory Group’s many-months long stakeholder process. Moreover, the statements do not in any way represent the views or position of Washington State University or the WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resources Sciences. These statements are disavowed by our institutions.

WSU then tried to dismiss Dr. Wielgus observation by stating that “In actuality, the livestock were released at low elevation on the east side of the Kettle Crest more than 4 miles from the den site, and dispersed throughout the allotments based on instructions found in the Annual Operating Instructions (AOI).”

However, Donny Martorello with the Washington Fish and Wildlife recently validated Wielgus assertions. In an email September 2nd, Martorello wrote: “Based on field reports of the 13 wolf depredations on livestock since July 8, three were within about a mile of the pack’s activity centers (den or rendezvous sites) and ten ranged from 2 to 10 miles away from wolf activity centers.” Martorello went on to say “As cattle continued to disperse through the allotment they inevitably crossed paths with the den site and later with rendezvous sites.” Martorello also confirmed that salt blocks were even placed near rendezvous sites, thereby attracting livestock to areas utilized by wolves.

This is diving into the weeds over definitions. Whether the cows were quite literally “on top” of the den or four miles away is irrelevant to the wolves. What such statements demonstrates is either the Ag school’s ignorance of wolf biology or a not so-veiled attempt to confuse the public. If you are a wolf where regular daily hunting excursions of 20-30 miles are common, four miles is a short romp. Cattle grazing four miles from a den site is essentially “right on top” of the wolves.

The attempt to muzzle Wielgus is not unusual when academics challenge traditional industries like livestock grazing, logging, or wildlife agencies. They often covertly and not so covertly support (read control) the academic agenda at natural resource schools.

For instance, a few years ago, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks threatened to withdraw its funding of all research at Montana State University in retaliation to a peer reviewed paper written by Dr. Scott Creel that challenged the agencies wolf hunting limits. http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/fw-p-warns-msu-over-scientist-s-wolf-study/article_0d470f22-fff8-11df-85de-001cc4c002e0.html

Or consider how the Dean and some professors at the Forestry School at Oregon State University attempted to suppress the publication of a peer reviewed paper that then graduate student, Dan Donato wrote that found that post-fire logging of the Biscuit Fire harmed forest regeneration.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biscuit_Fire_publication_controversy

I had my own experience with this kind of censorship. I had applied for entrance to a Ph.D. program at Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman and was accepted. I had helped to write a grant proposal to a foundation to fund my research and had obtained financial support for four years.

Prior to admittance into the program, I was well known in Montana as a critic of public lands grazing. So once the Montana Stockgrowers learned that I would be attending MSU, they put pressure on the university to rescind the financial grant offer (which I had written) and they also threatened the professor who was to be my advisor that he might not get tenure if he continued to work with me.

Rather than see this individual lose his opportunity for tenure, not to mention, the idea of attending a program that was hostile to my presence, I “voluntarily” withdrew my application.

The Wielgus character assassination is merely the latest a long sordid history of natural resource interests interfering with, and attempting to suppress research that challenges their hegemony and control of public

resources.

It's important that media, citizens, and others "follow the money." Whether as blatant as the effort to discredit Dr. Wielgus or subtler, these industries make it clear there are sidebars to your research and what you can say or publish.

To believe that agency "professionals" whether wildlife biologists working for state wildlife agencies or foresters working for the Forest Service or range conservationists working for the BLM are presenting complete objective information is naïve.

However, it goes beyond the agencies since they often fund academic researchers. So if you are a forestry professor at Oregon State University, you know that it is not wise to criticize logging or the Forest Service policies. If you are a wildlife professor you had better not challenge hunting and state wildlife agencies. And if you are a range professor, well you know that cows are God's gift to mankind so what else do you need to know.

The point is that one must follow the money. As Upton Sinclair noted long ago, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

I don't mean to imply that all foresters, range cons, wildlife biologists, academics, etc. are doing the bidding of commercial interests. But all are well aware of the parameters of their jobs. There are certain questions that don't get asked, certain research that is not initiated, and careful omission of specific facts that could change public attitudes or perception. These are the compromises that many make to maintain their employment.

If you violate these unwritten rules, you can suffer. I recall an Idaho BLM fishery biologist who publicly condemned livestock grazing because of its impacts on fish. He was "transferred" to Tonopah, Nevada, just outside of Death Valley and one of the driest places in the West—essentially he was sent to the fish biologist's equivalent of Siberia.

So one needs to understand these limitations, anticipate them, and know that researchers like Wielgus who stick their heads up are risking a lot more than academic integrity. They could easily find that their schools no longer support their research or adopt other ways to punish you.