

2020

Conflicts and Attitudes Regarding the Return of the Grey Wolf to California

Kendall Burke

Humboldt State University, keb720@humboldt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/humboldtgeographic>



Part of the [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Spatial Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burke, Kendall (2020) "Conflicts and Attitudes Regarding the Return of the Grey Wolf to California," *Humboldt Geographic*: Vol. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/humboldtgeographic/vol1/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Humboldt Geographic by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

CONFLICTS AND ATTITUDES REGARDING THE RETURN OF THE GRAY WOLF TO CALIFORNIA

kendall burke

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Euro-American settlers began the task of changing the landscape of California from vast expanses of wetland and forest into agricultural land. Since the arrival and eventual settlement of Spanish colonizers, ranching cattle has been a lucrative business in much of the state. The growing ranching industry and population of California directly led to the extermination of the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) within the state by 1924. Wolves had long been regarded as dangerous vermin that preyed upon livestock, and it was believed their destruction would be beneficial to both profit and public safety.

Wolves in other areas of the rapidly expanding United States would meet a similar fate, and soon the species was confined to small patches of land in the Upper Midwest, Rocky Mountains, and Pacific Northwest (US Fish and Wildlife Service 2019). In the latter half of the twentieth century, the environmental movement brought relief to the species. The gray wolf was listed under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and slowly the species began to recover. More than 20 years later, wolves from Canada were released into Yellowstone National Park after a 60-year absence, proving that the wolf was capable of successfully integrating into areas of its former range. In December 2011, wolf OR-7 stepped into Siskiyou County from Oregon and became the first documented wolf in California since 1924 (California Department of Fish and Wildlife 2013). OR-7, nicknamed Journey, is now just one of a handful of wolves that have returned to California.

Though a success for the recovery of the species, the return of the wolf has been a source of controversy. Echoing the very attitude that expatriated the wolf nearly a century ago, many individuals who make their living ranching believe the wolf will endanger their livestock. These fears are not

unfounded. According to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), there have been over ten depredation investigations concerning gray wolves as of September 2019. In another report released by the CDFW, the Lassen pack's breeding female LAS01F gave birth to at least four pups in April of the same year. During this time, the CDFW monitoring cameras recorded two uncollared wolves travelling separately throughout Lassen County. While the California wolf population remains small and largely transient, it seems as though the species is beginning to form a foothold in the northeastern corner of the state. With the increasing presence of the wolf, it is becoming more important that the state identify areas of possible conflict and the attitudes of individuals within those areas in order to ensure the effective management of the species.

The conservation of wolves depends largely on the willingness of the community to cooperate. Wolves "can only coexist with humans if people are willing to share landscapes, tolerate livestock losses, and accept possible risks to human safety and property" (Bath 2009, 174). This can prove difficult as many in ranching communities believe that wolf conservation is a direct threat to their livelihoods. "Large carnivore management, especially wolf management, tends to be more socio-political in nature than biological" (Bath 2009, 174). Wolves are often symbolic of the battle between rural conservatives and the influence of the federal government. The battle over the gray wolf is representative of the disconnect between economic and ecological interests in rural communities, especially in regard to legislation concerning the protection of endangered species.

Rural communities often perceive regulation of the extractive industries their communities as a threat from the federal government. It is vital to recognize that as long as "wolves are presented

as a threat to the commodity... they will be opposed” (Nie 2003). It is therefore imperative that conservationists work closely with the community to understand these attitudes towards the wolf in order to increase the odds of a successful conservation plan. Many individuals and interests such as agribusiness “believe that wolf recovery, especially reintroduction into the American West, is a ruse and political ploy for more regulatory federal lands management, thus posing a serious threat to rural communities, extractive industries, and the sanctity of private property and individual freedom” (Nie 2003). In far northern California, many ranchers are deeply distrustful of wildlife officials (Hearden 2017). If the conservation of the wolf is to be successful, the suspicions of ranchers much be addressed.

The return of the wolf into California presents a unique set of problems as they were not reintroduced via human intervention, such as in the case of the wolves of Yellowstone. Therefore, those who oppose the return of the wolf must take their case straight to the state legislature, not argue with agencies such as the CDFW or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Not long after OR-7 entered California, ranching interests sued to prevent the listing of the gray wolf under the California Endangered Species Act. In a case brought forth by the California Cattlemen’s Association and the California Farm Bureau Federation against the California Fish and Game Commission, Center for Biological Diversity, Environmental Protection Information Center, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, and Cascadia Wildlands, the status of the gray wolf in California was contested. The California Cattlemen’s Association and the California Farm Bureau Federation, representing the interests of ranchers, had filed a lawsuit against the California Fish and Game Commission’s decision to list the gray wolf under California’s Endangered Species Act (Clarke 2017). Although the Cattlemen’s Association

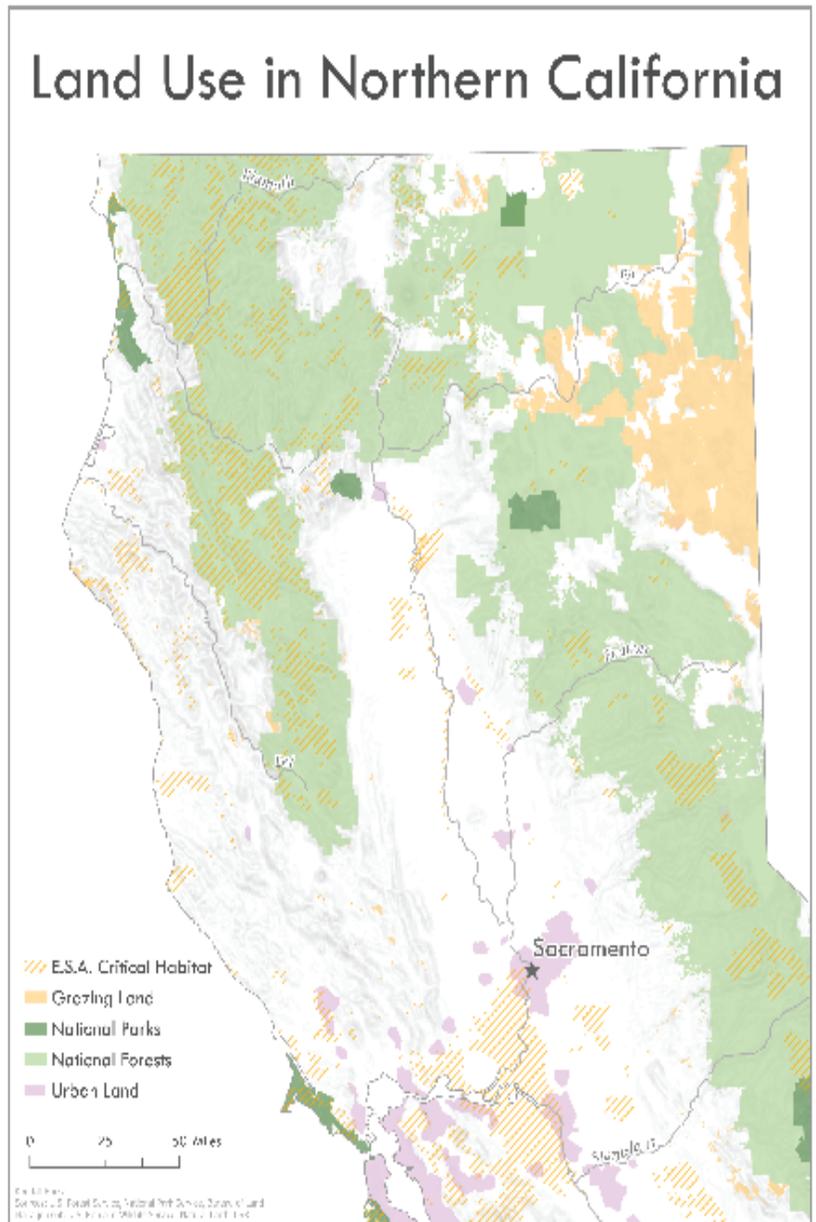


Figure 1. Land uses in northern California, including Endangered Species Act critical habitat, Bureau of Land Management grazing land, National Parks, National Forests, and urban land (map by author).

and Farm Bureau eventually lost the case, their fight reflected the views held by many living in the possible future California range of the gray wolf.

It is likely that the areas wolves will repopulate are those within protected areas, rangeland and land with sparse human habitation. By compiling data about national forests, national parks, rangeland, and population centers, areas of possible conflict may be identified. Maps provide an easily understandable way to communicate spatial information to the general public. By compiling this information into a map, one can create a visual representation of possible future wolf habitats. This data would be used to identify areas of future conflict between wolves and

people, especially ranchers. The views and opinions of people living in these areas should be taken into special consideration. As stated in numerous articles and books regarding wolf conservation, the success of wolf management depends on the attitudes of the public. The cooperation of people living and working in these areas of the map are essential to the success of wolf conservation in far northern California.

Figure 1 cartographically illustrates a variety of land uses in Northern California, including national forests, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) grazing land, and population centers. Areas designated as “critical habitat” under the Endangered Species Act earn special protection under the federal government, thus benefiting species such as wolves. Areas of grazing land next to forests or parks present the most likely areas of conflict due to the large numbers of livestock next to possible future wolf habitat. As shown on the map, the northeastern corner of the state holds hundreds of square miles of grazing land surrounded by national forests. This interface of forest and rangeland contains the range of the Lassen pack. Once again, it is vital to understand the attitudes of individuals, especially those likely to come into direct conflict with wolves such as ranchers, towards the gray wolf.

The internet provides a platform for individuals to express themselves and their opinions freely and anonymously. Looking at local news websites in various northern California counties, opinions on wolves seem to be mixed. A glance at the comment sections of these news articles and opinion pieces, reveals the attitudes by local residents hold. Many argue that wolves were here long before people and therefore have the right to exist undisturbed by ranchers (Clarke 2017). Others argue that ranchers should not have to tolerate losses to their livestock and should use whatever means necessary to ward off wolves (Lassen County Times 2017). These comments also respond to misinformation, such as the myth that wolves were intentionally reintroduced into California. These comments are often highly opinionated, aggressive, and take an extreme stance on either side of the issue. Because the individuals living in these areas, both wolf and human, are at the most likely to be at risk of conflict, their opinions and views toward the gray wolf should be given the most weight. It is also imperative that these people be educated about wolves and possible management plans to dispel any rumors or misinformation. The identification of these areas of conflict is beneficial to the safety of wolves and people alike.

With the successes of the Endangered Species Act, it is far from likely that the gray wolf will be the last large predator to return to California. Mapping areas of possible future conflict between large predators and people will ensure both conservation and safety. Furthermore, it is vital that the attitudes of individuals living in these areas identified on the above map be taken into consideration by regulatory bodies. These actions will greatly increase the efficacy of wolf management and conservation. How the state chooses to deal with the controversy surrounding the wolf and its management will set the precedent for the possible return of other large predators.

WORKS CITED

- Bangs, E.E., A.J. Bath, M. Bekoff, J.C. Blanco, C.H. Fox, S.A. Stone, D. Taylor & A.P. Wydeven. 2009. *A new era for wolves and people: Wolf recovery, human attitudes, and policy*. Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife. (n.d.) Gray wolf. <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Gray-Wolf>
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife. (n.d.) OR-7 - A lone wolf's story. <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Gray-Wolf/OR7-Story>
- Clarke, C. 2017. Ranchers, farmers sue to keep California gray wolves unprotected. *KCET*. <https://www.kcet.org/define/ranchers-farmers-sue-to-keep-california-gray-wolves-unprotected>
- Hearden, T. 2017. Trust between state, ranchers elusive as wolves populate N. California. *Capital Press*. https://www.capitalpress.com/state/california/trust-between-state-ranchers-elusive-as-wolves-populate-n-california/article_ea35b5eb-3c6c-5b93-9bf8-9dee21f79a06.html
- Lassen County Times. 2017. State's wolf management plan should give ranchers a way to protect their livestock. *Lassen County Times*. <https://www.lassennews.com/states-wolf-management-plan-give-ranchers-way-protect-livestock/>
- Nie, M.A. 2003. *Beyond wolves: The politics of wolf recovery and management*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service. (n.d.) Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). <https://www.fws.gov/home/wolfrecovery>