

# Science and Ethics Agree: Coexistence Must Replace Killing Wolves (Part 2)

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"Wolf" from goodfreephotos.com

**The need for an ethical dialogue**

To put it mildly, the ethical deliberations underlying current wolf (and most wildlife) management are inadequate, with short shrift given to the harms caused to all involved. Contrary to some Indigenous perspectives, Euro-North American federal and state agencies do not engage in the scientific and ethical exploration of who wolves are and how that should inform our relationships with them, despite overwhelming scientific evidence of wolf [sentience, self-awareness](#), and [culture](#) among other morally relevant traits. The underlying, unexamined assumption within wildlife management is that any human claims (e.g., to eliminate any nuisance or risk, or to recreation) trump those of wild animals (e.g., to life, freedom from harm, social stability and health). In other words, wolves are treated as a combination of a natural resource (i.e., an object) to use as humans see fit, including as means of recreation, and a nuisance to eliminate, even preemptively. This exposes not only untrustworthy scientific expertise at play within public agencies, but also narrow, inaccurate and inconsistent views that hold an inordinate amount of power over our relationship with wildlife.

Science may provide valuable information, but there's plenty of evidence that [identity](#), values, and ethics drive not only policy but [science](#) itself. It is because of this that ethics and values need to be an explicit and central discourse within environmental and wildlife policy. Importantly, this does not mean that all ethical views are of equal value or equally legitimate. As with science itself, reason, evidence and experience also help distinguish better from worse ethical viewpoints. By dismissing a bona fide ethical conversation about wolf conservation and protection, the hierarchical, oppressive views and values of special interest groups with intimate ties to industry, wildlife agencies, managers and policy-makers are perpetuated.

[Social science research](#) suggests the dominating and exploitative values of US public agencies towards nonhuman animals are increasingly at odds with those of their constituents, which espouse increasingly considerate and compassionate worldviews towards animals and nature more broadly. When it comes to wolves, we endorse the traditional worldview of the Ojibwe (Chippewa or Anishinaabe) of the Great Lakes.

The Ojibwe consider wolves as [persons](#), worthy of compassion and justice despite not being human. The Ojibwe traditionally oppose wolf hunting, population caps or lethal management in conflict resolution, supporting instead the protection of wolves from harm, barring self-defense. This view of wolves as relatives and worthy of care and respect (a “due regard for others claims”) is [a view shared by hundreds of Indigenous tribes globally](#). Such a view is also far more holistic, with a much more robust basis in not only situated ecological knowledge, but also contemporary ethics, philosophy and science:

*Recently, ethologists have taken the trouble to watch wolves systematically, between mealtimes, and have found them to be, by human standards, paragons of steadiness and good conduct. They pair for life, they are faithful and affectionate spouses and parents, they show great loyalty to their pack and great courage and persistence in the face of difficulties, they carefully respect one another's territories, keep their dens clean, and extremely seldom kill anything that they do not need for dinner. If they fight with another wolf, the encounter normally ends with a submission. They have an inhibition about killing the suppliant and about attacking females and cubs. They have also, like all social animals, a fairly elaborate etiquette, including subtly varied ceremonies of greeting and reassurance, by which friendship is strengthened, cooperation achieved, and the wheels of social life generally oiled. Our knowledge of this behavior is not based upon the romantic impressions of casual travelers; it rests on long and careful investigations by trained zoologists, backed up by miles of film, graphs, maps, population surveys, droppings analysis, and all the rest of the contemporary toolbox.*

- Philosopher Mary Midgley ([1995](#) p.24–25)

*High intelligence, expressiveness, and unusual emotional depth enable wolves to maintain sophisticated social bonds, to work together as highly skilled cooperative hunters (Haber 1977). This same extraordinary sentience that is so integral to their basic biology also provides an ethical reason for not allowing them to be harvested*

*and for considering remedial short-term control only in the rarest of circumstances, when there are solid, irrefutable biological and cost-benefit arguments and no other reasonable alternatives. To treat them otherwise is wrong.*

- Wolf biologist Gordon C. Haber ([1996](#))

Such situated, ecological, scientific, and ethical worldviews also promote the consideration of others who may be different in some ways, but who nevertheless share in the fundamental experiences of being vulnerable, being mortal, and thus able to be harmed in similar ways. In such worldviews, we find value in one's own life alongside the lives of kith and kin. Under such worldviews doing right by wolves, Indigenous peoples, domesticated animals and their associated humans, and the broad public would entail: (1) protecting wolves from lethal management and harm, especially from recreational killing but also in conflict management, and (2) a focus on proven non-lethal methods to resolve conflicts barring clear, immediate threat to life (which is already allowed under full protections).

However, the views — explicitly and implicitly — championed by established wildlife management (the practice and precedent of which fall within the confines of traditional conservation) value and consider those who possess an 'enshrined quality', like being human as opposed to nonhuman, and dismiss what is shared. [Scholarly work](#) has found this hierarchical thinking not limited to the human-animal divide, and [intimately tied to other worldviews that place a higher value on certain human qualities](#), such as whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, ableness, rationality, and carnism, among others. Humans who don't share in those qualities have to some extent been dismissed from consideration; 'delisted' rather than protected, despite their contributions to society and disproportional vulnerability to harm given those same prejudices. It is no different with wolves: they value their lives, they contribute greatly to a healthy environment, to their society, and are extremely vulnerable to harm.

Established wildlife management, in its dismissal of wolves and claims made on their behalf, in conjunction with the elevation of claims by hunting and ranching communities, is thereby [linked to other prejudicial views](#) acting within human society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia and authoritarianism. Promoting these dominating views within wolf policy can prejudice people against wolves and nature more generally, as well as against other humans. Consistent with such prejudice towards differences, there is a shocking lack of human diversity in wildlife management and policy, with the [profession being composed mostly of white males](#), and ethnically-similar resource boards with ties to hunters and ranchers. For wolves as well as humans, this is a social justice issue.

### **From wildlife “management” to coexistence**

Wolf policy is but one issue being affected by this dismissal of science and ethical deliberation. Agency capture by narrow, unsupported and undemocratic interests and worldviews is rampant within broader wildlife management. The same agency capture and dismissal of science and ethics is at play [in state wildlife killing contests](#), [BLM round-ups of wild mustangs](#), among other controversies. How then should we begin to move towards coexistence, which entails a caring and respectful relationship towards wildlife?

There is a need to democratize wildlife policy through the equitable participation of currently underrepresented world views at all policy levels. From the multiple lawsuits by Native American tribes and wildlife advocacy organizations, to the magnitude of comments received against reducing protections for wolves, it is clear that the public is already demanding a change, but being shut out from within. The Trump administration’s delisting proposal [did not include consultation with Native American tribes](#), in clear violation of the law, and the Biden Administration has followed this lead. [Hundreds of Tribal Nations from North America and globally](#) have already petitioned for reinstating wolf protections to the Biden Administration and to Interior Sec. Haaland and are being ignored at best. Their worldviews and situated ecological knowledge were dismissed right along with wolf interests.

Simultaneously, in order to promote common ground and analyze how values translate to policy, we suggest that public agencies focus on creating official spaces for ethical deliberation and analysis within the policy process. Moreover, such ethical deliberation demands better ethical education and training for decision-makers, managers and technicians in all branches of government. Such initiatives would open spaces for a productive exchange of worldviews, clarification of values, mutual understanding, and could rebuild the ethics-science relationship that allows us to triangulate on policies that equitably consider our entire community of life. There is [precedent](#) for this type of institutionalized ethics-based policy dialogue, which will certainly promote the federal National Environmental Policy Act's (NEPA) goals of improving decision-making and facilitating broad public participation. This process could be supplemented with [ethics reviews or briefs](#) created with the assistance of trained experts that can provide a pluralist ethical analysis of the process and resulting policy alternatives, similar to current scientific review.

And yet, as much as it is important to get equitable representation and deliberation among humans in wildlife commissions and policy bodies, it is equally important to promote an [ethic of care and justice](#) towards nature front and center. To begin heading in that direction, there is a stark need to explore who other animals are, what they want, and our responsibilities towards them. Wolves, as many other animals, value their lives, seek to avoid harm, can experience a range of emotions, including feelings of joy. Wolves are self-aware, with complex social relationships. These are [scientific facts that carry serious ethical implications](#) for their protection and management. For us, this argues for the equitable consideration of their claims alongside humans, rather than their exploitation for our convenience or pleasure. This has indeed been the position promoted by the Ojibwe for wolves, and seems to us the strongest position scientifically and ethically.

Of course, the aforementioned are long-term, general proposals. But, what about the urgency for wolves? The public has already marked their support for wolf protection, and provided stronger-evidenced and more compassionate alternatives. For example,

the US could protect the wolf permanently through species-specific federal or state legislation, as done nationally for the Bald Eagle and as promoted by many Indigenous Tribes through their drafted [Wolf Treaty](#).

Wolves value their own lives, and have much more urgent claims for protection (to life, to freedom from harm) than humans have for killing them (recreation, nuisance, hatred, biased perception of effectiveness). Yet, governments are choosing policies that oppress and devalue wolves, rather than choosing to promote their consideration, care and respect that attend to what we both share and to relevant differences. We need to establish an ethical dialogue that helps us clarify what values and attitudes our policies promote. And we should always remember that our social nature and empathy are not restricted to who is like us, be it in skin color, ability, sex, gender, or species. Our communities, our wonder, care and respect have never been limited to humans, and it is in no small part because of wolves. This simple, intuitive recognition can be extremely powerful when employed politically, as we hope it will: by protecting wolves we are protecting our entire [mixed-community](#) of life.