

Science and Ethics Agree: Coexistence Must Replace Killing Wolves (Part 1)

William Lynn Uncategorized 2022-02-17 8 Minutes



USFWS. 2001. Mexican Wolf (by Jim Clark)

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Brown people, Native people in this country have a history of being 'delisted'.

Marvin Defoe, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer
Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa

Gray wolves in the US are once again under fierce attack. After 45 years of protection under the Endangered Species Act and despite scientifically and ethically-driven protests, the USFWS delisted the gray wolf from the federal list of Endangered and Threatened Species on November 3, 2020, with the ruling taking effect on January 4, 2021. Despite a recent February 10, 2022 court decision to relist many wolves, namely those outside the Northern Rocky Mountains (delisted by Congressional budget rider), gray wolves in the NRM continue to be exposed to the same widespread, indiscriminate, and state-sponsored killing policies that nearly exterminated them from the contiguous US in the last century. **Idaho** plans to reduce its wolf population by 90%, with the state hiring contractors to kill wolves using night-vision goggles, ATVs, leg-hold snares, and shooting from helicopters. Wolf pups on private land are also fair game.

In **Montana** the plan is to kill up to 85% of wolves. Hunters may now kill an unlimited number of wolves day or night, use bait, and be paid a bounty by the state. While wolves were delisted, Wisconsin intended to hold another wolf hunting season of **at least** 130 wolves in November, 2021 despite holding one 9 months prior that led to the legal killing of 218 wolves (overshooting the official quota by nearly 83%) **and the poaching of close to 100 more, but a state judge enjoined the hunt prior to the recent relisting.** **South Dakota** allows wolf killing year-round (including trapping) when wolves are delisted, despite not even having a resident pack.

These policies are crafted and enforced by state wildlife agencies and natural resource boards, which are largely supported and influenced by **hunter and rancher lobbies**. Hunter and ranching groups, along with wildlife managers, are important constituencies in wolf policy decisions. State wildlife officials generally have specialized knowledge and expertise in environmental sciences and are charged with managing natural resources, including wolves. There exists, however, an inherent conflict of interest as state wildlife agencies are funded by hunting and angling license fees authorized through federal statutes. The Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, for example, levies a tax on sporting arms and ammunition and apportions it to states. Hunters are by definition interested in killing; however, many express a depth of admiration for wildlife, claim they enjoy deep family connection from hunting, and are aware that their activities support state conservation efforts (through licensing fees). And ranchers are in the business of raising domesticated animals for food, so predatory wildlife that may harass or kill those animals is inevitably a source of stress and conflict. Most ranchers perceive wolves as competitors, and contend that wolves are a threat to their livelihoods. Whether for financial reasons or care for their animals, it makes sense that ranchers want to remove all threats, including getting rid of wolves. In any case, for those enmeshed in what they

perceive to be wolf-human conflicts, it is unsurprising that such relationships are conceived as an *us-or-them* problem.

Consider the claims of hunters and ranchers. A segment of these groups says the wolf population is “**out of control,**” and that their predation on domesticated animals threatens ranchers’ livelihoods. Some hunters voice concerns over the effect of wolves on populations of deer, elk and moose, while other hunters claim populations of this ‘wolf resource’ are healthy enough to allow killing for recreation. Wildlife managers charged with responding to such claims insist they need to allow for institutionally sanctioned wolf-killing because that will **increase tolerance** for the species, reduce unsanctioned killing of wolves and conflicts, and garner political support for wolf conservation from said groups. But wildlife officials do not make such decisions in a vacuum; indeed, hunters and ranchers wield considerable influence on **undemocratic state wildlife commissions** (where they are disproportionately represented), state legislatures and thus on agency policy, which of course influences wildlife management decisions and actions. And as surely as hunting and ranching lobbies make their preferences heard at the policy roundtable, just as sure is the fact that other voices with less influence and power have been rendered silent.

They may be the most influential stakeholders, but hunters, ranchers, and wildlife managers are certainly not the only ones invested in wolf policy matters. Others have just as much or more at stake in this conversation and its outcomes. Those with literally no voice have the most at stake—the wolves themselves. Also indigenous peoples, wildlife and environmental advocates, academicians and scientists, as well as the broad public, who entrusts our federal and state governments with public trust responsibilities, all are deeply invested in the fate of wolves.

It is not just that the stakeholders with the loudest voices drown out or silence the others; in fact, the claims made by the hunters, ranchers, and wildlife managers who currently control wolf policies are neither scientifically supported nor ethically justified.

Experts who study the role that **science and ethics can play in wolf-human relationships** and **policy** are clear that returning to widespread, state-sponsored killing policies—those that nearly exterminated wolves from the contiguous US in the last century—are not justified. Such policies are clear dismissals of the relevant scientific evidence and moral considerations that support the continued protection of wolves. Rather than return to past policies that perpetuate the killing and vilification of wolves, we have an opportunity to enact more democratic, scientifically sound, and ethically robust public policies for managing wolf-human relationships. Failure to do so will undoubtedly harm not only wolves and the stability of wolf society, but with it also lead to harms to domesticated animals, their associated humans, relationships with Indigenous groups, and the public’s trust in federal and state wildlife policy.

Science says killing wolves harms all

The decision to remove protections for wolves is a blatant dismissal of science. Research on wolves reveals them as **feeling, thinking, socially complex** individuals who, akin to ourselves, **want to know about their world**, and value their lives and **families**. We call a wolf family a pack and each wolf plays a critical role in the pack, allowing for the breeding and

rearing of pups, cooperative hunting and territory defense. As an apex predator, the **internal regulation of their populations** depends on available resources and, in great part, on the social stability of their families and the wider community of other wolf packs. Wolves do not require any type of lethal management to achieve natural densities. On the contrary, **lethal management disrupts the behavior and social structure of wolf families**, causing more harms to all on the landscape, as we explain below. While the scientific knowledge that substantiates the complex internal and social lives of wolves is indisputable, public policies about wolves and relevant management plans routinely dismiss this scientific knowledge. Instead, the focus is on the science of how wolves may impact (some) humans and the interests of (some) humans in controlling and exploiting them.

As apex predators, wolves do exert a regulating influence on wild ungulate populations through direct (killing) and indirect effects, such as risk assessment by prey. But, after 40 years of recovery efforts there is **no evidence** to suggest that increasing wolf populations are imperiling wild ungulate populations, and predator removal has been shown to have **negligible effects** on wild prey populations. Yet, there is substantial evidence to show that wolves are having **positive ecosystem effects** as they expand their distribution, and they may even be **mitigating harm and economic loss** by keeping wild ungulates away from roads, resulting in fewer vehicle collisions.

Contrary to the claims of some federal and state wildlife managers that reducing protections is necessary for political support and increased tolerance, multiple peer-reviewed studies – from **focus groups** and **surveys**, to wolf monitoring data – provide robust evidence that reducing protections for wolves does not “increase tolerance” for wolves. On the contrary, reducing protections is associated with more intolerant attitudes and behaviors towards wolves by hunters and ranchers. Monitoring data from **gray** and **Mexican** wolves also point to substantially increased rates of concealed and previously unmeasured poaching of wolves during periods of reduced federal and state protections. This is true, even in the absence of state-sponsored wolf hunts (i.e., by only allowing managers to respond lethally to conflicts). Poaching is, in fact, the **largest source of wolf mortality in the US** and consistently underreported. Consequently, wolf populations are systematically and routinely overestimated. Reducing protections for wolves – even marginally – sends a policy signal that further devalues wolves in the eyes of people who may already possess negative perceptions of them, resulting in increased rates of both **legal and illegal killing**.

As for wolf predation on domesticated ungulates, such predation accounts **for less than 1% of domesticated ungulate deaths**, which is much lower than any non-predator cause of death, such as disease, weather, or calving problems. And yet, some ranchers claim they suffer from chronic conflicts with wolves, which they claim necessitates their killing. The problem with lethal intervention is that, while reactive wolf killing may benefit from the perception of effectiveness, the evidence for the actual effectiveness of lethal methods is **mixed at best**, and lethal methods may actually increase conflicts. For example, in the Great Lakes, studies suggest that sanctioning restricted, targeted wolf killing by government agents results in an **increasing rate of conflicts, and therefore more dead domestic animals and wolves, over time relative to periods of full protection**. There are two suggested, interdependent reasons for this effect: (1) lower protections may **increase negative attitudes, perceived conflicts and complaints**; and (2) killing wolves

disrupts their **social cohesion and breaks up their family units (packs)**, complicating their cooperative hunting and incentivizing wolves to select domesticated prey, despite wolves' clear **preference for wild prey** species.

In addition, no method of indiscriminate killing of wolves – e.g., hunting, trapping, hounding, or killing pups in the den – has been proven effective at reducing wolf-human conflicts. All this evidence points to misguided, ill-founded policies, which cause short- and long-term harms to a wide community of people, animals and nature.

In stark contrast to problematic lethal methods stand **scientifically-proven, functionally-effective nonlethal methods** of preventing conflicts with wolves. These include fladry (small strips of cloth on a wire), an array of visual and sound deterrents, as well as guardian animals such as livestock guarding dogs – although the use of dogs is not without its problems when considering their protection and treatment. The effectiveness of **fladry** and **guardian dogs** has been rigorously tested and shown successful in mitigating wolf-predation in Michigan. Other auditory and visual deterrents (e.g., scare boxes, foxlights) have proven effective at reducing conflicts out West in states, such as **Idaho**, where cows and sheep are grazed on public lands. Contrary to wolf-killing, these non-lethal interventions do not disrupt pack structure, so they do not increase the risk of wolf predation on adjacent properties, as lethal methods can do.

If wolf killing causes such harms to wolves and domesticated animals alike, and does not serve a conservation purpose such as reducing wolf killing or increasing tolerance, why is it still promoted in legislatures and agencies alike? This is not just a scientific failure. Underlying the claims of some hunters, ranchers and wildlife managers is an established, dominating view of wolves as a natural resource to be exploited given any human claim, as long as there is lip service to it being done sustainably. This view has been the ‘traditional conservation’ position promoted by Euro-North American wildlife agencies since their inception: “to understand, appreciate, and *wisely use* fish and wildlife resources” and do so “for the continuing *benefit of the American people*” (**USFWS, Objectives**).

Part 2 of this essay, “The Need for Ethical Dialogue” will appear next week. There we map out the fundamental role of values and ethics in US wildlife policy, and how we can begin to transition from the oppression of traditional conservation to worldviews grounded in care, respect and coexistence

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