

The gray wolf as a symbol or a subject of science

Wolves have always slipped easily into the part of the human brain that processes symbols and metaphors. In the *Inferno* from his *Divine Comedy*, Dante (~1265–1321) used wolves to represent greed and fraud. In the Middle Ages Europeans called famine, and anything else that made their lives more difficult, “the wolf”. *The Secret History of the Mongols* states that Chinggis Khan (~1160–1227) was born from a blue wolf and a fallow doe, with the blue wolf symbolizing the heavenly masculine spirituality, the Eternal Sky. Nunamiut people describe the wolf as part of the universe where some things are known and other things are hidden. To the first European colonizers of North America, wolves represented a “howling wilderness” that needed to be tamed. Take a walk through any museum and you will find an image of or reference to wolves on a shocking number of artifacts, portrayed both in a positive and negative light. In the complex *Homo sapiens* brain, a wolf is so rarely just a wolf.

This ease with which humans are able to replace the wolf, the animal, with symbols – freedom, family, wildness, failure, oppression – has made management of wolves more complicated and more contentious than for any other species in the US. Those symbols, for many people, inform their identities; *how* someone feels about wolves becomes part of *who they are* as a person. And, as humans often do, we seek out those who think and identify the same way we do, and we see people who think or feel differently as opponents. All of a sudden wolves, the animals, find themselves in the middle of a human identity battle.

Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) management in the US, starting with European colonization prior to the country’s independence, was tainted by the human penchant toward wolf symbolism. Those making the decisions about how many wolves there should be and where they should be eliminated or protected were certainly influenced by how they viewed wolves: by their own wolf-identity. Their lup-entity. In the 1970s wolf management seemed to shift away from symbolism; wolf biologists dedicated their careers to better understanding not only the species but also their roles and impacts on ecosystems. As wolf populations began to naturally recover and wolves were reintroduced in several Western states, people’s lup-entities intensified and, as the internet and instant, accessible, crowd-sourced communications grew exponentially, suddenly we all had an outlet to express our lup-entities to the world, and to hear what the wolf meant to everyone else. Often that symbolism was communicated in a way that looked like facts, but distorted and cherry-picked to fit the symbol, to support the individual lup-entity.

Science is the opposing force to the lup-entity. It seeks to understand the truth without bias. Science is also an iterative process, where previous work is constantly being checked and adjusted as it strives to get closer to the truth. Wolf research pursues knowledge about the gray wolf, leaving as many of the lupus-entities behind as possible. But scientists aren’t immune to lup-entities. I have to regularly remind myself that the truth about wolves lies separate from the things they symbolize in my mind. Some days I succeed and other days I fail.

Recently in the US, wolf management seems to be driven less by science and more by the lupus-entities of nonscientists in decision-making positions. Some states have instructed scientists to reduce wolf numbers, others to reintroduce wolves. A few areas do use complex algorithms to set hunting quotas, showing rare and admirable trust in the state’s own biologists. When scientists are ordered by anyone to manage wolves based on lup-entities it damages trust in science. We all end up losing in this system, including the wolf, the animal.

Is it possible to manage wolves, to even think about wolves, without symbolism? Trying to completely eliminate lup-entities would be working against thousands of years of human psychology. Wolves and humans will likely always have a complicated relationship. But we can work to inform all people’s lup-entities with science. We can empower people to trust but also question science and scientists. After all, questioning science is part of the scientific process. To untangle the gray wolf from politics and get back to science-based wolf management, we need to examine and manage our own lup-entities; seek knowledge from trusted sources of wolf research and science; and reshape that lup-entity so that the foundation is in truthfulness. Lup-fulness.



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