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Wolf Recovery in the Northern Rockies:
Where Biology Meets Politics

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The Public Lands During the Remainder of the 20th Century
Natural Resources Law Center
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SUMMARY

Because the public's feelings about wolves have been so strongly influenced by our culture, the primary issues regarding wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies are more social and political than biological. An even-handed review of the wolf's biology and history dismisses the wolf's reputation for destroying livestock, decimating big game populations and posing a threat to human safety.

Experience both in Canada and northern Minnesota demonstrates wolves and humans can coexist, and the conflicts can be managed. The keys to successful management include: establishment of recovery areas in locations with low human and livestock densities; development of a wolf management program that effectively controls problem animals as necessary yet protects the population from excessive take; and finally, the development of a program to compensate ranchers for livestock lost to wolves.

The most effective way for conservationists and livestock interests to resolve their differences is through face-to-face meetings and negotiation. Such an approach might avoid the polarization that otherwise is likely to develop over this controversial issue.

OUTLINE

I. The Mythical Wolf

A. The public has several misperceptions about wolves.

1. That wolves pose a threat to human safety.

2. That wolves are a significant predator on domestic livestock and can't live in proximity to livestock without extensive losses.

3. That wolves will decimate big game populations if not controlled.

B. These misperceptions are often reinforced by poorly-informed public officials.

1. Provide examples from Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.

II. The Real Wolf

A. Wolves pose no threat to human safety.

1. There are no documented attacks of healthy, wild wolves on humans in North America.

2. According to wolf expert Dr. David Mech, one should think of a wolf as he does a fox.

3. The fact that wolves aren't dangerous to humans has important management implications; area closures to guarantee safety--like those initiated to enhance grizzly bear recovery--won't be necessary.

B. According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service studies conducted in Minnesota, wolves pose a "minimal" threat to

domestic livestock.

1. The highest verified livestock loss rate recorded in Minnesota was less than one-half of one per cent.

2. In an average year, approximately 20 farms out of the 12,000 farms in Minnesota wolf range suffer verified losses.

3. In an average year, 12 sheep and 5 cows are lost to wolves for every 10,000 animals grazed.

4. There's good evidence to suggest the livestock loss rates are higher in Minnesota than they would be for a recovery area like Yellowstone.

a. While Minnesota has fully 234,000 cows and 91,000 sheep, Yellowstone has fewer than 10,000 cows and 5,000 sheep.

b. While Minnesota has a population of 1,200 wolves, the recovery goal for Yellowstone is approximately 60-100 animals (10 breeding pairs).

c. While Minnesota's wolf range is approximately 60 per cent in public ownership, Yellowstone's is more than 98 per cent publicly-owned.

d. While Minnesota has fully 12,000 farms in its wolf range, there are less than 50 livestock permittees in the Yellowstone area.

C. Wolves will not decimate big game populations in the Northern Rockies.

1. The recovery goal for each of the three recovery areas in the Northern Rockies is 10 breeding pairs, which is the equivalent of approximately 60-100 animals. It's not physically

possible for this small number of wolves to seriously reduce ungulate populations like those in Yellowstone.

a. Yellowstone Park currently houses nearly 30,000 elk, 2,000 bison and lesser numbers of mule deer, antelope, bighorn sheep and moose.

b. Because wolves are territorial animals that have extremely large home ranges, there are finite limits on how many wolves Yellowstone can sustain, irrespective of prey.

2. The Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan permits the control of wolf populations if predation is in significant conflict with management objectives of state wildlife agencies.

3. Research indicates wolves typically only have significant impacts on prey populations when they are coupled with other environmental problems, such as hard winters, declining habitat conditions, or overutilization by human predators.

4. Many biologists, resource managers, state fish and game agencies, outfitters and popular writers have suggested that prey populations are too dense in places like Yellowstone Park, where they can't be hunted.

III. The Process for Recovery

A. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is in the process of finalizing a revised wolf recovery plan.

1. The plan outlines the steps federal and state agencies need to take to achieve wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies; this includes reintroduction of the wolf to Yellowstone under an experimental population designation.

2. The plan outlines a framework for a wolf management program that permits the taking of problem animals.

3. The plan proposes the development of a task force to investigate compensation for ranchers who lose livestock in the wolf recovery zone.

a. Conservation groups have suggested that such a plan might be privately funded but publicly administered.

B. Federal agencies, led by the National Park Service, need to initiate an environmental impact statement (EIS) regarding the restoration of wolves to Yellowstone.

1. Regulations detailing the experimental population designation must also be promulgated.

2. A specifically-defined control program would also be part of the EIS process.

IV. Finding Common Ground

A. A key to achieving success with wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies is the early involvement of special interest groups potentially-affected by the reintroduction, including ranchers, sportsmen, outfitters and the timber industry.

1. Defenders' field trip to Minnesota wolf range for western livestock producers was a first step in that direction.

B. The Congressional delegations from the Northern Rockies as well as members of key Congressional committees that oversee endangered species and national parks matters must also be involved.

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