

The Importance of the Minnesota Experiment

by Steve Grooms

Illustration by Joan Ouellette

Minnesota is unique. In no other state have so many wolves and so many humans occupied the same landscape for so many years. Unlike every other state except Alaska, Minnesota has always had a wolf population. Since coming under federal protection, that population has steadily increased (today it numbers somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 adults). At the same time, wolf range has steadily increased and today it comprises more than a third of the state. Because it was the earliest state to experience wolf restoration, Minnesota now has wolves increasingly occupying developed lands that have high numbers of humans, pets, and livestock.

These unusual facts are made even more unusual by the fact that Minnesotans generally like wolves and want them to continue as a presence in the state's wildlife community. Public opinion polls, including media polls and the work

of Yale researcher Steven Kellert, all show that most Minnesotans want wolves to do well in their state. For an animal that has been vilified and persecuted for centuries, the climate of opinion in Minnesota today represents an unprecedented opportunity. A significant wolf population now lives in relatively close contact with a significant human population, and those humans generally hope they can coexist with wolves without a great deal of conflict. The situation defined by all these circumstances might never have existed anywhere in the world, and it certainly has not existed anywhere before in United States.

Minnesota is a laboratory in which people's tolerance for wolves will be tested in ways it never has been before. Most Minnesotans who say they like wolves live far from them and thus are not in a position to lose a pet or livestock to wolves. Their affection for wolves might be enhanced by the fact that wolves are a theoretical presence and not a real threat of any sort. As wolves and people increasingly come into contact with one another, the depth of Minnesotans' tolerance of wolves will be tested. Similarly, the ability of managers and politicians to craft intelligent and effective wolf management programs will be challenged at the same time. So far, wolves and people have gotten along better than most observers would have expected, although that could change.

The effort to restore wolves where they were once extirpated is taking place in many different regions and countries. Inevitably, people fighting to fashion new wolf policies will cite the Minnesota experience as an example of what happens when people and wolves share the same living space.

If wolf restoration eventually goes badly in Minnesota, people in other states and other countries will be more reluctant to conduct a similar experiment on their own soil. But if wolves and Minnesotans can continue to coexist with an acceptable level of conflict, the future for the wolf will be much better in many varied places on earth. ■

Steve Grooms is the author of several books, including a popular book on wolves and wolf restoration in the United States, 'Return of the Wolf.' A writer living in Saint Paul, he serves on this magazine's advisory committee.



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WHAT GOOD IS THE WOLF?

Public Opinion About Wolves

BY CORNELIA HUTT
AND STEVE GROOMS

A Croatian shepherd spits in disgust. “What good is the wolf?” he asks. “You can’t eat him and you can’t milk him.” A young man who suffered a violent attack by thugs outside his high school takes a dramatically different view of wolves.

During months of painful recuperation, the teenager develops a fascination for wolves, seeing their restoration as a symbol of hope for his own recovery. He hungrily reads anything written about wolves in Yellowstone and dreams of seeing one.

People have exceptionally diverse views of wolves. Recently, several wolf authorities discussed the various factors that cause people to see wolves so differ-

ently. Many of them addressed this topic at our Beyond 2000 wolf symposium held in Duluth in February. Others responded to requests for comments for this article.

There are surely other factors that influence people’s views on wolves. The list of factors in this article, if not complete, at least suggests why wolves are so controversial for so many people.

Knowledge about wolves

Myths and lack of information often cause people to fear wolves. Canada’s Alistair Bath, talking to an education panel at the wolf symposium, noted that many wolf opponents have false impressions of their size, their

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Lynn and Danna Rogers



J. Henry Fair

Yadvendradev Jhala of the Wildlife Institute of India speaks during the symposium on conflict between humans and wolves in India.



Brett Groehler-UWD

Djuro Huber of the University of Zagreb speaks on the situation of wolves in Croatia.

numbers, and their behavior. Nikita Ovsyanikov of the Russian Federation has found that many people in his country fear predators and misunderstand their role in an ecosystem. Gerry Ring Erickson, a field representative with Defenders of Wildlife, constantly battles misinformation about wolves, especially the perception that wolves commonly attack humans.

Some wolf educators caution that disseminating accurate information about wolves will not end wolf hatred. The facts people hear about wolves usually have less impact on their view of wolves than deeply held convictions and fears. Those core convictions and anxieties often determine which “facts” about wolves people choose to believe.

Wolf educators note that it is usually easier to educate children about wolves, since children have fewer entrenched biases than adults. For this reason, polls on attitudes toward wolves often show that younger people see them more favorably than older people do.

Patrick Valentino, director of the California Wolf Center, worries that many people in the United States don't have much direct knowledge of animals. They pick up cues from the media that they should “save” one animal or another, yet the same people are quickly terrified if exposed to wild animals that they feel could threaten them.

Wolf fans sometimes labor under misperceptions of their own.

According to Luigi Boitani, a wolf specialist in Italy, efforts to eradicate old stereotypes about the “bad wolf” might have created new stereotypes about the “good wolf.” Boitani asks, “Have we done something wrong in education to have made wolf support so emotional?”

Acceptance of ecological values

People who like wolves are often motivated by their understanding of the role of wolves in ecosystems and by their acceptance of several core values associated with environmental preservation. Environmentalism is

not only a series of observations about the natural world but also a worldview and a set of beliefs. Those beliefs include notions about what is valuable, such as ecological health, and about mankind's proper role in the natural world, which is not to dominate but to live in harmony with it.

Nina Fascione, director of carnivore conservation with Defenders of Wildlife, observes that people who like wolves often feel a moral obligation to pass along a healthy ecosystem to future generations. As it affects attitudes about wolves, environmentalism encourages people to appreciate wolves as keystone predators rather than condemning wolves because they kill to survive.

That perspective is not shared by everyone. People who think man was put on earth to dominate “lesser” animals often dislike the wolf, a predator that competes with humans and is hard to dominate. People who see animals in strictly utilitarian terms sometimes find little value in wolves. The Kellert study (see page 9, Survey Details Attitudes About Wolves, Past and Present) shows that hunters and trappers value the wolf.

Several wolf educators believe environmentalism is a natural development of highly developed and wealthy societies. Researchers Yadvendradev Jhala of India and Christoph Promberger of Romania note that people living in poverty are usually unaware of environmental values and would consider them a frivolous luxury anyway.

The economic Impact of Wolves

A ubiquitous factor influencing attitudes toward wolves is the issue of depredation on livestock. All around the world, a consistent source of wolf hatred is the fear of livestock producers that wolves will hurt them economically. Because livestock producers are so vehement, their

opposition to wolves can be more politically potent than would be expected based on the actual damage wolves do.

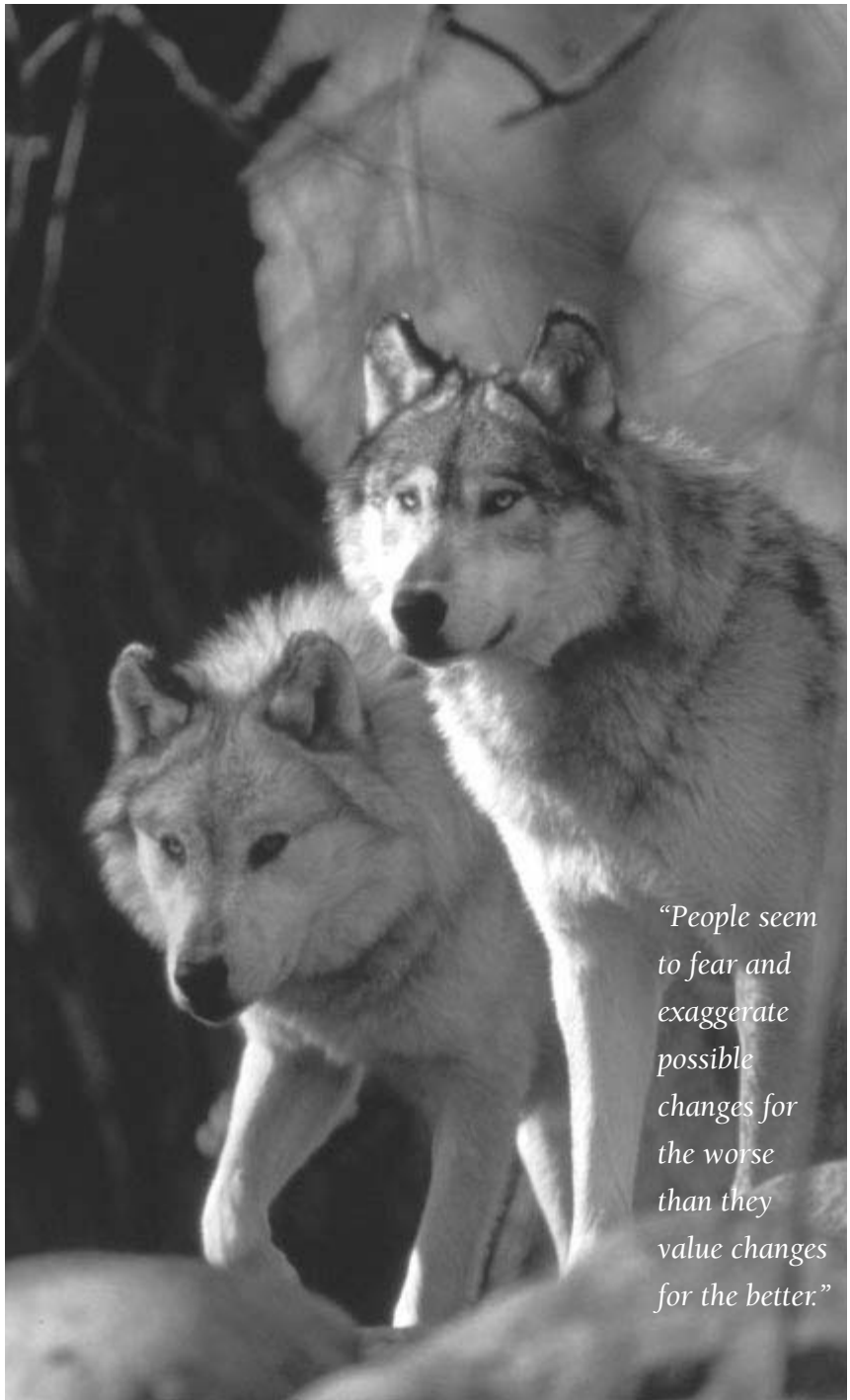
An example is Sweden, where anti-wolf sentiment is closely linked to wolf depredation on reindeer herds, according to researcher Anders Bjarvall. Portugal's Francisco Petrucci-Fonseca told symposium attendees that the key to wolf acceptance in his country would be responding to the concerns of shepherds, the group that has most to lose from wolf restoration. In the United States, wolf opposition has come not only from livestock producers but from hunting outfitters who fear wolves will kill enough elk or deer to threaten the resource that supports their businesses.

People often hold negative views of wolves unless they see there is a way they can benefit economically from wolves. That leads some educators to hope that support for wolves can be built by showing the potential for eco-tourism based on wolves. Mary Theberge, a researcher working with her husband John in Canada's Algonquin Park, hopes to improve people's attitudes toward wolves by making the public aware of the ways wolves can attract people and money to the park.

Proximity

Many wolf educators point to people's proximity to wolves as a major factor influencing public opinion on them. Even in Minnesota, a generally "pro wolf" state, those living in urban areas tend to like wolves more than those who live in wolf ranges and are at risk of losing a pet or livestock to wolves.

The importance of proximity to wolves is usually expressed in terms of the rural-urban split. In the words of Djuro Huber, a researcher in Croatia, "The key factors influencing public attitudes about wolves are



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completely different for the public that shares the habitat with wolves and have some direct competition with them as opposed to the urban public.”

Rural people sometimes feel they have practical knowledge of wildlife such as wolves, but believe wolf supporters operate from uninformed sentimentality. Dean Cluff, a biologist in Canada’s Northwest Territories, expressed the point this way: “Those who experience wildlife on a day-to-day basis will likely differ in perceptions from those who get their exposure mostly by Discovery Channel or visits to parks.”

Experience with wolves and fear of change

A few wolf researchers and educators point to the fear of change as a factor that causes people to oppose wolf restoration. Where wolves are being introduced, people often react negatively because of stereotypes and myths. Where wolves have long been established, people are more likely to accept them (sometimes begrudgingly) as a natural part of life. In Croatia, for example, shepherds have long dealt with wolves, according to researcher Djuro Huber. In the U.S., there is a sharp contrast between wolf

acceptance in Minnesota (where wolves have always existed) and the Southwest (where wolf restoration is a new fact that frightens many people). According to Gerry Ring Erickson, “People seem to fear and exaggerate possible changes for the worse than they value changes for the better.”

Respect for government and law

Several wolf education panelists at the symposium mentioned the covert but potent impact of people’s attitudes about government and law. In the United States, this is often linked to particular resentments among rural people toward the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Because wolf restoration is a federal government initiative conducted under the ESA, some wolf opponents express some sympathy for wolves but contempt for the government and the law that forced wolf restoration upon them against their will.

Patrick Valentino points to the example of an Arizona gun shop owner who vigorously opposes wolf restoration in the Southwest. That man believes wolves could put his gun shop out of business. “The wolf, to this man, is a symbol of governmental intrusion into his way of life,” according to Valentino. A woman who fears wolf attacks on her grandchildren explained that she doesn’t worry about cougars or coyotes much because, “We can kill them, but we can’t do anything about wolves (because of ESA protection).”

Gerry Ring Erickson has learned the hard way that negative attitudes toward government can poison people’s attitudes toward wolves. Erickson reports, “Opposition is particularly virulent on the Olympic Peninsula where there is tremendous residual anger at government interference stemming from the creation of Olympic National Park over six decades ago.” More recent actions,

including restricting timber cuts to protect spotted owls, have exacerbated local bitterness about federal “meddling” in local affairs.

Resentment of government is not limited to the U.S. In Croatia, Djuro Huber fears governmental protection of wolves came “too fast” for local people. Wolves, once accepted by local people as a fact of life, now are tainted with rural people’s fear they are losing control over their lives.

Final Thoughts

If anything is clear from the perceptions of people who work with public opinion about wolves, it is that the topic is complex. Wolf fans generally believe that more people would love wolves if they just knew more about them. As a generality, that is probably true. Yet wolf educators caution that it is overly optimistic to expect wolf education to turn wolf haters into wolf supporters.

Opinions about wolves are complex because they exist on many levels. People often argue facts about wolves when what really determines their attitudes are deeper fears and resentments. Debates about depredation rates, for example, often mask underlying resentments about the way rural people feel abused by distant politicians and arrogant city-dwellers.

It also seems clear that self-interest has a major impact on how people see wolves. An old maxim holds that “where you stand depends on where you sit.” How people feel about an issue like wolf restoration is heavily influenced by the impacts people imagine wolves will have on their lives. ■

Cornelia Hutt is a wolf advocate, educator, and International Wolf Center board member who lives in Purcellville, Virginia. Steve Grooms, a writer living in Saint Paul, has recently revised his book, The Return of the Wolf.