

The Wolf at the Turn of the Millennium

As the new millennium dawns, it is beneficial to review the past. A thousand years ago wolves lived almost throughout their original range. However, as human populations increased, as livestock herding spread and as technology developed, the incentive and the ability to curb wolf numbers affected their existence.

During the past few centuries, wolves were wiped out of much of western Europe, Japan, Mexico, and all of the 48 contiguous United States except Minnesota and Isle Royale, Michigan. In other areas, their ranges and numbers were much reduced. Except for the last 70 years or so, the human mindset throughout the northern hemisphere was that the creatures were vermin, perhaps worse than rats, mice and cockroaches.

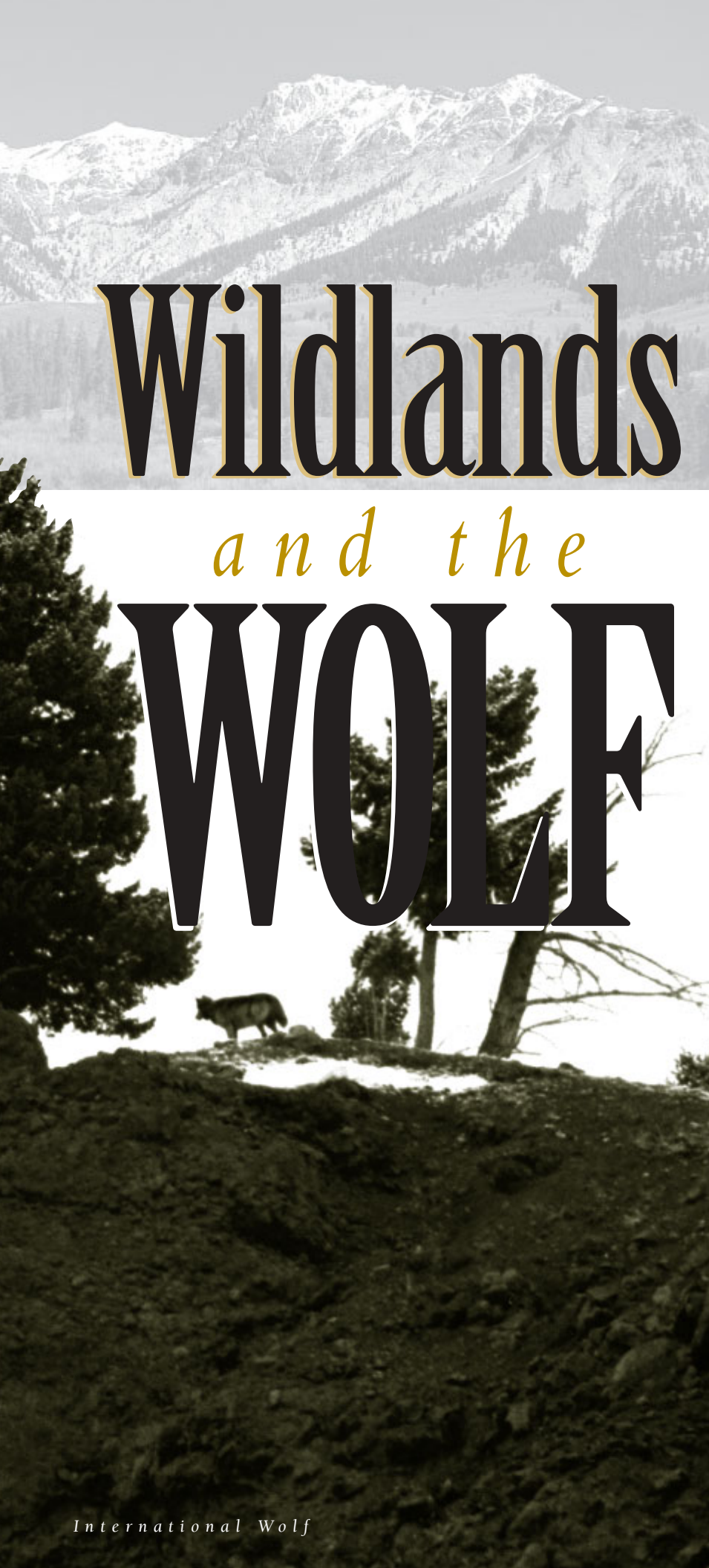
Widespread poisoning, bounties, traps, snares, pits and actions such as digging pups out of dens were used to persecute the wolf and eliminate it wherever it competed with humans for livestock and sometimes even where it did not. At the same time, market hunters were depleting herds of the wolf's wild prey, forcing the predators to turn more to domestic animals.

Only in the last several decades—primarily the last 30 years—have public attitudes about the wolf begun to change. We are fortunate to be bringing that change into the new millennium. Wolves are responding well. Through human protection and nurturing, they are repopulating such areas as France, Germany, Scandinavia, Wisconsin, Michigan, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, North Carolina and Arizona. Populations are strong in Minnesota, Alaska, Canada, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Eastern Europe, Italy, Russia, several areas of the Mideast and central Asia.

As we enter the new millennium, the International Wolf Center celebrates this significant success and congratulates all the citizens, organizations, government agencies and media outlets that have together wrought this change.

We know that the new millennium will bring even greater challenges as the increasing populations of both wolves and humans continue to conflict. Thus we will strive through education to promote a greater understanding and tolerance of the wolf and a reduction of this conflict. With the solid support of our members as we enter this new era, we are confident of continued success.





Wildlands

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WOLF

BY NANCY JO TUBBS

When the Rose Creek pair of wolves were flown from Canada and released in Yellowstone National Park in 1995, they explored the wilderness, killed elk and behaved like healthy wild wolves. But the pair traveled outside of the park. A few days after they reached the outskirts of Red Lodge, Montana, wolf 10, a classically handsome 122-pound male affectionately nicknamed “The Big Guy,” was illegally shot and skinned. His mate, wolf 9, had just given birth to eight pups. What happened next is perhaps a textbook example of why Mike Phillips, project leader for wolf restoration in Yellowstone at the time, believes that wildlands make the best home for wolves.

“I asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to return wolf 9 with her pups to Yellowstone’s wildlands,” Phillips said. “It may have been the most important management decision of the project.” Relocated back to the park, wolf 9 gave birth to several more litters, and her first four female young and two of the males parented pups in 1997 and later years. No longer near people who intended them harm, the pack infused generations of young wolves into the greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

“While wolf populations ebb and flow in other places,” Phillips contends, “wildlands will always be the nidus—the nest or breeding source—where wolves can flourish in safety.”

The Wolf on the Porch

In northern Minnesota, some wolves living around humans have become relaxed, much like “nuisance” bears that hang around dumps and garbage containers. Bill Paul, district supervisor of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Minnesota Wildlife Services office, handles such complaints of wolves killing livestock and pets.

Sometimes wolf incidents seem like fiction, even to experienced wildlife officers, says Paul. In one instance, a woman was fixing a friend’s hair in her kitchen. She heard pounding outside, investigated, and found a wolf trying to kill her dog on the front porch. She grabbed a snow shovel and whacked the wolf until it backed off

J. Henry Fair

into the yard. Investigators didn't know whether to believe the telephone account until they arrived and found blood from the wounded dog in the snow on the porch.

As wolf populations grow in many areas, wolves are forced to colonize near humans. When a wolf comes up on a porch to eat suet from a bird feeder, it naturally provokes concerns for kids and pets playing in the yard. While there has been no attacks on children in Minnesota where the wolf populations are thriving, it could happen, Paul says.

In the wildlands of Yellowstone National Park, wolves have recovered with very little wolf-human conflict.

Wildlands for Wildlife

Indeed, the success of wolf recovery near people inevitably leads to wolf-human conflict. With conflicts on the rise, it's time, say some conservationists, to consider the idea that great wild spaces are the wolf's most appropriate home. Phillips, now head of the Turner Endangered Species Fund and an International Wolf Center board member, addressed this issue with colleagues at the Center in 1999.

"Wildlands supported populations of gray wolves long after the species had been exterminated from most of its historic range," wrote Phillips in a proposal to the board of directors. "These populations produced dispersers that recolonized Montana,

Michigan and Wisconsin. As wolf populations grow, conflicts with humans will increase. Conflicts will often be resolved by killing the wolves involved. Wildlands will, therefore, always be the last best refuge for wolves. He concluded, "Accordingly, the International Wolf Center should integrate into its mission the understanding and conservation of wildlands."

Wolves can survive nose-to-nose with livestock and rural communities, but tensions run high wherever wolves and humans live in proximity. Italian wolf biologist Luigi Boitani tells of a wolf pack denning 25 miles from Rome; wolves were spotted at the city garbage dump eating spaghetti. In Italy's northern sheep-dotted Apennines Mountains, herders' flocks are vulnerable to increasing wolf numbers. Shepherds showed up in Tuscany to shout their concerns at a 1995 seminar on wolf issues. Until recently, wild game was nearly nonexistent in Italy, so wolves had to live off the community refuse heap or kill domestic animals. Another concern is that while pet dogs sometimes fall victim to wolves, wildlife managers fear that interbreeding with feral dogs will dilute the genetic identity of wild wolves.

Courtesy of Yellowstone National Park



Lynn Rogers

Working for Wildlands Conservation

Along with environmental organizations like the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy, a bold-thinking newsmaker has joined the land ethic defense team: The Wildlands Project was founded in 1991 by a group of scientists and activists including Dave Foreman, founder of Earth First!, and conservation biologist Michael Soule. The Tucson-based group looked at the ecological needs of charismatic carnivores such as

Though wolves are adaptable animals and able to exist close to people, most experts believe wildlands are the best environment for them.

wolves and grizzlies and began planning to preserve an interconnected network of wilderness throughout North America so that these species and others could re-inhabit the wild.

The project's founders believe that remnants of habitat are inadequate to guarantee the long-term health of wild populations of such species. Young adult wolves, for example, usually disperse from the pack to find prey and a mate, to breed and establish new territories. Radio-collared wolves have been tracked traveling more than 500 miles. Barriers such as highways, timber operations, cities and subdivisions interrupt corridors that linked viable habitat for these and other species 200 years ago. Studies have shown that roads are a threat to large carnivores because of collisions, and also because they provide access for illegal hunting.

To reconnect the dots, the project will work with various partners to design wildlands networks stretching across the least inhabited parts of North America, from Alaska to Yellowstone and from Maine to the Florida everglades. While the project is sure to provoke wise-use, property-rights, anti-government and other interest groups, it will also seek partners large and small, from the U.S. Forest Service to individual ranchers.

Considering an Expanded Mission

In considering adopting wildlands conservation into the International Wolf Center's mission, board and staff members have wondered if the Center can maintain its policy to advocate only through education on such a controversial issue. "Expanding our mission to include wildland preservation need not push the Center into any more of an advocacy role than we are now," says Dave Mech, Center founder and board vice-chair. "Our expanded mission could be to advocate for wolf

survival and wildland preservation through public education. Wildland preservation doesn't always mean keeping snowmobiles out of wilderness. It can mean saving a brushy vacant lot for inner-city kids to explore or setting aside parcels of land around a housing development, as well as advocating for more large wilderness tracts."

This addition to the Center's mission would result in more regular informational articles on wolf landscapes in *International Wolf* and on the Center's Web site. Staff and speaker's bureau educators would compare the damage wolves do on agricultural lands with that on wildlands and would discuss with various groups the rate at which open spaces are disappearing and the difficulty in restoring them. Educational programs could explore the importance to wolves of the location, size, connectivity and variety of wildlands and discuss methods of preservation, such as land trusts and conservation easements.

No stranger to controversy in the wars that surround the wolf, the Center would hope to facilitate conversation rather than incite arguments with competing interests. Industry, developers and loggers are

important to this dialogue, just as the Center's current exhibits include the perspectives of hunters, trappers, ranchers and wolf advocates.

"The Center has a tradition and a desire to promote education, facts and discussion," says Executive Director Walter Medwid. "We support the recovery of one of the world's most controversial predators; for the wolf's allies, the next challenge will be the jump from the frying pan of recovery into the fire of land issues. Soon, in parts of North America, the wolf may not be considered endangered, but we have to ask, 'Where can it live in peace?'"

In its mission and educational efforts, the International Wolf Center teaches about the wolf in the context of other species and in its relationship to humans. That context includes the wolf's landscape as well. Perhaps the time has come when, no matter what else is done for wolf survival, it will not be enough unless the Earth's caretakers also preserve wildlands. ■

Nancy Jo Tubbs is a writer and resort owner and chairs the Board of Directors of the International Wolf Center, where she relishes working with resident packs of directors, staff and wolves.

What's Your Opinion?

The International Wolf Center proposes to expand its mission.

The proposed additions are in parentheses:

"The International Wolf Center supports the survival of the wolf (and its natural environment) around the world by teaching about the wolf's life, its associations with other species, its dynamic relationships with humans (and about the importance of wildlands to its survival)."

Please tell us your opinion of the proposal to extend the Center's mission to incorporate education about wildlands. In April 2000, the Center's board and staff will consider your ideas during discussion on the mission at an annual planning retreat. Please address your comments to "Wildlands," *International Wolf*, 5930 Brooklyn Boulevard, Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55429 or send via e-mail to magcoord@wolf.org. Comments will also be selected for the magazine's letters to the editor page.