

## Public Lands

### Wolf Debate Focuses on the Use of Public Lands for Livestock Grazing

by Tom France

**W**olf recovery in the Northern Rockies is one of the century's great conservation successes. Since wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone Park and Idaho in 1995, they have increased to about 600 animals. Central to this success has been a vast habitat base of publicly owned lands that have provided wolves with both the space and the prey necessary for biological success.

While wolf restoration in the Northern Rockies has been a great achievement, it has also added yet another point of controversy to the long-running debate over how and for whom public lands should be managed. Although depredation incidents have been modest, wolves have killed both cattle and sheep on public lands and will continue to do so. These incidents, which draw fierce complaints from ranchers and politicians, come against a backdrop of other controversial public-land issues ranging from logging and mining, to off-road vehicle use and fire policies.

The West's public lands offer conservation opportunities on a scale that probably cannot be realized on

privately owned lands; this has led some environmentalists to call for an end to grazing and other commodity uses of the public lands. But the laws require public lands management for multiple uses, including grazing, and there is no prospect for changing this mandate in the foreseeable future. Ranchers, like wolves, have a powerful hold on the public imagination, and a West without cowboys is as unthinkable to many as one without wildlife.

The wolf debate will continue in the West and will focus on public lands. Already, wolf advocates are calling for re-establishing wolves along the length of the Rockies, from Canada to Mexico. The key to this vision is the mix of national forests, national parks and Bureau of Land Management lands which form much of the land base in every western state. This vision will be sharply challenged by the livestock industry, and bitter public battles can be expected.

Underlying the debate, however, both wolf advocates and opponents are slowly recognizing that they must coexist on the same public lands. Some tools for accommodation, such as the Defenders of Wildlife compensation program, are well established. Others, including more formal political and institutional accommodations, are slowly emerging.

Conservationists know how to argue for strong wildlife policies on public lands, and they must surely continue this work. But they must

also realize that other legal and legitimate uses of public lands must coexist with wolf populations in much of the West. In many instances, collaborative problem solving and real dialogue can expand the range of wolves as surely as policy initiatives can. The art of wildlife advocacy is knowing the difference.



Tom Berkefeld

*The wolf recovery effort in the Northern Rockies is widely recognized as one of the great conservation success stories of the century.*

*Tom France directs the National Wildlife Federation's Northern Rockies office in Missoula, Montana, U.S.A. France was a leading advocate for wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone Park and Idaho, and was a lead attorney in the case that upheld the reintroduction program.*

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