

Wolf Management Zoning: Something for Everyone

by Ed Bangs

Wolves are one of the most adaptable mammals on earth, but human beings are the most dominant. For wolves to exist, we have to accept both the “good” and “bad” of having them as neighbors. Wolves can only act like wolves, so our society will determine where wolves will live by deciding how people will act towards them. However, humans hold a wide variety of opinions about how wolves should be managed. Some people want wolves protected; other people want them exterminated. Still others merely want them controlled.

Geographic zoning is a method that can help society deal with all these differences of opinion. For example, wolves can be protected in national parks or in large blocks of land with few domestic animals, controlled where agriculture and wolves intermingle, or kept out of areas so modified by human development that their presence is untenable. Zoning can be tailored to many situations, allowing different treatment of wolves depending on whether they live on private or public lands. In Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, where there are legally designated “experimental populations” of wolves, individual wolves perceived as “problems” can be shot or harassed for repeated depre-dations on livestock or pets.

In zones with chronic conflicts near large wolf populations, wolves can be removed under regulations allowing very liberal human involvement, including the harassing and killing of wolves. This approach saves management agencies time, funding, and effort; increases public

tolerance by involving local residents in management solutions; and reduces conflict so the wolf does not reacquire its negative public image once so common. Such negative perceptions are what led to the widespread and often irrational persecution of wolves, and could do so again.

On the other hand, national parks were legally designated as areas where natural ecosystems, processes and features should be preserved. Thus, such parks already constitute protected zones for wolves. Yellowstone, Glacier, Grand Teton, Isles Royale, Voyageurs, Denali and other national parks are some of the main places where wolves are completely protected, but even the largest is not large enough to support a viable wolf population by itself. Wolves and people will have to learn to coexist for wolf populations to persist.

Wolves have made a remarkable recovery in North America because of the historic restoration of prey animals by sportsmen and state fish and game agencies, because of shifts in public opinion about wolves, and because of widely shared knowledge obtained through scientific research and professional wolf management programs. Only 50 years ago, our society believed that wolves should be persecuted everywhere they lived, even in Yellowstone National Park. Today, a growing portion of society values wolves, and we are struggling to weigh the costs and the benefits of



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coexisting with these controversial creatures.

Zoning is an important tool to help people understand the trade-offs involved in restoring populations of large predators. By making deliberate public decisions about zones where wolves should live and how they should be managed, we can encourage public discussion, interject fact into this highly emotional debate, and allow for a mix of management strategies that address the wide diversity of opinions that people have about wolves. This approach should foster continued public respect for the wolf and ensure the animal’s long term survival. ■

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