

Wolf Recovery in the Where Do We

On a cold day last winter, I was searching for wolf sign near my home. The area had previously had wolves passing through on occasion but had never been claimed by a family group. Today the signs in the snow would tell a different story. As I turned onto a little-used forest road, tracks from a group of five wolves greeted me. As these animals had traveled down the road, they had scent-marked the area heavily. Eleven urine-stained spots marked the snow in one-half mile; one was blood-tinged, indicating a female in estrus. The area was now officially wolf country. Having monitored wolves in this area for years, I knew there were neighboring packs in all directions from this group, and they, in turn, had breeding packs on the borders of their defended territories. All this in an area that just 12 years ago had no wolves at all!

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This scenario has become commonplace in the upper Midwest, where wolves have been reoccupying previously occupied landscape since 1973. Today, Minnesota has about 2,500 wolves. Michigan's and Wisconsin's combined population is approaching 700 animals. Outside of Minnesota, wolf numbers appear to be increasing at the rate of about 15 percent yearly. In Minnesota, the population is more stable, with increases occurring primarily in areas of nontraditional wolf range, where conflicts with people are inevitable.

The upper Midwest is currently a place where millions of people recreate, develop land, manage timber resources, raise livestock and coexist with more than 3,000 wolves. The story of this remarkable natural recovery of a once nearly extirpated species will likely be studied for decades to come. Yet, I believe wolves and humans now coexist in an uneasy alliance in the upper Midwest, and I wonder how long the relative calm between wolves and humans will last.

Our best knowledge of wolf biology clearly indicates that wolves have far exceeded numbers that are necessary for population viability in the Midwest. The costs associated with the increase in wolves are also escalating. Losses of livestock and pets to wolves and the costs associated with these losses are mounting in all three states. This is to be expected and was to some extent anticipated. In the early 1990s, the

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federal wolf recovery team estimated that about 1,250 wolves in Minnesota and 100 in Michigan and Wisconsin combined would be optimal.

All this raises the question: where do we go from here? And it is in thinking through the possible scenarios for the future of wolves that I become very concerned. I'd like to share some of those concerns with you. Some of what follows are admittedly my opinions, forged from years of working with wolves and people in wolf country.

The Endangered Species Act has done its job. The federal act and various states' versions offering full protection of law for wolves provided a strong measure of legal protection to wolves. The federal act was pivotal in allowing the natural recovery process to proceed in the Midwest. This legislation also provided for animals and plants to be *removed* from federal protection ("delisted") when populations had sufficiently recovered, and when states could demonstrate that wolves would continue to exist in viable numbers after delisting. We have been at that place for several years now. It is important that the intent of this legislation be honored. Now that wolves are numerically recovered, they should be delisted. The provisions to delist should be held as sacred as was our commitment to list the species when it was in trouble. I view this as a pact with the public, with delisting equal in importance to listing a species.

Mike Popsis, Wild Thing Photography



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Another result of delisting is that it is a major step toward “getting the federal government out of state wildlife management.” In the future, we will need to act and react appropriately and in a timely fashion to wolf issues. States are in a much better position to do this than the federal government is. Further, management of wildlife is largely a state prerogative, not a federal responsibility. I am concerned that the delisting process may be stalled by litigation and political positioning. That will result in long delays in effective management actions for wolves and people in wolf country.

Ultimately many people in the upper Midwest will have to deal with wolves on some personal level. Just knowing wolves are out there is enough for some, and this is a value worth preserving. For others, knowing wolves can be controlled where and when necessary will be critical. Still others may find value in wolves only if they can participate in some type of season for taking wolves. To others, the wolf will always be a significant part of their spiritual connection to all of nature. More than most species, wolves

symbolize a wide range of values to humans; this is clear.

Will we respect *each other's* values for the wolf as we form our positions and opinions on wolf issues? This is far less clear to me. Emotion, dogma, presuppositions, past adversarial relationships, distrust and secret agendas have all played a role in the human dimensions of wolf management in the Midwest. These need to be replaced with trustful relationships and decision making based on the best available science with a large dose of pragmatism. Having a viable wolf population living in concert with people may be a worthy goal that most people could agree to. Getting there will necessarily mean altering long-held beliefs by many people. Management by political and public opinion needs to be replaced with management for sustainability while balancing the wolf numbers/human impact equation.

Although wolves are one of the most studied mammals on Earth, there will always be more to learn. Today, we know enough about basic wolf biology to make some good decisions based on this science. What will be needed, however, is more commitment from states to answer questions pertinent to their particular situation, especially as it may relate to wolf harvest by hunters and trappers to control populations. Of equal importance is the need for continued monitoring of human

dimensions. Fortunately in the Midwest there have been several excellent public attitude studies done regarding wolves. These past studies are important as stand-alone documents. However, they also allow future studies to measure changes in public opinion and identify places or topics that need to be addressed by wolf managers. It is important that these human dimensions studies be designed to track changes in attitude, and that they be extensive enough to be truly comparable.

Funding for wildlife research and monitoring (including human dimensions) has always been difficult to obtain. Primarily this is because the needs for study far outstrip the available resources to get these jobs done. Wolf studies compete directly with important and needed studies of animals like black bears, deer, ruffed grouse, moose and other species. Much of the competition for funding is for animals that are more economically important to the various states than are wolves.

For wolf populations to be controlled in a general sense, some type of regulated legal public “take” will likely be necessary. There will undoubtedly be resistance to this by some people. For any legal take of wolves to occur, states will likely need to at least have an understanding of population size, trends, mortality factors, longevity, production, density and biological as well as societal carrying capacity. This is a



International Wolf Center

Wolves have proved that they can live among us, and they are far more adaptive than we imagined. Can we adapt to having them among us?

A strategy for wolf education and outreach wolf management

tall order in times when funding competition is intense. It appears that the need to control populations in a rather extensive geographic area will occur well before the necessary questions are answered. Further, even if funding for wolf research were not an issue, would the wolf receive high enough priority in state agencies to receive funding appropriate to need? While wolves were classified as endangered in Michigan, funding to radio-collar and follow their movements was difficult to obtain. How much funding is likely to be forthcoming when the species is “off the critical list,” so to speak?

Today, the Midwest has some shining examples of educational efforts aimed at bringing facts about wolves to people. The work of the International Wolf Center, Timber Wolf Alliance, Timber Wolf Information Network, Defenders of Wildlife and National Wildlife Federation are all exemplary. I find it interesting that the most significant work in this area has been done by nongovernmental organizations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the NGOs listed have led efforts to preserve

habitat, provide quality educational programs, and supply funding to enhance law enforcement efforts. With few exceptions nationally, state fish and wildlife agencies have been followers, not leaders, in wolf recovery and management.

States’ wolf plans typically recognize the importance of wolf education and then set about to prioritize it somewhere below all those things that are more politically expedient. With some exceptions, states have failed to institutionalize wolf education as a priority among their employees. Public outreach on wolf issues is normally approached on an “as-needed” basis and is specific to incidents or demands by the public. A strategy for wolf education and outreach should be built into states’ wolf management plans and should receive a high priority. As management of wolves moves to state agencies, we will need to see effective leadership in wolf-related matters from these state agencies.

Wolves have made an incredible recovery in the Midwest. They have done this largely on their own. Protected by law, they have now occupied most habitat that does not put them into direct conflict with people and some that does. They have met the criteria to be delisted. They have proved that they can live among us with minimal conflict, and they are far

more adaptable than we imagined. Can we adapt to having them among us? Will we accept our responsibility to manage wolves, or will they be held as a “poster child for the Endangered Species Act”? Will our state agencies appropriately fund work that will be necessary to manage wolves? Can we minimize individual differences in opinion about wolf management to focus on a greater vision for wolves that is acceptable to more people in wolf country? We must get answers to these questions. There are certainly exciting times ahead for wolf managers in the Midwest with no shortage of challenges. In fact, it seems the challenges have just begun.

I believe that public attitudes about wolves in the Midwest will be driven in part by how agencies and NGOs deal with at least the issues mentioned above. A healthy or at least tolerant public attitude will be necessary for wolves to exist in the long term among us. We cannot afford to fail in these management responsibilities because now we have much to lose. ■

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