

A Look Beyond

Of Wolves and Wild Lands

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The wild lands surrounding Yellowstone National Park, known as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), are rapidly being changed by residential population growth and commercial development. In fact, the twenty counties in the GYE are growing faster than any state in the country, faster even than Arizona and Florida. Commercial development of land for ski areas and oil and gas extraction continues to change the landscape for wolves, their prey and other wildlife.

Northeastern Minnesota is another area where wolves have a strong presence, and the Ely area—the heart of wolf country—has been named in *MSN Money* magazine as one of the top 10 emerging second-home markets in the United States. This will no doubt spur even further interest in home building and all the associated infrastructure.

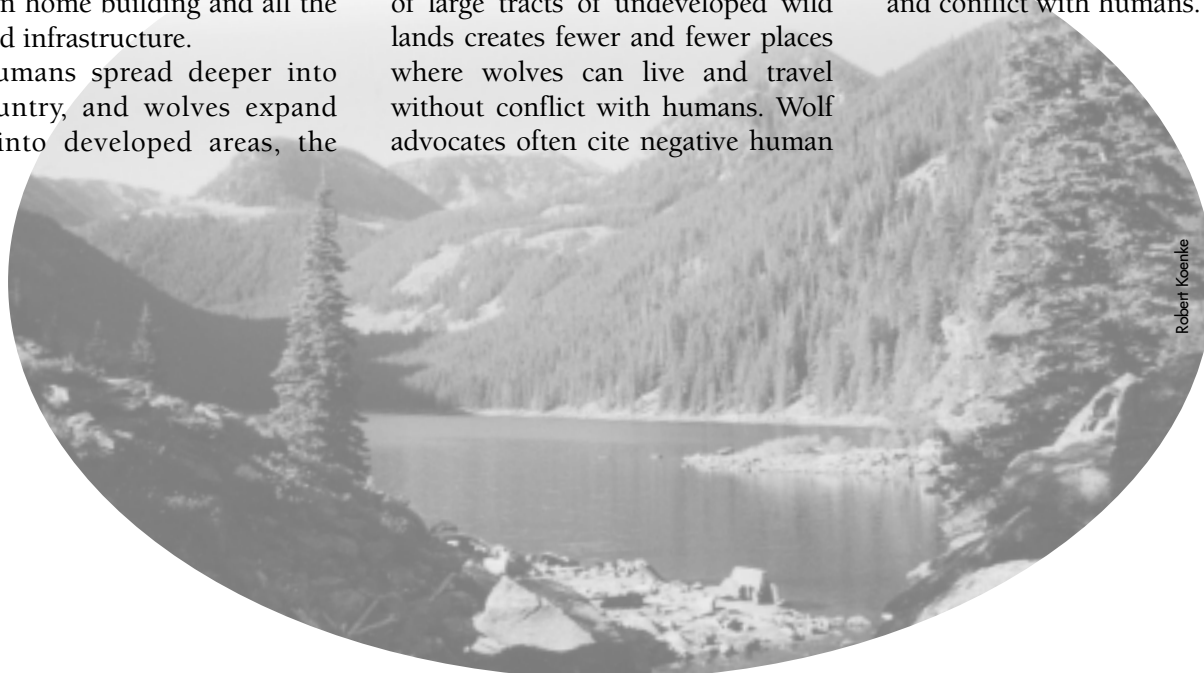
As humans spread deeper into wolf country, and wolves expand deeper into developed areas, the

two are on a collision course. Livestock and pet damage by wolves is well documented, and research is now confirming the displacement of wildlife by roads and human-built structures. Imagine being an elk spending your summer in Yellowstone National Park, then migrating to a nearby valley for the winter only to find that where last year's trees and grasses grew now stands a three-bedroom home on a fenced-in, 20-acre "ranchette"!

With human land-use patterns rapidly changing, wolf education must also be land-use education. One of the primary reasons that species become endangered is habitat loss and fragmentation. For the present, there is enough wild land to prevent endangerment of wolves. However, the increasing rate of urbanization and suburbanization of large tracts of undeveloped wild lands creates fewer and fewer places where wolves can live and travel without conflict with humans. Wolf advocates often cite negative human

attitudes as the wolf's biggest barrier to survival, but perhaps those with positive attitudes toward wolves and wilderness who build the ranchettes or second homes and use the increased networks of roads create just as much of a barrier to wolf survival.

Unless every citizen makes the connection between their actions and the environment, wolf populations will grow into a shrinking wild landscape that leaves little room for them or other wildlife. The choices our society makes about land use—collectively and as individuals—affect wolves on every level. Instead of focusing on preserving individual wolves, wolf education should focus on the need for preserving enough wild lands to allow wolf populations a place of their own to function naturally without being forced to compete and conflict with humans. ■



Robert Koehnle