

# Wolf Tracks

## Wolves Mean Different Things to Different People

by Jay Hutchinson

**F**act: Fourteen Canadian wolves were successfully introduced into Yellowstone National Park in March 1995, and another 17 in spring 1996. As of late 2004 15 packs containing at least 170 wolves inhabited the park.

While biologists ardently study the wolves, and conservationists rejoice over this event, and while visitors come enthralled to watch the mythical predator in its original domain, many people bordering the park violently disagree with the restoration. To understand the diversity of feelings about wolves, sociologists have now studied and interviewed not only ranchers, guides and business owners near the park but also rangers and environmental activists. The results reveal a wide diversity of viewpoints.

When wolves kill cattle, ranchers are compensated monetarily. But many feel that the money in no way makes up for the art and craft, the sweat and toil, and the years they have expended in creating their herds. They view ranching not just as *earning a living but as creating a life* from land that is theirs, and they view wolves as lifestyle wreckers.

Another strong feeling, say sociologists, is that the government's power to reestablish threatened and endangered species reduces the self-determination and freedom of people and community choice and values.

Many local residents believe that the park's mandate to protect the

land—animals, plants, water, soil, rocks and air—is a mistaken effort to close the park to both recreation and the resource extraction industries that some argue rightfully belong there. Other people maintain that it is to perpetuate a government bureaucracy. "I believe that eventually they're going to have buses to shuttle people through the park . . . it's more and more control, which eventually means it's more money in their (the government's) pocket," said one local citizen. Others see reintroduced wolves as bureaucratic vehicles for dominating the lifestyles and livelihoods of residents.

Some environmentalists feel that the government has even curtailed the wolves' freedom because the animals were not allowed unfettered migration into the park on their own. "I'm really sorry that they didn't have a chance to come back on their own," said one. "Are we going to have wolves in the wild or are we going to have wild wolves? . . . What we have right now is wolves in the wild."

Is the wolf a symbol of freedom and wildness, a scientific challenge or a vicious threat to a way of life? Understanding better what wolves symbolize to different people should help government agencies in solving future thorny environmental issues. ■



Lufroy Parker

*Thirty-one wolves were successfully introduced into Yellowstone National Park in 1995 and 1996, and as of late 2004 15 packs containing at least 170 wolves inhabited the park. Sociologists have interviewed not only ranchers, guides and business owners near the park but also rangers and environmental activists to understand the diversity of feelings about wolves.*

### Reference:

- 🐾 Rik Scarce, "What Do Wolves Mean? Conflicting Social Constructions of *Canis lupus* in 'Bordertown,'" *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 26–45.

*Jay Hutchinson is a writer and editor, retired from the U.S. Forest Service's North Central Research Station, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Between travels, he enjoys writing about various natural history subjects, including wolves.*