

Wolves and livestock

Written by Katy Nesbitt, The Observer April 05, 2010 09:56 am

ENTERPRISE — It's spring in Wallowa County. A time when a cowboy's heart turns to calving

After last spring's confirmed lamb and calf losses to wolves in Baker County and the confirmation of a pack of 10 living in Wallowa County, Eastern Oregon ranchers have their guard up in anticipation of wolf activity in their pastures and grazing lands.

On March 24, two presentations on the impact of wolves on the ecosystem were presented in Enterprise. In light of the wolf incident on Karl Patton's ranch two days later, they couldn't have been timed any better to preface the reality of the threat of wolves on Wallowa County livestock.

Dr. Robert Beschta of Oregon State University's Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society of the College of Forestry talked to Wallowa County citizens about the loss and reintroduction of predators in various national parks.

The second event was the viewing of the film "Lords of Nature," sponsored by Northeast Oregon Ecosystems, and a follow-up panel discussion.

Beschta's lecture and slide show at the Wallowa Mountains U.S. Forest Service office was well attended by a cross section of the public. His most compelling research dealt specifically with the impact of wolves on Yellowstone National Park's ecosystem.

While researching the loss of willows, cottonwoods and aspen primarily along rivers and streams in the park, Beschta said he believes that without wolves, elk and deer populations have exploded. In turn, the ungulates have over-browsed the riparian trees to a shocking point of decline.

Aldo Leopold, the grandfather of ecology and national park superintendents more than 60 years ago, had noticed the explosion of the ungulate population after the wolves were extirpated, Beschta said. More recent research, since the reintroduction of wolves into the park, have ecologists studying a more subtle impact, that of the return of riparian species.

Beschta's research goes on to argue that the decline in riparian woody species has also affected the natural flow of the watersheds and habitat for fish, nesting birds, amphibians and wildflowers have been restored since the wolf reintroduction.

His research tracks the decline of palatable woody species, those browsed by deer and elk, from the 1920s to present. Though his research is compelling,

Beschta admitted that it was intended to discover why the riparian habitats were in decline and not to argue the benefit of wolves in the ecosystem.

A member of the audience asked Beschta if increasing deer and elk hunting could replicate the wolves' ability to keep those populations in check. His answer was, "If we could extend hunting at various times in various places."

The big picture, Beschta said, is the wolf issue is social, not purely scientific. Human sentiment is where the issue will be decided.

Later that evening a viewing of "Lords of Nature" was held at the OK Theatre in Enterprise. The film covered the history from the near elimination of wolves in the U.S. to their reintroduction and the subsequent change of the landscape.

In the film, Minnesotan farmers discussed the tragic loss of livestock and the non-lethal measures they use to live with wolves. Minnesotans have a longer history with wolves than the West, and some livestock growers have learned to make a living while keeping the wolves at bay.

All the research and cinematography in the world doesn't add up to a hill of beans when it comes to the risk of losing livelihoods in an area already hard hit economically. Closely on the heels of economic concerns are the emotional ramifications of wolves in Wallowa County's backyard.

There are as many opinions concerning living with wolves in Oregon as there are people who live here. The Northeast Oregon Ecosystems group called together a panel of diverse representatives to discuss their feelings and research with the audience at the theater. Yet, according to Rod Childers, Wolf Committee chair for the Oregon Cattleman's Association, the ranchers weren't invited to the table until late Wednesday afternoon.

Members of the panel included Jesse Timberlake, Boise Defenders of Wildlife; Gary Miller, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Beschta, OSU; Russ Morgan, ODFW; Wallowa County rancher Todd Nash and Tick Moore, a Baker County rancher.

Childers started out the audience interaction with the panel by asking Morgan how a rancher can prevent or deal with a wolf attack on livestock.

"Wolves are listed as an endangered species in Oregon," Morgan said. "Under that law you can legally scare the wolf off. By law one must report if you have hazed a wolf. One cannot cause harm if a wolf is attacking livestock; you can scare them off, but can't kill one."

Nash addressed his concerns as a rancher with wolves in close proximity to where he grazes cattle.

“As we turn out cattle in the spring there is a normal death loss. We counted 15-20 cows short last year and had one calf killed,” he said.

Besides loss of cows, Nash said, “Body condition scores are lower than normal by 75 to 100 pounds.” Ranchers believe lower body weight is an indication that cows have been threatened by wolves.

Moore said, “We have new data for our ranch on our leased lands. Calves normally weighed 585 pounds and now are averaging 555 pounds running on the same landscape and grass.”

Moore, who had one confirmed wolf kill last year and suspects a few others, said, “As a rancher there are no tools to deal with wolves. That’s all we ask for. We can manage any other situations like dogs, disease and cougars, but with the wolf our hands are tied.”

Hells Canyon Preservation Council, based in La Grande, has been involved with the wolf issue since the creation of the Oregon Wolf Plan. Executive Director Greg Dyson said they were part of a citizens advisory committee, along with Defenders of Wildlife.

The work started in late 2003, Dyson said, and the plan was adopted in 2005.

“Wolves were coming to Oregon and it was better to have a plan before they were an issue,” Dyson said. “After the reintroduction in Idaho, it was just a matter of time.”

The first confirmed wolf crossing into Oregon was in 1999 when a wolf named B-52 was discovered near John Day. She was sent back to central Idaho, near McCall, where she had originated. Within five years of that wolf crossing into Oregon, the wolf plan was passed, Dyson said.

“The state recognized the need for taking action,” Dyson said. “So far there has been no legislative approval or weakening of the plan.”

“The question remains,” Dyson said, “under what conditions is it OK to shoot a wolf?” We all need to work together. Now that they are here we need to decide what we are going to do.”

Suzanne Stone of Defenders of Wildlife said her organization has been interested in wolves since its inception in 1947.

“People supported restoring native species missing from the ecosystem, including wolves,” Stone said.

Their position went from conceptual to on-the-ground when wolves began migrating from Canada into Montana in 1986. By 1987, Defenders had a

reimbursement plan in place.

“An informal way to help with depredation led from there to a formal program,” Stone said.

Through public outreach Stone said they try and dispel the misconceptions about wolves and tease out fact from fiction. “The wolf has been clouded in myth for so long,” she said.

Stone said she believes coexistence measures do work. If the wolf is fully removed from federal protection, Defenders will concentrate their wolf work in this area.

Fladery, an electrified fence with flagging, has met with success protecting sheep in Idaho. Cattle graze in a more dispersed setting than sheep, so Stone recommends range riders, cowboys working with the cows to detract wolves. These cowboys are trained in the use of shooting rubber bullets, cracker shells, air horns and starting pistols to scare wolves away from cattle.

“More and more we want to avoid livestock losses and economic loss, but through the reimbursement plan we can’t replace the emotional loss,” Stone said. “We want to help avoid this and learn to live with them by letting ranchers know they have tools.”