

Wolves: The debate is seldom rational

by Wendy Beyre

The wolf pot continues to boil in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. Now, another state has been added to the stew. In Oregon, environmentalists are protesting the piecemeal removal of wolves from the Endangered Species list, hunters want less competition from wolves, and ranchers complain that wolves are killing their livestock. In eastern Oregon, where there is only one known breeding wolf pack, a federal judge temporarily halted a kill order on two of the pack's members. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife had hoped the targeted kill would "send a message to the pack to not kill livestock and change the pack's behavior."

Meanwhile, in Montana, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks announced the wolf harvest quota for the 2010 hunting season would rise to 186, up from 75 last year. The quota does not include the increasing number of wolves shot for bad behavior -- 145 in 2009. Since the estimated number of wolves in Montana is only 525, the state will soon see a reduction in the wolf population if the hunt goes as planned. When the public was asked to comment on the proposal to increase the total harvest, 1,500 comments flooded in -- a clear sign that wolves remain a hot issue.

Federal District Court Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula, Mont., is feeling that heat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to de-list wolves in Montana, Idaho, Utah, Washington and Oregon before Wyoming adopts an approved wolf management plan has been challenged by Defenders of Wildlife, among other groups. The stress level in Molloy's courtroom on the day he heard oral arguments was so high that one lawyer fainted, and the proceedings were suspended until she could be revived. A decision is expected this fall, so the question of hunting quotas may become moot if wolves are re-listed as an endangered species in all states where they live or roam.

Meanwhile, I continue to marvel at our ability to ignore facts about wolves while jumping on one bandwagon or another. A case in point: It was coyotes and not wolves that killed 23 lambs on a Bitterroot Valley ranch last month. The news article appeared in only one local newspaper and drew no comment from readers. Coyotes seem to have no champions on the environmentalist side of the issue, and ranchers take coyote depredation in stride, viewing it simply as a cost of doing business.

But earlier, a report of a wolf pack killing four miniature horses and chewing on an irrigation hose resulted in the pack being summarily executed. Last year, Montana's Livestock Loss Reduction and Mitigation Board paid out \$142,000 to ranchers who filed for wolf depredation losses -- headline news! -- while no reparations were made for losses from coyotes, domestic dogs, mountain lions or eagles. In addition, the 56,000 sheep that died from non-predator causes went mostly unnoticed by the public.

It's obvious that wolves are not the only culprits here. The Associated Press reported that invasive weeds cause \$415,000 in livestock production losses, plus undetermined reductions in wild game populations each year on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front alone. That information doesn't seem to bother either ranchers or hunters, nor has it corralled any new money for weed eradication.

Because many hunters remain convinced that wolves hurt hunting success, Montana State University studied elk to discover why populations decline in some areas and increase in others. The findings were perhaps

surprising: Elk were more bothered by human activities -- including hunting and residential activity -- than by wolves.

In any case, vehicles bump off more wild game than predators do. But I haven't heard of any plans to eradicate cars or drivers.

I find that my sympathies are divided. In late winter, I walk daily on a lane that skirts a calving pasture on a local ranch. I've seen wolves crossing through the herd without even looking at the calves or cows; they're concentrating on pocket gophers and meadow voles for breakfast. The cows likewise ignore the wolves. The ranch manager worries that one day the wolves will sample a cute little black calf instead of their usual prey. I share his concern, but I also don't want to see another wolf killed.

When I watch wolves in the wild as they go about the tough business of survival, I know that they belong here. They should never again be exterminated, as they were in the 1930s. No matter how difficult the process, I hope wildlife managers, hunters, ranchers and environmentalists find a balance so that we can continue to live together.

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