

LOBO WATCH

Sportsmen Taking Charge of Predator Problems

News Release

For Immediate Release

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Wolves Return...

Conservation Success Story, or Ecological Disaster?

If you've been following the reintroduction of the wolf in the Northern Rockies since the late 1990s, you surely have heard a lot of talk, read numerous newspaper and magazine articles, and you've likely seen quite a bit of television programming regarding the controversy surrounding this project. On one side of the debate have been the pro-wolf folks and environmental groups, who claimed that the return of the wolf will be good for the environment, and that wolves would not create the devastation to other wildlife and livestock being claimed by the "*other side*". And on that "*other side*" have been hunters and ranchers who, in no uncertain terms, have sworn that wolves would totally destroy big game herds and make it economically impossible for livestock producers to remain in business.

It's now been 15 years since the first wolves in 70 years set foot in the Yellowstone National Park area. And we have had wolves with us in growing numbers ever since. So, which side of this controversy has actually come the closest to predicting the outcome?

The primary ecological benefit claimed by organizations like the **Center for Biological Diversity** and the **Sierra Club** has been the return of understory plant growth within Yellowstone National Park. This includes the low bush shrubs, young saplings, and tender growth like streamside willows. This same plant life is

a favored browse for elk, moose and deer, and due to the park's large wild ungulate populations of the mid to late 1990s, this growth had been severely over browsed. In many areas, there was no such growth at all. And without any willows, native beaver were becoming more and more scarce inside the park.

Another claim by both amateur and professional wolf experts of that period was that the reintroduction of wolves, in the role as the primary predator, would strengthen big game herds by weeding out the weak, sick and injured - and that wolves would not prey heavily on healthy animals. Those in favor of wolves had determined the average wolf would likely consume just 12 to 14 elk, deer or moose in any given year, and would have relatively little impact on overall game populations. Environmental groups and organizations painted a rosy picture, with wolves finding a happy balance with other wildlife, and killing that wildlife only when they needed to feed. Plus, they claimed there would always be a very acceptable predator to wild prey ratio, meaning that wolf depredation of livestock would remain extremely minimal.

Sportsmen and ranchers, who tended to have a much closer relationship with the land and the wild things upon it, presumed to know better. Many were quick to point out that the reason why much of the Northern Rockies was so blessed with a bounty of elk, deer, moose, pronghorns, mountain goats and bighorn sheep was due to the eradication of the wolf during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Also, they proclaimed that it was America's sportsmen who funded the conservation efforts that brought big game populations from near oblivion to record numbers across much of the area - before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began releasing wolves in the Greater Yellowstone Area in 1995. The majority of those who actually live on these lands felt that wolf reintroduction was nothing more than a ploy by groups like the **Defenders of Wildlife** and the **Humane Society of the United States** to destroy wildlife herds to the point where there was nothing left for sportsmen to hunt - and to make it too costly for ranchers to continue producing cattle and sheep for market.

And if these two views of wolf "**reintroduction**" were not controversial enough, muddying the waters even more were the provisions of the **Endangered Species Act of 1973**, which called for the protection, preservation and propagation of **threatened** and **endangered** species. And except for the

northernmost areas of Minnesota, and a few small wilderness pockets in Idaho and Montana, wolves had been extirpated across the rest of the Lower 48 states.

Enter, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - who was charged with heading up the Wolf Recovery Project in this country. And their first order of business was to find a source of wolves for the transplants it would take to bring the wolf back to roughly 99-percent of its historic lower U.S. range. That agency turned to northern Canada for those wolves, which were definitely not endangered there - where an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 wolves still roamed freely.

And with the first release of 14 Canadian gray wolves in Yellowstone in 1995, followed by 17 more the following year, the controversy thickened even more. It seems that the USFWS released the wrong wolf into the Northern Rockies, and many sportsmen and ranchers claim that it was not by accident. They say that this federal agency knew fully what it was doing, and also knew of the damage these wolves were capable of delivering.

The wolves that the USFWS released into the Northern Rockies came from northern British Columbia, northern Alberta and the Yukon. These wolves were of two, possibly three, recognized North American subspecies of gray wolves - which were completely different than the native subspecies that was found in the Northern Rockies. Not only were the Canadian wolves, on the average, 30- to 40-percent larger than the native "**timber wolf**" of the western U.S., they are also a considerably more aggressive wolf, with a tendency to hunt in packs rather than alone or pairs - to more efficiently bring down game as large as adult elk or moose. Likewise, being a different wolf and far from being endangered, critics now accuse the USFWS of actually violating the Endangered Species Act.

The wolves now found all along the mountains of western Montana, the northwestern corner of Wyoming (around Yellowstone National Park), throughout most of Idaho, and more recently moving into Washington, Oregon, and Colorado, are now having far more impact on other native wildlife than predicted by the "**wolf experts**" of the environmental organizations, or for that matter the "**wolf scientists**" with USFWS and some state wildlife agencies. One of the hardest hit areas has been right in the Greater Yellowstone Area, where this wildlife conservation controversy began.

Yellowstone's northern elk herd numbered right at 19,000 at the time the first Canadian wolves were released into the park. Now, due to severe wolf depredation, that herd is down to 5,000 or less. Likewise, one of Idaho's finest elk hunting areas was the Lolo Zone, which butts up against the Montana border, along the beautiful Bitterroot Mountains. That zone is made up of Hunt Units 10 and 12. The annual count there in 1995 was 13,561 elk. The 2010 count revealed just 2,178 elk remaining in those two units. And despite token management wolf hunts this past fall and winter, wolf numbers continue to grow and elk numbers continue to crash.

The loss of elk all along the eastern side of Idaho and the western side of Montana has been just as severe. Our *"learn as you go"* state and federal wolf managers now realize that each wolf is likely to take up to 20 big game animals *just to survive winter*, and they also now realize that wolves like to kill just to be killing. And the biggest impact wolves are now having on big game populations is the near total loss of calves and fawns during the spring birthing season. Before wolves, the survival rate of these young-of-the-year was 40- to 60-percent. In most areas, it is now down to 10- to 15-percent, and big game herds cannot be sustained with such a low recruitment of calves and fawns, whether those herds are hunted or not. Moose, which were on a solid growth rebound before the invasion of non-native wolves, have now become non-existent in many areas. Likewise, mountain goats and bighorn sheep, which are forced down from the high country during the winter are also taking a beating from the wolves.

And if such loss due to depredation is not bad enough, more than 60-percent of the wolves tested in Idaho and Montana are known carriers of a deadly parasitic tapeworm that can prove deadly to a wide range of wildlife. The resulting hydatid disease can also be contracted by pets, and humans.

A hundred years of solid conservation work and hundreds of millions of sportsman provided dollars are now proving to have been totally wasted. And as big game populations crash, the wolves are setting their sights on cattle and sheep. They are already dealing ranchers millions of dollars in losses annually, and each year that damage sees a significant increase.

Sportsmen and ranchers alike feel they have been pushed up against the wall, and they're ready to fight back. In early March, 40 or more showed up at

the **Environmental Quality Committee** meeting at the Montana State Capitol Building in Helena, most to testify that state and federal wildlife agencies have turned a blind eye to an ever spreading wolf problem. And in late March, more than 200 showed up at an "**Anti-Wolf Rally**" in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. At that congregation, all but one or two of the crowd that gathered were there to demand that the U.S. District Court (in Missoula, MT) delist the gray wolf in Wyoming, so much needed management can get underway - to try and save the rich wildlife heritage that is now quickly being destroyed by wolves in the northwestern quarter of the state.

In Montana, several fast growing sportsmen's organizations have been formed, primarily to fight for a dramatic reduction in wolf numbers and to save big game hunting in the state. This state has one of the highest percentages of residents who hunt, and they are angered over the loss of elk and other big game to the wolves. One new group known as **Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife** is now ready to wage war with environmental organizations, the USFWS and even the state's Fish, Wildlife and Parks department to see an immediate reversal of growing wolf numbers and declining elk and deer populations. Many of those making up this new organization are ready to take the fight to court, and to hold many of those who have caused the loss of the state's wildlife resources legally responsible. Another group known as **Montana Sportsmen United** shares the same agenda.

Many of Montana's state representatives and senators are now feeling a lot of pressure from the state's hunters, and ranchers as well. Come next election, those who tend to be "**pro wolf**" may see the writing on the wall - and someone else taking their place.

There is also a growing animosity toward Montana's U.S. Senators Jon Tester and Max Baucus, who have almost totally ignored this issue. Many concerned sportsmen have taken the time to write them, only to receive back a very canned response - probably written by a staff aide. Senator Tester has even admitted to being in favor of the wolf reintroduction, which in these hard times could prove to be political suicide.

A lifelong hunter and sportsman, who grew up in a ranching community, Mark French, of Paradise, Montana is also now a challenger for the state's single

seat in the U.S. Congress. And he is a strong proponent of reducing wolf numbers quickly.

"Montanans suspect they have been sold a lie. They are taking action into their own hands because their government has failed them while their game herds are disappearing before their eyes," exclaims French.

He's now calling on Montana citizens to contact Director Joe Maurier, of MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and to demand an immediate public hearing within the next two weeks (in time to save elk calves and deer fawns). This ***state of emergency*** hearing would be to open wolf season to all legal hunters; to launch aggressive helicopter hunting of wolves; and to allow the trapping of wolves.

Mark French adds, ***"Once the threat of this non-native species is significantly reduced, Montana must retain complete wolf management responsibility as authorized under the Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution."***

The last, and a major, factor in this whole wolf controversy is to accurately determine how many wolves there really are in the Northern Rockies, and how many wolves would it honestly take to insure that the species lives on, albeit under very strict population management. The states of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, at the start of the Wolf Recovery Project, only agreed to maintaining 150 wolves in each state. Today, there is a ***"minimum"*** of around 1,700 total - or nearly four times what was agreed to. Sportsmen who spend far more time in the outdoors than those hired to manage those wolves realize there are many more wolves, maybe as many as 3,000 to 3,500. And that would better explain the devastation the wolves have dealt wildlife resources and cattle production.

Weighing the losses and threats caused by wolves against the benefits of having wolves, it's easy to see that the scale tips far more in favor of the project being one of the greatest ecological disasters of our lifetimes. But, for those who still feel wolves do a lot for our ecosystem, there are now more willows and beaver in Yellowstone National Park - but a whole lot fewer elk, moose, deer, bison, pronghorn, mountain goat and bighorn sheep. - ***Toby Bridges, LOBO WATCH***

For A Look At The Very Emotional Gathering At The "**Anti-Wolf Rally**" Held In Jackson Hole, Wyoming on Saturday, March 20th, Use The Following Link To See A Short 10-Minute Video By Scott Rockholm, Of Sand Point, ID...

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18BX_3eltA8

For More On **Montana Sportsmen For Fish And Wildlife**, Visit Their Website At...

www.mt-sfw.org

To Read Montana Congressional Contender **Mark French's Full Press Release** On Reducing Wolf Numbers In That State, Go To His Website At The Following Link...

www.markformontana.com

www.lobowatch.com

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100 Parker Court Missoula, MT 59801

Phone - 406 542-9751