

The Plight of Gray Wolves in Washington State: Compromise or Oppression?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The gray wolf population has been making strides under the Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan implemented by Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife. Their numbers have been steadily increasing. Unfortunately, the increased numbers have caused more interaction between wolves and humans and livestock. The issues that arise pose a serious threat to the wolves. Although there are non-lethal solutions that can be taken to reduce the risk of predation, they are often not taken. Benefit compensation for livestock harm and death have been implemented to reduce the loss suffered by livestock producers. In order for the wolves to survive it is imperative that the livestock producers do their part to take precautionary measures to protect their livestock. Livestock producers can prevent or reduce the chance of such attacks in several ways, including removal of sick, injured, or dead livestock from grazing areas, use of herders and guard dogs, keeping livestock in pens or corrals at night, and delay of livestock turnout on grazing areas with wolves until after calving. Killing wolves should be the very last resort to alleviate the problem. There has to be compassion and compromise by all parties to control the threat. Non-lethal methods should be implemented and exhausted before turning to lethal methods. The recovery process has shown positive results and delisting the wolves too soon may cause their numbers to dwindle rapidly causing history to repeat itself. This may start the cycle over, causing us to lose ground. There is a need for proactive management.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2011, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission formally adopted the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan to guide recovery and management of gray wolves as they naturally recolonize the State of Washington. At present, wolves are classified as an endangered species under state law (WAC 232-12-014) throughout Washington regardless of federal status. Washington is composed of four recovery areas which include the Northern Cascades, and the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast. The WDFW is the primary agency responsible for managing wolves in the Eastern Washington recovery area while WDFW works as an agent of the USFWS in the remaining areas of the state (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Wolf conservation efforts in Washington State is a long standing topic of great concern filled with a great deal of controversy. Wolves are recognized as Keystone Predators that are very skilled hunters. On one hand you have the wolves that are doing what comes naturally to them, surviving as best as they can, utilizing the resources available within their territory. On the other hand, you have the ranchers and farmers that are a vital part of the state's economy, and the lands that foster this industry also foster critical habitat for a wide variety of wildlife that includes the Gray wolf (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Although Washington State has the Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan in place, is it sufficient to secure the future of wolves in the wild? This paper will explore the various positions of conservation and population control in regards to wolves as well as their impact on wildlife, humans, and domestic animals. I will present an argument that Washington State's Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan is more beneficial to ranchers and farmers as opposed to the Gray Wolf.

"Few animals in the wilderness elicit such strong emotions in people as the wolf. Wolves are loved by many who cherish wild places and intact ecosystems, but they are loathed by others who regard them as competitors for natural resources" (Tekiela 2012).

HISTORY OF WOLVES

Early humans and wolves no doubt shared similar regions worldwide and competed for food. Both were top predators, living and hunting in family units. They remained in groups throughout the year and traveled to hunt for food. Both used complex communication and taught survival skills to their young. Some cultures around the world believed that wolves were their brothers. The early American Indians and other indigenous peoples also had a kinship with wolves and their ways. Some tribes feared wolves and tried to eliminate local populations, others respected wolves for their power and even more for their intelligence. American Indians and First Nations People killed wolves only out of the need for fur for clothing and teeth and claws for trade, and they often made apologies to the sacred wolf. For them, the wolf didn't represent something to fear or obliterate. They didn't speak

harshly about wolves or brag about killing them. To do that, it was thought, would offend the wolves and bring bad luck and hard times (Tekiela 2012).

Wolves were once very common throughout Washington state, but declined rapidly as a result of trapping, poisoning, and hunting as ranching and farming by European-American settlers, as they expanded between 1850 and 1900. By the 1930's, wolves were no longer considered a breeding species in Washington. Infrequent reports of wolves were coming in during the following decades, suggesting that individuals were continuing to disperse in Washington from neighboring states and British Columbia (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Wolves are highly social and live in packs. The pack usually consists of a dominant breeding pair (an alpha male and an alpha female), their offspring from the previous year, and new pups. The pack hunts, feeds, travels and rests together. The pack size is commonly 4 to 11 animals. Most wolves live 5 years, but some have lived 12 years (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Gray wolves are about twice the size of commonly seen coyotes, measuring up to six feet in length, including the tail, about 30 inches in height at the shoulder, and weighing 70 to 120 pounds. Males are somewhat larger than females. Wolves vary in color from black, white, and shades of gray and brown. Wolf tracks are approximately 5 inches long by 4 inches wide, have four symmetrical toes with evident claws and a single lobe on the front of the foot pad. The paths of wolves usually show a direct, energy-efficient or purposeful route, whereas those of dogs often meander (Becker *et al.* 2015).

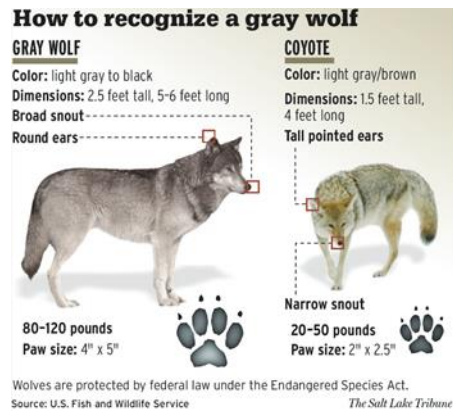


Figure 1 Gray Wolf compared to Coyote (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2016).

With their large body size, powerful jaws, large teeth, speed, endurance, and habit of hunting in packs, wolves are very well adapted to hunt large prey. Despite their hunting abilities, the majority of wolf hunts are unsuccessful. Wolves are selective hunters and tend to prey mainly on younger, older, and debilitated animals. This can leave prey herds at an advantage. Having more animals of prime age and in good health significantly enhance productivity. Wolves will also scavenge dead animals and eat smaller animals. They also kill and feed on domestic livestock, especially cattle and sheep (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Wolves normally do not breed until the age of two or three. Mating usually occurs in middle to late February, followed by the birth of pups two months later. Litters average four to six pups. Most packs produce only one litter annually. Dens are often in underground burrows, but can occur in abandoned beaver lodges, hollow trees, and shallow rock caves. As pups grow older, they are taken from the den to a protected location known as a rendezvous site. One or more rendezvous sites are used over the summer until the pups are large enough to travel and hunt with the pack (Becker *et al.* 2015).

A pack establishes its own territory and defends it against neighboring packs. Territory boundaries and sizes often vary from year to year, but usually average about 140-400 square miles. Territory size can be smaller when packs are close together because of common prey. Howling is a common behavior in wolves that enables pack members to communicate and stay together. Howls can be heard from as far as five miles away. Their howls tend to be long and drawn. In addition to howling, they also growl and bark. Most young wolves leave their birth pack at two to three years of age to search for a mate and to start a new pack of their own. The wolves move an average of 60 miles, but have been known to travel more than 500 miles (WDFW 2015).

WOLF RECOVERY

Wolves have not been reintroduced in Washington state. The State has adopted a position of recovery instead. Washington State has adopted Washington's Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, which is intended as a guide for the recovery of wolves as they naturally re-establish a sustainable population across the state, and authorizes management tools to address conflicts with livestock and other wildlife (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Washington's Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan consists of three main objectives.

- **Recovery Goals:** The goal of delisting 15 pairs of wolves that are present in the state for at least three years, with a minimum of four in Eastern Washington, four in the northern Cascades, four in the southern Cascades/Northwest coastal area, and three others anywhere in the state. The plan also provides for WDFW to consider initiating the

delisting process if 18 breeding pairs are documented during a single year, and the distribution objectives are met (Becker *et al.* 2015).

- ***Livestock Protection***: The plan establishes a variety of nonlethal and lethal management measures - from technical assistance for landowners to lethal removal - to control wolves that prey on livestock. It also establishes conditions for compensating ranchers who lose livestock to wolf predation (WDFW 2015).
- ***Wildlife protection***: The plan allows WDFW the use of lethal and non-lethal measures to manage wolf predation on at-risk ungulate populations if wolf numbers reach or exceed the recovery objective within a region where predation occurs (WDFW 2015).

Figure2: Wolf Packs in Washington State (WSDW 2015)



Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) conducted an annual survey late in 2014 confirmed the presence of at least 68 wolves up from 27 four years earlier. They also found a corresponding increase in the number of wolf packs and breeding pairs as the state's growing wolf population continues to spread into the west (WDFW 2014).

BENEFITS OF WOLVES IN THE WILD

There are indeed benefits that wolves provide that are not mentioned very frequently. Below is a list of some of the benefits they provide through their normal behavior in the wild.

- Wolves are highly adaptable and have the ability to live in a variety of habitats as long as there is enough prey. Wolves are most commonly found in forested areas with primarily flat, open spaces such as river valleys and basins where the prey is much easier to chase and catch (Becker *et al.* 2015).
- Wolves can be very beneficial to natural plant and animal communities in many of ways. Wolf predation can prevent the overpopulation of prey, this results in helping to maintain the natural occurrence of some plant and other wildlife species in ecosystems. (For example, in Olympic National Park where wolves were eliminated, over-browsing by too many elk during the past 80-100 years has caused substantial changes in riparian habitats, including severe declines in small and medium-sized cottonwood and maple trees (Becker *et al.* 2015).
- Increased availability of wolf-killed carcasses can help scavenging animals, such as black bears, grizzly bears, wolverines, foxes, mink, ravens, magpies, jays, crows, golden eagles, bald eagles, and vultures, especially during winter when other foods become scarce (Becker *et al.* 2015)
- Wolf populations have the best chance of survival in areas where conflicts with humans are low. These areas include locations with abundant public lands, few to no livestock, sparse roads, and limited human densities (Becker *et al.* 2015).

WHAT WOLVES NEED TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Wolf populations have the best chance of survival in areas where conflicts with humans are low. These areas include locations with abundant public lands, few to no livestock, sparse roads, and limited human densities (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Wolves remain a divisive issue in many parts of the state. While public opinion polls have consistently shown that most Washingtonians support wolf recovery, a significant portion of the state's residents oppose the state's wolf-management strategies. Public discord over this issue has been increasingly apparent in recent years (Becker *et al.* 2015).

- Thousands of people contacted WDFW to protest the two instances - in 2012 and 2014 - when the department took lethal action to stop wolves from preying on livestock. In both cases, WDFW was criticized those who did not believe those actions were warranted and those who argued that wildlife managers did not act quickly or forcefully enough to protect the ranchers' livestock (Becker *et al.* 2015).
- A public-opinion survey commissioned by WDFW in 2008 found that 75 percent of Washingtonians supported wolf recovery. In a follow-up survey conducted by the same company in 2014, statewide public support had declined to 64 percent (Becker *et al.* 2015).
- A dozen billboards featuring conflicting "pro-wolf/anti-wolf" messages have been on display in downtown Spokane since fall of 2014 (Becker *et al.* 2015).
- Poachers killed three wolves in 2014, the highest number since wolves began reentering the state during the past decade (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Despite the above incidents, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife recently released a new wolf management protocol that will remove important safeguards for recovering wolf packs in the state. The new protocol dramatically lowers the bar for killing wolves in response to livestock depredation and would allow state and federal officials to kill an entire pack of wolves for only two conflict incidents with livestock- one of which could be just a minor injury over the course of an entire year (WDFW 2014).

September 5, 2012: following two depredations the state of Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife ended its brief wolf-hunting reprieve and was again gunning to kill up to four wolves in the Wedge pack, with the aim of potentially breaking up the pack (WSDFW 2012).

Minimal action had taken place to resolve the conflict with the Wedge pack using nonlethal means, including moving calving areas not used by wolves, turning the calves out later and sending cowboys to check on the cows more frequently, according to information on the Department of Fish and Wildlife website (WDFW 2012).

COMPENSATION FOR LIVESTOCK LOSS

When depredation incidents are reported, investigated, and determined to be caused by wolves, there is state funded compensation for injuries or losses available under the criteria of Compensation Rules for Depredation Incidents. The claimant is required to furnish documentation that includes the commercial value of the lost livestock, an estimate of the percentage loss of value for the injured livestock, and a completed claim form. The state law requires that only claims of \$500 or more may be filed for compensation from state funds. The

amount paid depends upon the amount of acreage the claimant has. If the claimant has less than 100 acres they are paid for the verified losses, if the claimant had more than 100 acres they will be paid twice the amount of verified losses based on the assumption that multiple animals are missing. There is a protocol that claimants must follow it includes: Notifying the WDFW within 24 hours of the discovery of livestock attack, protection of the carcass for investigation, requesting claim forms and prompt submission of the forms. WDFW works with recognized livestock organizations and the state Department of Agriculture to set the lost livestock value. Livestock producers can work proactively with WDFW to avoid or minimize problems with wolves under Damage Prevention Cooperative Agreements. Communication between livestock owners and WDFW is key to living with wolves on the landscape (WDFW 2015).

CURRENT DELISTING ACTIVITIES

Below you will find an excerpt from a letter written by WDFW Director Anderson to USFWS re: Federal Wolf Delisting Proposal - March 27, 2014.

“Yet, wolves remain a divisive issue in many parts of the state. While public opinion polls have consistently shown that most Washingtonians support wolf recovery, a significant portion of the state's residents oppose the state's wolf-management strategies. Public discord over this issue has been increasingly apparent in recent years.” (WDFW 2014).

ONGOING LEGAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES

In the northwestern United States, most wolves die from human causes that include control efforts to stop livestock depredation or illegal hunting. The difference in areas where wolves are fully protected, such as large national parks, most wolves die from territorial conflicts with wolves in neighboring packs, starvation, or disease (Becker *et al.*2015).

The gray wolf is federally listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the western two-thirds of Washington. Within this area, it is fully protected by the ESA, which is administered and enforced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). On May 5, 2011, wolves were federally delisted in the eastern one-third of Washington (east of State Route 97 from the Canadian border to Highway 17, east of Highway 17 to State Route 395, and east of State Route 395 to the Oregon border). This means that the USFWS has the lead responsibility for wolf management in the western two-thirds of Washington (Becker *et al.* 2015).

For species listed under the federal ESA, activities that may result in “take” of endangered species are generally prohibited. The definition of “take” includes to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or attempt to engage in any such conduct. Penalties for violations of the ESA include fines of up to \$100,000, with a maximum prison term of one year in jail (Becker *et al.*2015).

The gray wolf was listed as endangered by the State of Washington (WAC 232.12.014) in 1980 and receives protection under state law (RCW 77.15.120) from hunting, possession, malicious harassment, and killing. It was listed because of its historical occurrence in the state,

near elimination from the state, and existing status as endangered under the federal ESA. State law specifies that when species are federally listed, the WDFW will recommend that they be added to the state's list. Penalties for illegally killing a state endangered species range up to \$5,000 and/or one year in jail. Because wolves have been federally delisted in the eastern one-third of Washington, WDFW has management authority over the species in this part of the state (Becker *et al.* 2015).

Figure 3: WDFW tagging an adult wolf to monitor hunting and migration habits (WDFW 2012015).



Figure 4: Yearling wolf from the Lookout Pack in Okanogan County-July 2008 (Remote camera image). Photo courtesy of Conservation Northwest 2008.



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