

# Thrown to the Wolves

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In a press release from the U.S. Department of the Interior on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced the removal of populations of Gray Wolves in Idaho, Montana, and parts of Washington, Oregon, and Utah from the list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act. Citing a successful recovery, proponents of the delisting say these wolf populations are back to “healthy levels.” But many concerned Americans are uncomfortable with the idea.

Now, opponents of the delisting in these areas are concerned that the remainder of Gray Wolf populations in the U.S. will be removed from protection as well, leaving the species wide open to danger too soon. Many of these opponents say that the original hatred for wolves that *started* their decline is still present, and that it will destroy them yet again. Is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s recent move based on a genuine belief that previously threatened wolf populations have recovered in these areas, a desire to cut funding for rehabilitation efforts, or something entirely more sinister? Most importantly, whatever the answer is, what do we do about it?

## Nearly four decades of protection

In 1966, the first precursor to modern species protection legislation was passed in the form of the

Endangered Species Preservation Act. This first iteration was important but rudimentary, as it provided only the means to *list* species as endangered. It gave no authority to actually *enforce* protective rights, but allowed the government only to *suggest* limited protections. In 1969, this act was amended to include globally endangered species, preventing their importation and sale in the United States. It was subsequently renamed the Endangered Species *Conservation* Act.

In 1973, after 80 countries signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), congress passed the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Now, there was a lot more direction to the legislation. For instance, plants and invertebrates were now officially made eligible for protection, and several key words such as “endangered” and “threatened” finally had specific definitions.

Today, this piece of legislation is administered by the Department of the Interior, and continues to seek to uphold our nation’s delicate ecological balance by protecting, aiding, and maintaining populations of organisms if and when they begin to suffer. The official ESA fact sheet states that the act is meant to recognize that “our rich natural heritage is of esthetic, ecological, educational, recreational, and scientific value to our Nation and its people.”

Prior to the act's passage, an environmental awareness movement regarding dwindling populations of Gray Wolves was already underway. To keep livestock protected from what they viewed as a dangerous pest, ranchers and citizens had attempted to "control" wolf populations by shooting, trapping, and otherwise eliminating them from their respective regions. According to the conservation organization Defenders of Wildlife, the wolves were already nearly completely killed off by the mid 1930s. In 1974, the Gray Wolf was officially added to the ESA list of protected species in the lower 48 states and Mexico. Just over a decade later in 1988, critical wolf habitats in Michigan and Minnesota were also listed.

**"Hear the bloody scream of wildlife and fight wolf re-introduction!"** *—Anti-wolf re-introduction protest sign*

Citing the carnivorous nature of wolves as the underlying problem behind maimed and injured cattle, wildlife, pets, and sometimes humans, many citizens and policy makers in inhabited regions have viewed and characterized the wolves as dangerous, murderous pests. And, in some ways, it's true—the Gray Wolf is a predator, seeking out food anywhere within its range and often becoming aggressive in obtaining and defending it. The primary diet staple for the Gray Wolf is large, hooved mammals like deer and elk, so it comes as no surprise that livestock, kept in large numbers on a fenced-in ranch, might be seen as an appealing buffet.

What biologists point out that many opponents of wolf re-introduction don't realize, however, is that the vast majority of wolves will not eat livestock unless there is no other natural prey available. Every so often there is an individual that will stray from the trends of the pack and find uncommon sources of food, but Gray Wolves generally behave as a cohesive unit with pack hunting and feeding norms—not as evil rogue invaders. Unfortunately, decades of anger from anti-protectionists may soon turn to revenge if the wolf populations in their areas are delisted.

In Minnesota, delisting the wolves would mean that any wolf over the required 1,600 individual population minimum that comes within 500 yards of a person,

building, livestock, or domestic pet could be legally harassed by humans. That wolf can also be legally killed if the wolf poses an immediate threat. It goes without saying that the vague definition of "immediate threat" is of central concern.

Depending upon the situation and the judge, a wide range of things can be construed as "immediate." For farmers with cattle, an immediate threat might be a wolf that was spotted a few acres away on their farmland. That might sound like an unreasonable definition that any judge would disagree with, but, well, let's put it this way: if a wolf is shot and no one is around to hear it, does it make an illegal sound?

### **Cultural differences**

In the past, there have been some obvious crude generalizations of two distinct cultural sides of the issue, so let's indulge those easy stereotypes for a moment. On the pro-wolf side, we have the typical tree-hugging, liberal, "save the planet" types that value the wolf simply for being the wolf. On the other side, we have the conservative, human-centric ranchers and "big agriculture" bullies that see the wolf as they always have: as a pest problem.

Since the wolf's listing in 1974, however, an interesting cultural shift has occurred. For the most part, the campaigns for awareness and protection have created an image of the Gray Wolf as an unfairly persecuted victim. Some scholars have even written that since their widespread branding as "endangered," wolves have become an image of sympathy, inseparable from the mystery and beauty of the wilderness. This equation of the animal to the idea is called a "metonymy," and as any rhetorician will tell you, it's a powerful device when it comes to persuasion. The poet Hugh Bredin explains it best: "Metaphor *creates* the relation between its objects, while metonymy presupposes that relation." For example, "elephant" might be metonymic for "republican." The instant relation of the wolf to the environmental movement at large has since shifted the popular opinion away from "vile" toward that of "misunderstood," and sometimes "beautiful."

Tossing aside the previous cheesy stereotypes of proponents and opponents of wolf recovery and conservation efforts, the fine cultural and social splits between the two sides of the issue are available in many shades of gray.

For one, we have a sort of faith-based cultural split around the concept of human exceptionalism, which is the belief that humans hold special status in nature because of our unique capabilities. Judeo-Christian belief systems typically hold human exceptionalism as a key element of importance, while other systems—such as some more naturalistic Native American beliefs—view all creatures as equal. Taken broadly, these two different faith cultures view the “natural rights” of the Gray Wolf (if there are any) in entirely different ways. This isn’t to say that American Christians are necessarily dispassionate about the plight of endangered species, but simply to say that when it comes down to the hierarchy of importance, the survival needs of humanity will always outweigh the survival needs of other species. By contrast, Nikki Brueger asserts of the Native American Perspective:

*“We are ... kin to all living things and we give all creatures equal rights. Everything on Earth is loved and revered. The Native American way of life has kept its people close to their living roots. We are natural conservationists and this is philanthropy from a Native American perspective.”*

Another part of the problem is that there seem to be warring ideas regarding species protection in the first place. On one side of the issue, conservationists feel that it is important to maintain the survival of as many different species as possible—not only because they are beautiful and interesting, but because proper ecosystem function requires a high level of biodiversity. On the other side, there are those who argue that species loss and extinction are simply functions of nature that shouldn’t be tampered with. Deeper within this side of the argument are two flavors of “anti-protectionists:” those who *exclude* humans from “nature,” and those who *include* humans. Especially inflamed by the social controversy over global warming, a growing argument is that species loss related to

human activity is merely survival of the fittest—and that we, too, have a right to strive for what’s best for us. This, of course brings us back to the overarching question: what is best for us?

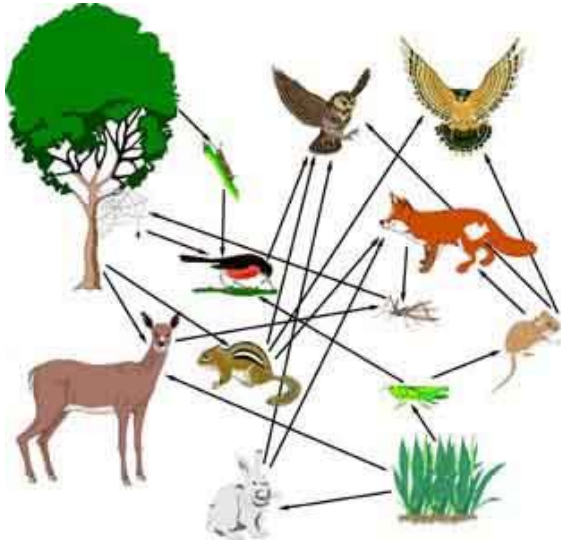
Politicians in general seem to feel that what is best for us is that which not only keeps the problem from becoming a crisis but also reasonably fits in the budget. But with poor definitions and lack of popular opinion concerning what truly constitutes a need for species recovery and re-introduction, I imagine it’s difficult to determine what are appropriate actions and budgets. A unified sense that there is a moral obligation to preserve threatened species might slide the definition of “reasonable” into an area that provides more funds for related efforts.

I think most people would agree that when non-scientist citizens are concerned about an issue and turn to non-scientist politicians for relevant budgets and policy, the politicians *should*, then, turn to the informed scientific community. But when they do, it can seem almost impossible for them to learn enough about the topic to understand its nuances well enough to develop rules.

### **A (relatively) quick biodiversity primer**

The problem of information lack and overload is particularly relevant in the case of biodiversity and ecosystem function. Sure, we’ve all heard of the “food chain” and the “cycle of life.” Grass grows. Rabbit eats grass. Wolf eats rabbit. Rabbit’s remains are broken down and “used” by the Earth to grow new grass. For many of the policy makers and stakeholders in a widespread issue such as wolf re-introduction, this is as good a mental model as any for what is happening. But what’s *really* going on is more of a *network* of activity. Grass grows. Rabbit *and* deer *and* grasshopper eat *some* grass, *some* other things. Wolf *and* fox *and* crow *may or may not* eat *some* rabbits, *some* deer, *some* grasshoppers. Remains *may or may not* be eaten by scavengers. Any remains that are broken down into the soil *may or may not* contain enough nutrients to directly contribute to the growth of new grass—or other

organisms. It's a system of shared resources with varied actors and options. It's like a biological economy.



Things get even more complicated when we take a step back from the living components of an ecosystem and take into account the nonliving components: nutrients, minerals, physical processes like erosion, etc. I'll spare you the gory details, but the gist is that there is a network of nutrients that flow naturally through an ecosystem. For all the normal ecosystem activity to occur in a sustainable way, there's actually an ideal range of nutrient ratios that should be present at each point in the "cycle" of nutrient flow.

As it turns out, some species have a stronger effect on the balance of the food web, and therefore on the balance of available nutrients. These species are ones that affect their ecosystem so greatly that if they were removed, the health of the "network" would decline drastically, sometimes to the point of complete destruction. Such creatures are called "keystone species," and—surprise—the Gray Wolf is one of them.

As a keystone species, conservation efforts are potentially more meaningful and impactful; the outcome of any action (or inaction) is amplified as a factor in the health of the region. In fact, several conservation groups reported that after the wolves were first re-introduced in 1995 in Yellowstone National Park, the entire Northern Rocky Mountain region began to improve in health and ecosystem function.

Even with that brief overview of the wolves' ecological importance, we can easily see how an overload of complex, sometimes abstract ideas can be difficult to "sell" to policy makers. Subsequently, we can imagine how difficult it might be for policy makers to then "sell" these ideas to the public. Sometimes the gaps between scientific knowledge and the common vernacular are simply too large to bridge within a reasonable stretch of time. It is for precisely this reason that issues like this become so easily entwined with personal values, morals, and beliefs.

A lack of understanding of the science and its surrounding policy problems has polarized U.S. citizens around both the old issue of wolf re-introduction and the new issue of wolf delisting. Citizens seem to perform a "self-selection" regarding which information about the issue they will take in and agree with. If a person identifies first and foremost as an animal and nature lover, he or she might be more apt to pay attention to information disseminated by wildlife conservation organizations and radical environmentalist groups. If an individual identifies first and foremost as a rancher, farmer, or agriculture CEO, he or she might be most interested in the information that informs them as to how to best protect his or her assets.

### Uncertainty

When it comes to species protection and population maintenance, some significant decisions are made in the midst of uncertainty. For one thing, we can't be sure that it will actually *benefit* us (or the ecosystem) to preserve the natural elements in question. A popular utilitarian argument for species conservation is that we must protect species from extinction because they may be useful in future research and discovery efforts. But even if this is true, the degree to which these species will actually contribute to future progress is still unknown.

Even if we assume that a species is valuable because it is necessary for ideal ecosystem function, the exact degree to which its extinction would be detrimental is unknown (the closest determination we can make is in the case of those keystone species, and even then the

answer is simply “a lot”). The only way to be certain that species protection is worthwhile is to find significant value in a species’ very existence—something that is typically a more spiritual or moral valuation than a scientific or economic one.

Knowing that the “value” of species is uncertain and that it has many possible definitions and origins, the authors of the Endangered Species Act of 1966 were sure to clarify that economic valuation should play a limited role in granting protection rights. Even so, there are some who would argue that there is still more concern for the economic value of species than for their inherent value (if such a thing exists).

There’s also a great deal of uncertainty regarding what *really* constitutes a healthy, recovered population. Section 3 of the Endangered Species Act covers 21 different terminology definitions, none of which is “recovered” or “recovery.” The nearest the act gets to such a definition is the reverse interpretation of its definition for “endangered species”:

*“(6) The term “endangered species” means any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range other than a species of the Class Insecta determined by the Secretary to constitute a pest whose protection under the provisions of this Act would present an overwhelming and overriding risk to man.”*

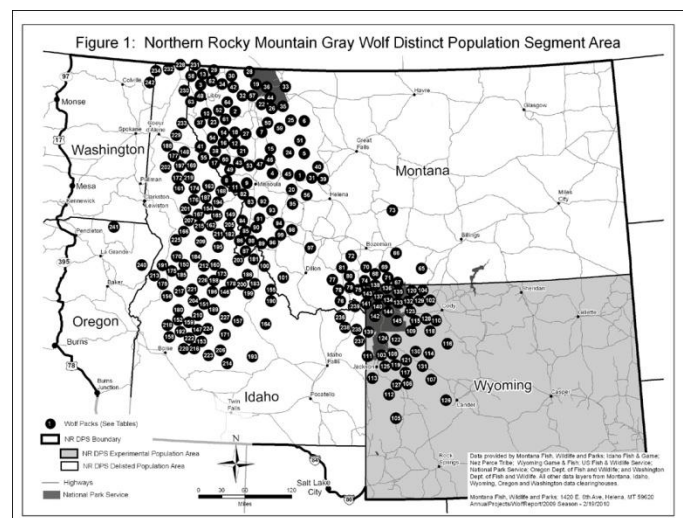
By this measure, a species that is no longer considered endangered (one that has presumably recovered well enough to be delisted) is no longer in danger of extinction. With such a vague description of when a species’ protective rights can be legitimately rescinded, it’s no wonder people are concerned about the validity of the Gray Wolf’s delisting. It’s also fairly apparent why some Americans are concerned that it might be too easy to bend such a foggy definition around the desires of a particularly strong political influence like agriculture.

### Local differences

In some areas of the country where wolf populations were never protected, the creatures have been hunted

for sport. One of the more popular examples given by the pro-wolf side is the wolf-hunting culture in Alaska, where—according to John Fuller of *How Stuff Works*—if they’ve got the right license, interested buyers can spend a couple thousand dollars to attend guided hunting tours, complete with information on how to bait, call, and kill. It comes across as kind of bizarre, considering in states where wolves were protected officials were doling out fines of up to \$2,000 and revoking licenses for up to five years. On the federal level, wolf poachers could see fines of up to \$100,000 and a penalty of jail time.

Despite an overall shift in the way we view the Gray Wolf as a creature (vile vs. beautiful), a prevailing paradigm regarding how we are to treat the Gray Wolf is still not present at the national level. Instead, we seem to have a variety of paradigms based on which of our human geographic boundaries a given wolf population falls into, and what policies prevail in that area. These paradigms don’t really seem to change much, nor do they need to—other than fluctuations in total population in a specific area, wolves don’t move around a lot. The National Wildlife Federation estimates the size of Gray Wolf territories at between 50 and 1,000 km in size, and wolves tend to stay within those areas. We can see the compact regional behavior of the wolves in this map of known wolf packs in the Northern Rocky Mountains as of 2010:



Although population density is uneven across the United States and wolves are locally-based animals, it

seems policy makers are somehow still mainly concerned about providing a federal level of oversight.

### **What should we do?**

The recent decisions by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service aren't completely without foresight. It should be noted that they intend to monitor the wolf populations in their respective areas for a period of five years to be certain that delisting does not have a damaging long-term effect on the species' overall survival. In perhaps their least contentious move, the FWS has also decided to end protection for some habitats previously listed as "critical" due to data that reveals these habitats to be outside the wolves' actual historic range. With my sense that the FWS is *actually* trying to strike a balance between what's best for the country and what's best with the wolves, I can't imagine that the delisting is the result of some kind of political massaging or sinister intention. Frankly, I think it's just another case of fine details and differing cultural opinions falling through the cracks of legislation that just can't encompass all things.

The obvious policy dichotomy here is "sally forth" versus "relist the wolves." Despite the fact that I would consider myself more a "pro-wolfer" than not, I can't realistically suggest that the FWS relist the Gray Wolf without expecting it to inflame the controversy even further.

It might be a tough pill to swallow, but I think it's perfectly fair for *truly* healthy, thriving wolf populations to be hunted—especially if they border on overpopulation (a keystone species is just as dangerous in the *other* direction). On the other hand, there have been some state management programs (specifically in Wyoming and Idaho) that have sparked more outrage from the pro-wolf camp. In these states' plans, "population management" included the aerial shooting of wolves until the population reached the minimum allowable population size.

Because the definition of a "healthy" or "recovered" population is presently left undefined, one of the best ways for the FWS to deal with species protection-related controversy would be to provide more specific

guidelines for recovery. By developing some sort of amendment to the ESA that directs programs and agencies to stricter definitions of recovery for protected species, individual states might be more able to develop appropriate and acceptable species management plans.

In order to assuage the fears of those who worry that delisting will occur too soon for upper Midwest wolf populations, the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should do two things: maintain a high level of transparency throughout the delisting and five-year monitoring process, and engage with the public about how species protection decisions are (and should be) made. The scientific community, the public, and the science policy intermediaries of various state and federal natural resource agencies are often removed from one another. In situations such as this, where decades of controversial activity are shifting gears and fanning the flames once more, it is paramount that communication and understanding be fostered amongst these different viewpoints and across cultural landscapes.