

The Inhumanity Of Wolf Management

BY JAY MALLONEE



IT SEEMS THAT wolf management agencies have circled the wagons to produce a new government document that tries to justify the killing of wolves in Montana, over problems that barely exist. Their Environmental Assessment (EA) is entitled “Gray Wolf Damage Management in Montana for the Protection of Livestock, Other Domestic Animals, Human Safety, and Other Resources.” The title implies that wolves have created enough property damage and safety threat to justify management unity to deal with these “problems.”

Although local tribes and the Department of Agriculture gave their input, the main architects of the EA are the two agencies most responsible for wolf management. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) creates and carries out state management policies, and the federal agency Wildlife Services (WS) does the killing. This organization has been criticized recently for their excessive slaughter of wildlife throughout the country. The EA provides the public with several potential alternatives for future wolf management, all involving varying degrees of WS involvement. As stated in the EA, the preferred option is Alternative 1, which is to continue with current management practices: kill many wolves in response to damage caused by only a few. This includes a 6-month public hunting season that involves trapping.

Last year I published a scientific paper that reviewed the government’s data on wolf management in Montana and their reasons for hunting wolves: reduce livestock depredation, and concerns about the wolves’ effect

on prey populations, especially elk (www.wolfandwildlifestudies.com/researchpapers.php). Their justifications were proven to be statistically insignificant and were not consistent with their claim that science was used to reach management decisions. The EA is another version of the same thing, and describes a system in which wolves are a crop to be harvested for revenue and killed for sport. This mindset is at the core of wolf management. It uses little science and by ignoring the most current information about natural processes, wolf management fails to promote the conservation of intact ecosystems. Studies on animal emotions and intelligence are also ignored and wolf management produces an incomprehensible amount of suffering in our forests. Using the EA, let’s examine why this is true.

Who Are The Better Killers? Those who oppose wolf management have often used morality as the basis of their arguments. They believe it is inhumane to kill wolves unless absolutely necessary, if at all. Given that hunting and trapping seasons

are now in place, apparently MFWP and WS are not concerned about the morality of killing wolves. However, in the EA, they comment about wolves being taken inhumanely.

The EA states that lethal wolf management would occur regardless of whether WS is involved. Alternative 2 would require that WS use and provide advice on only nonlethal methods, although MFWP, tribes and private property owners could still kill wolves. Wildlife Services also states that the public could use less humane methods due to their frustration toward wolves and inexperience. Therefore the preferred method is to change nothing, meaning keep Alternative 1. As a result, WS would continue to remove problem wolves using the following methods: foothold traps, snares, ground shooting, denning (removing pups from the den by using “approved methods”), chemical immobilization with euthanasia, and aerial gunning.

Apparently WS believes they are better killers than a bigoted public. This coming from an agency that keeps track of the wolves they kill with symbols on the side of their planes. I would consider all of these methods to be inhumane. Even euthanized wolves had to be caught, either by foothold traps, snares, or chased down by aircraft. And it is not only physical suffering that wolves must contend with. My research has shown that the mental anguish from being chased by aircraft and shot produces its own unique suffering, such as post traumatic stress (www.wolfandwildlifestudies.com/researchpapers.php).

Regardless of who does the killing, the title of the EA implies



Photo by S. Michael Bisceglie

wolves are a public safety hazard. However, the EA explains that this is not from the wolves themselves. Instead, management techniques to capture and kill wolves, such as trapping, snares, aerial gunning and shooting are the safety issues. So in our haste to kill wolves, we endanger ourselves.

Livestock Loss The EA provides a table that lists the number of requests for assistance by livestock owners (ranchers and those who own farm animals in general) and the value of damage caused by wolves in Montana. This information was “reported to or verified by WS personnel.” Therefore, an unknown portion of this “data” was unverified and simply told to WS by people who do not necessarily like wolves. For example, in 2011, there were 2,743 requests for assistance in regards to cattle, and ranchers claimed a total of \$298,165 in damages. However, MFWP’s annual report for that year stated that only 74 confirmed cattle were lost to wolves.

The EA also states that “the damage reported is only a fraction of the actual damage caused by wolves in Montana because WS does not hear about all depredations and many livestock are just missing and not found.” Apparently WS is assuming that the unreported depredations

and missing livestock are caused by wolves. The table is filled with unverified numbers and conclusions based on assumptions. There are also no references points, such as what

percent of the ranchers’ income was reported as damage. Was it small or is there actually a problem because of wolves? How does the level of wolf damage compare to the loss of cattle from other causes, such as weather, disease, accidents, or even coyotes? Are ranchers trained and competent enough to know the difference between wolf depredations and those caused by other predators?

Let’s put this into perspective. In 2005, the National Agricultural Statistics Service conducted a survey in which Montana cattle producers reported they had lost 66,000 cattle, including calves, to all causes. Predators were responsible for 3,000 of these losses, or 4.5 percent. Of the 3,000 cattle, 2,400 were calves. According to the cattle producers, coyotes had killed 54 percent of these calves. The remainder were killed by all other predator species combined, with an unknown number by wolves. Even when given the opportunity to express themselves, ranchers as a group seem to know little about how wolves affect their livestock, and apparently they are angry at the wrong species.

According to the EA’s numbers, this pattern apparently has continued into 2011. Now all wolves must suffer because 74 cows were killed, out of almost half a million cattle in western

Montana. That is only 0.01 percent of the cattle population. Even if the wolves killed 1,000 cows, this would still only be 0.2 percent. Yet the EA is being used to justify the killing of Montana’s wolves over a problem that does not statistically exist.

Prey Populations In regards to wolf numbers, the EA states that “the current population level is a concern to sportsmen who rely on surplus mule deer, white-tailed deer, and elk for hunting, and livestock producers who use public and adjacent private land for livestock grazing.” This statement summarizes the real reasons wolves are killed in Montana and other states: to satisfy the hunters and ranchers.

Letting these people blow off steam by killing wolves brings in revenue for the state, which believes it can maintain balanced wolf and prey populations using the remaining wolves. However, there has been no relevant research conducted in northwest Montana to determine the effects wolves have on wild prey populations. Elk populations, however, have been studied in southwest Montana and Yellowstone National Park. This research concluded that wolves at best had mixed impacts on these herds: some declined, some increased, and others showed little or no effect from wolves. So where is the problem? Blasting away at wildlife then expecting their populations to be in balance with one another is unrealistic and irresponsible.

As stated in the EA, additional research has shown that elk pregnancy rates are unaffected by wolves, and calf survival rates before and after wolf restoration

are basically the same. Studies that have looked at elk distribution in the winter indicate wolves have only a small-scale effect, and large-scale effects are still unknown. In some areas, like the Bitterroot of western Montana, a continuing MFWP elk study recently showed that mountain lions are the main predator of elk, especially calves. So MFWP's own data shows that their reason for killing wolves is wrong. In response to these unexpected results, scientists will begin studying the lions in the area. However, MFWP has already responded by increasing the hunting quota for cougars in the Bitterroot. Now scientists will monitor a manipulated lion population while trying to determine the natural interactions between cougar and elk. Shouldn't the lions be studied first **before** killing them?


The Future of Wolves in Montana

A recent article in our local newspaper described how MFWP is attempting to further increase the assault on wolves. Ken McDonald, Bureau Chief of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

stated, "Our goal is to aggressively manage the wolf population while keeping management under state authority." They plan on accomplishing this by changing state law to allow hunters and trappers to buy multiple tags and use electronic wolf calls, to reduce the price of non-resident wolf tags, and eliminate the requirement that hunters wear fluorescent orange outside of deer and elk season.

The article explains that in part this change is in response to the lower take of wolves each year by the public, despite the increased quotas set by MFWP. Several reasons for this pattern could be examined more closely by wolf managers before they react by killing even more wolves. For example, their own survey of public attitudes from last year demonstrated that most people want the "right" to kill wolves but few of them actually do so. Again, MTFP ignores their own information. And here is a thought, perhaps there are fewer wolves living in Montana than MFWP claims. My published review of their wolf numbers demonstrates that wolf managers do not know

the total number of wolves in Montana. Instead, they use their reported minimum wolf counts to arrive at erroneous conclusions about the wolf population then use them to make policy.

The EA offers no alternative to leave the wolves alone and only deal with isolated depredation incidents, because by law they are a "species in need of management." In fact, at a MFWP meeting last year in northwest Montana, a previous regional director stated, "We manage wolves because they exist, just like any other species." In reality, the EA is a vain attempt to justify policies that cannot be justified. By nature, wolf management is inhumane. According to the regional director, MFWP kills wolves because they can. Until the public as a whole tells wolf managers to stop, this process will continue indefinitely. 

Note: Before this article was published, it was sent to the Governor of Montana, and to officials at Wildlife Services and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. They were given time to provide comments but declined. This continues the pattern established in the past several years in which MFWP has refused to answer my questions regarding the quality of their wolf population data and its inability to withstand scientific scrutiny. Therefore, they continue to make management decisions using information that often cannot be verified or contradicts their own and other studies.



From post-traumatic stress in a captive wolf to breaching whales in the Bering Sea, Jay Mallonee has studied the behavior of numerous animals. Through his business of Wolf and Wildlife Studies,

he has researched the Fishtrap pack in northwest Montana for a decade and has written several scientific publications. Jay also wrote... *Timber—A Perfect Life*, an account of his sixteen-year relationship with a profound canine companion.



Photo by S. Michael Bisceglie