

When Reason and Data Mean Nothing

As a wolf biologist in Montana, I sometimes feel as if I am floating in a sea of stupidity, with an occasional buoy of logic that points toward common sense. The truth is there, but few people notice or care. Their misconceptions about wolves have fueled a kind of hysteria that has infiltrated many aspects of daily life. Although most people here do not have extreme views about wolves, almost everyone's perception of them has been tainted by the fear, bigotry, and incompetence of others. Am I just ranting? Let's find out as we sort through the ugly truth.

Public Attitude

During his reelection campaign in 2010, Montana Congressman Denny Rehberg held public meetings around the state to promote his proposed legislation to amend the Endangered Species Act (ESA) so that wolves could be killed. Senator Tester made sure this happened by sneaking a rider into the federal budget bill that passed in 2011, which helped produce our current wolf hunt. Previously, he and Montana's other senator, Max Baucus, had already introduced legislation to remove wolves from the Endangered Species List (ESL).

In October 2010, I attended one of Rehberg's meetings. All dozen or so panel members voiced anti-wolf sentiments for a variety of reasons, ranging from the killing of livestock (depredation) to fear of wolves. Many people in the crowd of over 150 also voiced resentment toward wolves. Most of the views expressed were biased and not supported by science, or even common sense in some cases. I wanted to jump up and shout, "Don't you people have a Klan meeting to go to?" Instead, I took my turn in line and voiced my concerns about the situation. I stated that I was finishing a paper that reviewed the data collected by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), the agency responsible for wolf management. They have used flawed information to make management decisions, including the fabrication of wolf numbers. Rehberg told the crowd and me that he wanted a copy of the paper. I sent him one but have never heard back. (To read or obtain a copy of this peer-reviewed scientific paper, go to www.wolfandwildlifestudies.com.) I sent the paper to senators Baucus and Tester as well. In return, they have sent me junk emails regarding their policies, including wolves, and thanking me for my support.

Throughout the meeting, no numbers were presented by the panel members and no scientific studies were cited to support their contentions. Furthermore, their views did not represent all livestock owners nor were they necessarily accurate. From 1996 through 2006, the agency responsible for killing wolves, USDA Wildlife Services, received 679 complaints of suspected wolf damage to livestock. Only 50 percent of owner complaints, however, were confirmed as wolf-related, which meant the owners were wrong half of the time.

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. However, predators were responsible for only 4.5 percent of this loss, half of which were reportedly killed by coyotes. The remainder were killed by all other predator species combined, with an unknown number by wolves. A similar pattern occurred with sheep. Collectively, livestock owners reported that coyotes were responsible for 72 percent of predator depredation on sheep. Even

when given the opportunity to express themselves, livestock owners as a group seem to know little about how wolves affect their livestock, and apparently they are angry at the wrong species.

Despite these negative attitudes, the ranchers I have worked with saw and heard wolves all the time, yet took responsibility for their actions. We worked together to avoid potential wolf conflicts and found that wolves were often mixed in with the cattle but did nothing to harm them. Consequently, wolves have been only an occasional problem, even though they were constantly present.

Educational facilities have also caved in to public pressure. I taught science courses for nine years at the local community college, yet they have rejected my three separate proposals to teach a non-credit wolf course. I was finally told that wolves were too controversial and to try the local educational institute in town. I had gone there several weeks earlier to give the director my newly published paper. In a previous meeting, she had suggested that I teach about wolves for them. However, when I mentioned that the government would probably not like what I had found regarding their data, she proceeded to lecture me about my attitude: it needed to change. I had been there about 60 seconds. She also squeezed in that the subject was too controversial. I took her abuse for another minute or so then left without saying a word.

I was so perplexed that when I got home I looked on the institute's web site for an explanation. I found a list of sponsors, and at the bottom was Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). So much for education.

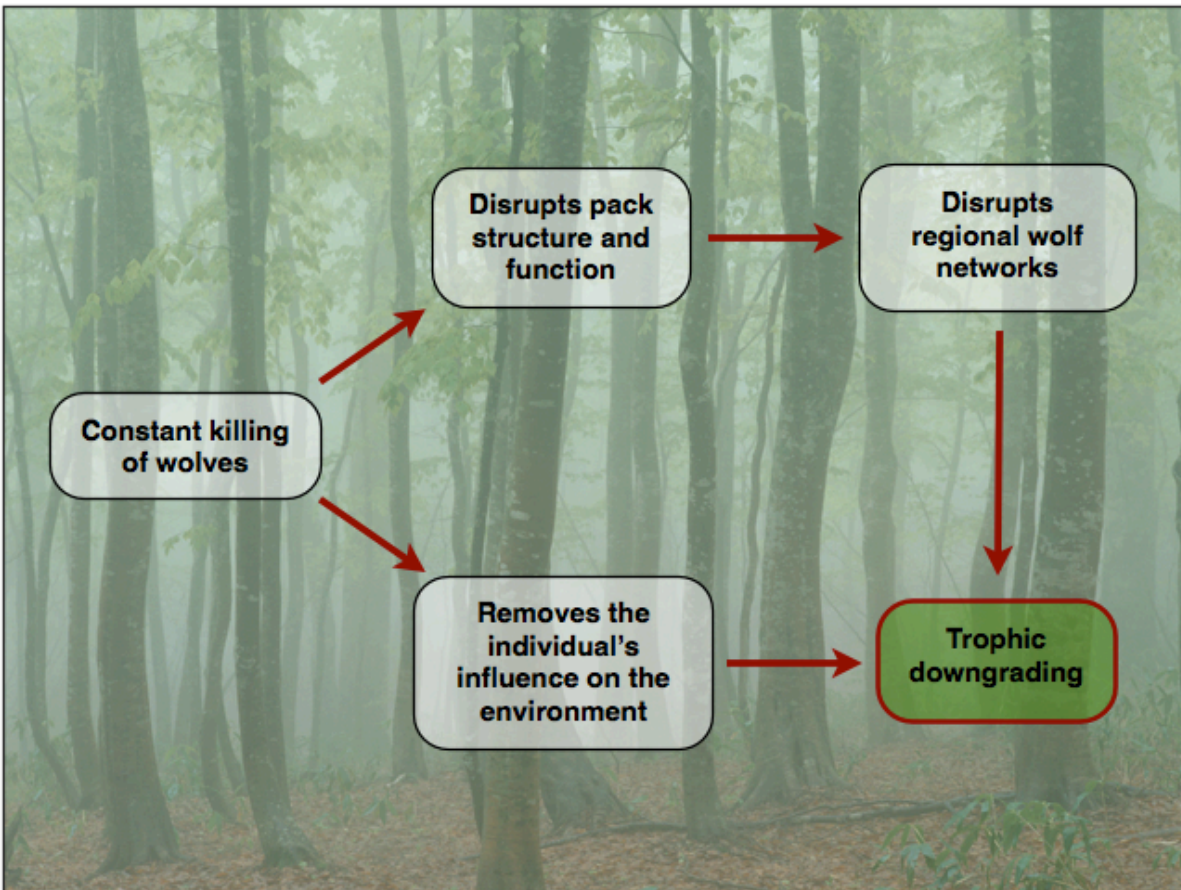
The Government

In an unprecedented move, FWP began a public hunt only months after the wolves were taken off the endangered species list. The season was set to end in December 2011, a month longer than the regular hunting season. By mid-December, only half of the 220 wolf quota had been achieved, so the hunting season was extended to February 15—another unheard-of move. In an effort to provide additional motivation for hunters, FWP supported at least one group that offered cash prizes for the best photo of wolves killed in the hunt. FWP has gone out of their way to make sure wolves die.

Some wolves that have depredated on livestock are designated for removal and are killed by the airborne hired guns of USDA Wildlife Services. The tally of slaughtered wolves on the plane's fuselage suggests that they are proud of their achievements. Not only does the process of wolf management cater to the bigotry and hatred of wolves; it also employs people that promote it.

In short, wolf management is ridiculous. My published paper demonstrates that FWP's data is wrong. They have no idea how many wolves inhabit Montana, which means the hunting quota is completely arbitrary. Their claim that wolf hunts are based in science is false, because no scientific protocols have been used. This has resulted in fabricated wolf numbers. The net effect is environmental degradation rather than conservation. For the past two decades, science has shown that top consumers (predators) influence the entire food chain, down to the selection of grass species and the expression of disease. This "top-down" process is known as trophic cascading.

The loss of predator species (trophic downgrading), such as wolves, has disrupted ecosystems around the world, both terrestrial and aquatic. The consequences have been devastating to the global environment, mostly fueled by habitat destruction, poaching, pollution, and other human activities. Wolf management fails to implement this current science which potentially can lead to a series of repercussions that result in degradation of the environment.



A Call to Action

In an effort to understand how the government can justify their actions, I spent two months making inquiries throughout the FWP hierarchy. Although no one has yet to answer my questions, our email exchanges validate what I have observed for years: FWP is a club. Their concept of wolf management acts more like a belief system rather than a set of rational guidelines. They are entrenched in their conviction that what they do is right, despite evidence to the contrary. They use other peoples' hatred of wolves to make and save money. This takes the form of public hunts and a new proposal to allow hunters to remove wolves that have killed livestock, which can promote further bigotry and hatred. They get away with it because society lets them.

Few people question anything, much less confront the source of misinformation. This is how management agencies derive their power and push their agendas forward. People often become angry about it afterwards, but they had the chance to speak up but did not. In addition, the employees of such organizations act as a group with a common goal: in this case wolf management. With this kind of solidarity, management agencies have more power than individuals, and they are often financed with taxpayer money. Being passive only contributes to the problem. The tragedy is that this results in the death of wolves and other wildlife. Apathy kills. Einstein said it best: "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."

What You Can Do

Ultimately, the solution to the wolves' predicament will come from you. I have provided the truth, along with documentation. However, awareness of the issues carries a responsibility: are you willing to help or not? If so, go to my web site (www.wolfandwildlifestudies.com) and read the email exchanges. Judge for yourself. You can help by contacting FWP directly and asking your own questions or demanding answers to the ones I have asked. If they say my scientific paper is wrong, ask them why. These people are public servants. Make them accountable.

Public pressure is needed to make FWP tell the truth.