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THE DANCING OF WOLVES AND MEN

Wolves are back, and here to stay. How hunters handle this reality may be critical to the future of hunting itself.

Wolves have figured prominently in the lives and imaginations of men seemingly forever. Feared for their capacity as predators, loathed for their depredation on domestic stock, and admired for their complex social behavior and extraordinary beauty, wolves were destined to become legendary, or so it would seem. Their howls, sent skyward in the winter darkness, rolling over the color-drenched landscapes of autumn, have never failed to inspire our own soulful musings. They were meant

to walk the earth with us, transformed from a distant relationship of competition to one of companionship and playfulness. Their domesticated cousin, the dog, has been of extraordinary significance to human societies for thousands of years.

Yet, despite the long road and many changes that have occurred since we first domesticated him, the wolf retains the capacity to draw from modern human societies

an intense debate as to his value, his proper place in today's world, and yes, even his right to exist. Few animal centered-debates have raged so furiously and for so long. In this sense, our relationship with *Canis lupus* represents the very essence of our complicated tension with those others who demand a share of earth's limited space and resources. We may see in their presence a more limited possibility for ourselves; but in their absence, a sense of loss and disconnectedness that haunts our own desire for a world of beauty and completeness.

In both the Great Lakes region and in the Northern Rocky Mountains, wolves (specifically the gray wolf) have been increasing in numbers and expanding their range. Arising from their beleaguered

status that saw them placed on the U.S. Endangered Species List in 1967, the snow dog is once more roaming over great territories ripe with herds of elk, mule deer, and fat cattle. Howling with his newfound opportunity, his kind now muscularly probe an expanding array of habitats and ranges, growing ever stronger and advancing with certainty toward final legal delisting. Emerging from the protective carapace of the Endangered Species Act, the wolf now enters the domain of state policy and wolf management plans. Regardless of how strongly some individuals may feel, the wolf will again be hunted; and his death, like his life, will stir the deep longings and fear that humans have always held toward him.

But the question that looms before hunters is not so much whether wolves should be managed for both ecological and social carrying capacity, for that will surely happen to some extent; but what position should we take as conservationists? To kill a wolf is a challenge, and managers will certainly find "managing" them an elusive prospect if fair-chase recreational hunting is their only option. We ought to remember that this is not something we are well versed in. It is hard to find examples of where recreational hunting has had much effect on wolf numbers, although with extraordinary efforts such as aerial shooting, their numbers can be more effectively decreased. Where roads are few and timber plenty, the recreational hunter will find the task especially difficult and managers may be forced to consider alternative means if the objective is large-scale wolf reductions on a continuous basis.

This is not to argue against making our best attempts to use hunters under fair-chase restrictions to manage healthy wolf populations. Quite the contrary. We should make every effort to do so. However, we must also be prepared for



Wildlife biologists examine a gray wolf as part of the study on their status on the Endangered Species list.

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the difficult decisions that will ensue if this fails; and it probably will not, in itself, be sufficient to the task. Will we, as hunters, be prepared then to recommend taking wolves by any and all means to keep their numbers within



Scientific management is required to maintain some equilibrium between wolf numbers and their prey species.


limits we consider reasonable? And how will we decide what is reasonable? Will it be when our hunting opportunity is diminished just a little or only when it has been drastically curtailed? And what effect will these positions have on how we are perceived by the mainstream public? It might be easy to say we don't care about that, but the reality is we had better care a great deal. We need public support and where we stand on wolves can make a big difference in how much we get and how much we maintain.

However, simply accepting wolves as part of the landscapes where we hike, ranch, and hunt may prove far more difficult than finding ways to manage their numbers. Many people fear wolves and many people loathe predators whenever they intrude on human space. It is not about how many there are or how much damage they do, rather it is simply that

they do not want dangerous animals anywhere near them. Often other arguments are put forward to justify removing predators; but often, deep down, it really is our species-old fear of the great beasts that pursued and ate us. And wolves have done this in the past and probably will in the future. Like snakes and spiders, carnivores often elicit deep and negative evolutionary reactions, not logical considerations of ecology or biophilia (love of nature).

So the very much larger question for us as hunters is this: How will we like dancing with wolves, now that they are truly in our midst, and regardless of whether they are "managed" or not? No longer a mythical prospect, the wolf is here, a real life predator with extraordinary capacity to alter ungulate populations, and significantly affect our opportunities to hunt the experiences and animals we desire. Furthermore, the snow dog will bring many social partners to the ball—partners who will use his iconic status to argue against all hunting, and suggest that it is man who must move aside. Infuriating, naive, and distracting, this viewpoint we must recognize is here to stay and a portion of society will agree with it. Our challenge as hunters is to make sure that we do not, by our reactions, increase the percentage of the public who will agree with this notion of wolves first and humanity second.

As with all dances, the first and most important technique to be mastered here is balance. The wolves are here to stay, and most hunters will agree that having them with us is important. Maintaining the big carnivores has been one of the great achievements of North America's hunter-led conservation movement. We must not jeopardize this, nor ever be seen to want to do so. What we really want is to maintain some equilibrium between wolf numbers and the prey that both wolves and men seek. Hunters must be the champions of the wolf, the champions of the elk, and the champions of sustainable use for them all. We need to walk carefully in this debate, and keep our balance. Dancing with wolves is here to stay.






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