

Through the Eyes of the Humane

“I’m prepared to bid for that first ticket to shoot a wolf myself,” Idaho Governor “Butch” Otter exclaimed to the crowd at a Boise rally of anti-wolf zealots (Schlickeisen). Has human hatred for the wolf become so extreme that we must resort to violence? Do people even remember why they hate wolves with such a passion? Idaho’s own governor clearly illustrates human revulsion towards the wolf and how dire this animal’s condition has become. Humans have co-existed with Mother Nature’s most misunderstood creature throughout history. Amazingly enough, the wolf has withstood the test of time, facing relentless hatred that has swept over entire wolf populations like a plague, killing off countless numbers of these majestic creatures. Humans’ extreme hatred has created numerous problems for wolves and has been unjustly lethal. Unfortunately, a few prominent issues surrounding wolves today may prove to be the most destructive of all.

A plan to kill off more than eighty-percent of Idaho’s wolf population has been proposed, and people such as Idaho’s own governor have not backed down, claiming this proposal to be a necessary action (Schlickeisen). Wyoming and Montana have also expressed such wolf management desires (Schlickeisen). On January 29th of this year, federal officials of the Bush/Cheney Administration announced the proposal to end federal protections for wolves in Idaho and Wyoming (Schlickeisen). A price was even made for the tag to kill wolves by the Idaho Fish and Game Commission (Schlickeisen). Just a week earlier, the Senate’s Wildlife Committee approved a bill that would allow unlimited killing of wolves in wilderness areas, and it doesn’t stop there; Alaska has already participated in brutal wolf massacres by methods of aerial gunning (Schlickeisen). It is hard to say whether or not humans even remember the

reasons behind all these killings. The question that people should be asking themselves is where did this fierce hatred come from? Surely there is a logical explanation as to why wolves must be exterminated- or is it based on false assumptions and accusations? It all comes back to the idea of the wolf's misunderstood nature.

Wolves have faced a history of hatred that unfortunately has also survived throughout time. During the Dark Ages, wolves were seen much more frequently than they are today. Because people had no use for them, either as pack animals or food, wolves were seen as “pests”. Both the Church and the state believed the wolf to be a “manifestation of evil” and must therefore be destroyed (Stanmore). Medieval townsmen and peasants did not think to question the Church's ordinances; doubt would have been blasphemy. Though this fear of wolves being in league with Satan developed in medieval times, it has been reflected throughout legends. According to Ellen J. Stekert, an English professor from the University of Minnesota, “legends abound about how wolves will kill for the sheer love of the slaughter”, and “most often they are said to attack women and children” (Stekert). Such ideas can be seen in the media today in stories like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf*. It is clear that such history has tainted our outlook on wolves and has clouded human judgment, which does nothing to improve the wolf's plight. The famous writer of *Never Cry Wolf*, Farley Mowat, brings up the thought-provoking idea that we can see some of our own traits in the wolf – “We have doomed the Wolf not for what it is, but for what we have deliberately and mistakenly perceived it to be..the mythologized epitome of a savage, ruthless killer..which is, in reality no more than a reflected image of ourself” (Mowat). Though it may be difficult for some to accept, wolves are more similar to the human species than one might believe.

Wolves and people share comparable ways of life, yet wolves are arguably more benevolent than humans. Isn't it true that some of us hunt for sheer pleasure just to put a trophy on our wall? Wolves only hunt for food, and when they hunt, they prefer to prey on the oldest and weakest animal. Like us, wolves have feelings, according to animal researchers (Ballantine 34). Jim Dutcher, an acclaimed cinematographer, his wife and a group of scientists lived near a wolf pack in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho for six years. They formed a special bond with each wolf and experienced natural wolf behavior up close and personal. During that time-period, Jim and his crew observed that "the care, attention and training lavished by adult wolves on their young...[formed] enduring bonds of intimacy, affection, and friendship between individuals, one and the same with the pack" (26). Isn't it true that we show the same care and affection with our children? The only difference is that there are some people who abandon their babies, beat them, or don't care either way. According to Jim and his scientists, a wolf pack is always a "closely-knit family unit bound by intense care-giving between its members. The future of the pack is in the young, and a wolf birth is an event" (26). The scientists also noticed that a wolf would "put aside his or her immediate needs for the greater good of the pack" (46). In other words, a wolf would go hungry so that another may eat. How many humans can claim such a selfless act of sacrifice?

Another way of life we share with wolves is mourning the loss of loved ones. When one pack member was killed by a mountain lion, Jim wrote his observations:

"All play in the pack stopped for six weeks. When the pack passed through the aspen grove where Motaki was killed, the wolves would become noticeably transformed in a quiet and depressed way. And when the pack howled, [I] heard a new, eerie quality in the wolves' voices that sent chills down [my] spine. The pack was in mourning". (32)

Out of curiosity and much research, Jim and his team discovered a seemingly surprising fact that “no human has ever actually been killed by a healthy wild wolf in the history of North America” (Dutcher 19), yet humans have been killing these animals for decades. This says a great deal about which species can truly deserve to be called humane. However, when we choose to co-exist peacefully with these magnificent creatures, powerful and meaningful bonds can be formed and in fact have occurred throughout history.

Native Americans viewed the wolf in a favorable light, forming a strong connection between the magnificent creature’s power and their own beliefs. Edwin Wollert, Education Coordinator for Wolf Song of Alaska, says that the Navajo would “call upon Powers to restore peace and harmony to the ill, and the wolf is one such Power” (Wollert). They also recognized the wolf for “its extreme devotion to its family, and many drew parallels between wolf pack members and the members of the tribe” (Wollert). These Natives formed a special bond with the wolf that defined their everyday life, one that never failed them. Spiritual ties to wolves were evident in many other tribes as well, according to Wollert. The Cree believed that “divine wolves visited earth when the northern lights would shine during winter” (Wollert), and there are even numerous Chippewa myths that told of “wolves supplying humans with food and hides” (Wollert). The most prominent human/wolf relationship though, was with the Pawnee Tribe. According to The Kansas State Historical Society, the Pawnee tribe respected wolves “for their cunning and courage” and “long have been known as the ‘Wolf People’” (The Kansas State Historical Society). Relationships such as the ones the Natives shared with the wolf are also found today, with just as much power and emotion.

After Jim Dutcher completed his project in 1996, he created an award-winning book and film on his experience, both intimately portraying natural life in a wolf pack. In his book, he wrote,

“I will never forget my time with them...What wonderful, rich memories I have-the joy they seem to express when I return to camp or the howls when I depart. I actually believe they will miss me as much as I miss them. Our bond is that strong”. (Dutcher 19)

Jim isn't the only person to have had a life-changing experience with wolves. At the Wolf Education and Research Center in Winchester, Idaho, wolf handler J. Heft talks about a wolf called Amani, who died in November of 2005:

“We should all remember Amani as a beautiful, intelligent, and sometimes silly guy who possessed a true love for being social with friends...He changed the lives of countless people through his life...Being his closest human family member for most of his life, I can honestly state he has influenced me in ways no other being ever has, nor I expect ever will. I will forever miss and remember my ‘Mani-mani’”. (Heft 6)

The wolf's contribution to human life does not have to stop with these individuals. Not only can these majestic animals affect certain people, but they most certainly can benefit our society as a whole.

Wolves have proven to be extremely beneficial to the economy, due to eco-tourism. The wolves at Yellowstone National Park have attracted millions of visitors through the years and according to the park, more people show up when they know they can see wolves (Yellowstone National Park). Statistics show that in the 1970's, when wolves had been killed off by hunters, there were only around two million visitors. However, when the wolf population started rising in the 1990's, so did the number of tourists. Over three million visitors were present in 1992 (National Park Service). Yellowstone Park claims that the “unexpected result of wolf recovery...has generated national and international public interest in coming to Yellowstone to observe wolves” and “the interest in seeing a wolf has become one of the main wildlife

attractions for visitors coming to Yellowstone from both around the country and the world” (National Park Service). If wolves were extirpated, places like Yellowstone would not bring in as many people; this would cause a decline in travel, which then in turn would see a decrease in the amount of money coming in altogether. Additionally, wolves are also advantageous to our ecosystems and are in fact necessary for keeping balance and order. Without such predators, deer and elk populations would rise significantly. For instance, many people are terrified of spiders, yet everyone knows that these arachnids are needed in order to keep the bug population down. If spiders somehow became extinct, we would be overrun with flies. Therefore, wolves should be seen in the same light. Surprisingly, there are many who would agree.

The proposal (set forth by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game) to kill off seventy-five percent of the wolves has a great deal of evidence against it. Out of the 42,000 comments received, the Wolf Education and Research Center found that “the vast majority opposed it”, and “Idahoans were also overwhelmingly against the proposal by a two to one margin” (Fiore). Even the peer reviewers hand picked by IDF&G themselves showed an unfavorable reaction toward the proposal (Fiore). Another interesting point that WERC discovered was that the Idaho proposal had unconvincing factual evidence regarding wolves and declining elk populations. According to WERC, “the proposal itself states that elk declines began in the winters of 1996 and 1997, yet few wolves were present in the Lolo zone before 2000” (“Letter to Idaho Fish and Game Coalition Responds to proposed wolf reduction in Idaho”).

Besides fear for the elk, many ranchers fear for the safety of their livestock. This is a legitimate reason for believing the wolf to be a nuisance, of course. However, there are more humane ways to approach this issue without having to kill the wolves. Defenders of Wildlife are currently working on non-lethal ways of wolf management. Together, with the Bailey Wildlife

Foundation Proactive Carnivore Conservation Fund, they have conducted experiments involving “multiple guard dogs, electric night pens, fladry fencing, task-specific range riders, and other methods” that have proved to be “remarkably effective” (“Removing Northern Rockies Wolves From Endangered Species List Jeopardizes Continued Recovery”). Studies and results showed “zero known livestock losses to wolves”. Defenders of Wildlife even “compensates ranchers 100 percent of the market value for confirmed livestock losses caused by wolves” (“Removing Northern Rockies Wolves From Endangered Species List Jeopardizes Continued Recovery”). These methods have proven to be much more useful, not to mention more humane, than participating in heartless massacres. So why isn't the solution simple?

If people were more aware of this wolf situation and the consequences of following fears instead of facts, we would be in better shape. We have been degrading our species for centuries and have become the predators and wolves the prey. Though it may be hard to accept, wolves' humanity is entirely true and deserving. Why should we blame these creatures for exhibiting natural behavior: hunting for food, when we would do the same to survive? We must learn that co-existence is very much a part of Planet Earth and will never cease to exist. However, if we do nothing to stop Idaho, Montana and Wyoming from killing wolves, Mother Nature's most misunderstood creature may come closer to extinction than ever before. If we wish to keep our ecosystems balanced for a better future, humans must accept the world for what it was meant to be: a diversely populated planet with creatures some of us may always choose to hate. As we all have a purpose, so do wolves. As William Lynn, Ph. D, Co-Director and senior Research Scholar at the Center for Humans and Nature states, “We know that wolves are neither beasts of waste and desolation, nor varmints, villains or vermin. They are simply wild beings enmeshed, like ourselves, in the tapestry of life” (Wolf Trust)

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