

Research team examines the challenges of coexistence between humans, wolves

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Having grown up on the crowded East Coast and studied wildlife in developing countries like Uganda and Ecuador, Adrian Treves knows just how difficult balancing the needs of people and wild animals can be - and how often human interests win out.

"I used sometimes to despair that we could never repair the damage we'd done to nature," admits Treves, an assistant professor in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies.

"But," he adds, "I've become an optimist since moving to Wisconsin."

Treves came to the state in 1997 with his wife, UW-Madison geography professor Lisa Naughton, and what changed his outlook was the research they started doing together on Wisconsin's wolves. After being hunted to extinction here in the late 1950s, the gray wolf has been quietly making a comeback: first padding in from Minnesota and colonizing the Northwoods, then spilling into central, and lately, southern Wisconsin, where it hasn't roamed for almost a century.

The wolf population has also overshot the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) original goal of 350. DNR biologists estimate that 500 to 600 wolves now make Wisconsin home, and last March the wolf was taken off the federal endangered species list in the western Great Lakes region.

This heartening outcome is hardly the end of the story, though; in fact, a

more complicated chapter is just beginning.

"The successful recovery of wolves is something to celebrate and be proud of," says Naughton, who is also a professor in the Nelson Institute. "But ultimately the next phase is going to be even more challenging: figuring out how we're going to coexist with wolves and share this space."

For almost a decade, Treves - an animal behaviorist and ecologist - and Naughton - a social scientist - have worked closely with the DNR to address the challenges of living with wolves, especially the losses of livestock and hunting dogs that inevitably result. Over time, the scientists have produced a historical analysis of wolf attacks on Wisconsin's domestic animals, as well as maps that predict hotspots where wolves are most likely to prey on livestock in the future.

Yet, the couple's biggest contribution has less to do with the behavior of wolves than with the beliefs of people. In two carefully crafted public opinion surveys, they've uncovered the attitudes toward wolves and wolf policies of citizens all over Wisconsin, including individuals who openly detest the carnivores, those who ardently support them, and scores of people whose views fall somewhere in between.

For DNR managers, the information couldn't be more valuable. "With large carnivores such as wolves, public attitudes are sometimes more critical to manage than the animals themselves," says Adrian Wydeven, a long-time DNR wolf biologist stationed in Park Falls.

"Wolf biology is pretty well understood at this point," adds Randy Jurewicz, who has overseen the DNR's wolf management program since its inception nearly 30 years ago. "But public emotions and public perceptions - that's where most of the unknowns lie."

It's not as though the DNR is completely unfamiliar with people's views on wolves; part of Wydeven's job is to field phone calls about wolf sightings, and the agency regularly holds meetings with wolf stakeholder groups. But both Wydeven and Jurewicz suspect that often they're hearing only from the vocal minority rather than a broad cross-section of state citizens. And the need to reach quick management decisions makes collecting more comprehensive data nearly impossible.

"We almost never have as much information to make a decision as we would like," says Jurewicz. "So, the work Adrian and Lisa have been doing to verify or disprove some of the ideas behind our past decisions is very important to fine-tuning our wolf management and compensation programs."

The heart of the DNR's management approach is the compensation program, which is designed to promote tolerance for wolves by reimbursing livestock farmers and others who suffer damages. The agency launched it back in 1982 - when just a handful of wolves inhabited the state - and prior to 1999 reimbursements never amounted to more than about \$20,000 per year.

But as the wolf population has grown so have the program's costs. Last year, payments totaled nearly \$120,000 or 10 percent of the entire budget for endangered species protection, out of which the payments come. What's more, the wolf is technically no longer endangered, which means that eventually wolf damages will need to be covered in some other way.

As it works to refine the program in this shifting landscape, the DNR has relied heavily on Naughton and Treves' findings. The good news is that even in the face of burgeoning wolf populations and mounting costs, most Wisconsinites still want at least some wolves in the state, says Treves. A majority also thinks that farmers should continue receiving

compensation for their losses.

The surveys also reveal, however, that many individuals disagree with paying bear hunters for hounds killed by wolves while on the hunt. This is especially true of people who contribute to the endangered species fund - and, thus, the compensation program - by buying wolf license plates or donating money through their tax returns.

Although the state remains committed to reimbursing bear hunters for the time being, the DNR has already seen some contributors defect as a result, says Jurewicz. If the trends continue, there may be less money available overall for endangered species protection.

And an even larger controversy is looming. This April, a group of citizen advisors to the DNR, known as the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, will be seeking public opinion on the idea of a regulated hunt to control wolf numbers. The issue is sure to be divisive, and the DNR expects to hear from many who are vehemently for or against it.

As the debate moves forward, Wydeven believes that Treves and Naughton will play an important role in ensuring that the larger picture isn't lost.

"One of the things we're hoping Adrian and Lisa can explore for us is public attitudes toward future management scenarios: whether people would be able to accept public hunting of wolves and under what circumstances," he says. "If we need to have a hunting season, we want to design it so that it's broadly acceptable to a majority of the public. What we don't want is to get bogged down in the controversy."

For their part, the scientists hope to see Wisconsin's experiences with wolves inform the management of large carnivores and other "problem" wildlife all over the world. Naughton explains that until now research

into the conflicts between people and carnivores has largely taken place in wild, remote areas like the Rocky Mountains.

"And that's important," she says. "But alas, most of the world is more like Wisconsin in terms of little farms, and commercial and residential areas. That's the kind of landscape that most carnivores have to make it in."

In other words, carnivores have to make it in places with lots of people, which means finding a way of balancing their needs with human needs to reach that elusive state called coexistence.

"We don't know enough yet to be able to design coexistence," says Treves. "We're learning. There's really inspiring new knowledge. And yet, many questions remain."

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison

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