

Missouri elk are being reintroduced in the wrong part of the state, anthropologist says

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According to prehistoric records, elk roamed the northwestern part of Missouri until 1865. Now, the Missouri Department of Conservation is planning to reintroduce elk, but this time in the southeast part of the state. While a University of Missouri anthropologist believes the reintroduction is good for elk, tourism and the economy, he said the effort may have unintended negative consequences that are difficult to predict.

R. Lee Lyman, the chair of [Anthropology](#) in the College of Arts and Science, has studied the history of mammals, [conservation biology](#) and wildlife management for nearly 40 years. He said a 2002 MU study completed by a graduate student proved that most prehistoric elk remains found in Missouri were in the field plains of the northwestern area of the state, not the southeast reintroduction location.

"If we are looking for the best place for elk survival, we should consider why elk were not in the southeastern part of the state in prehistoric times," Lyman said. "If they weren't there previously, why would they survive there now? The Mississippi flood plain -where they are being reintroduced – is not the best habitat, because elk didn't live there for some reason, such as the wrong kind of food or bad terrain."

A coordinated effort to control a species is always controversial, Lyman said, because it involves many different factors, including politics, economics, tourism and biology. Lyman believes mistakes can be avoided if the prehistoric record is considered.

In his most recent study, Lyman found that the North American elk in the mountains of eastern Washington State were native to those mountains – even though popular mythology, and early science, indicated that humans had driven the elk there from adjacent lowlands. The results were published in the March edition of the journal *Environmental Management*.

There are plenty of examples where wild animal control has not been advantageous to the environment. For example, in Missouri, river otters that were reintroduced are now dominating ponds and overtaking ecosystems. In Montana and Idaho, ranchers and farmers have successfully fought to get wolves reintroduced to the Yellowstone ecosystem in the early 1990s removed from the endangered list, so that farmers can kill the wolves, which jeopardize livestock.

"The issues in these situations relate to time and the ecological cascade that happens when you change one variable," Lyman said. "A hundred years is nothing when compared to the 12,000 years elk have been in America. So what is going to happen when elk roam the Ozarks? If we think that 500-pound [elk](#) are going to stay in one area – that is pretty naïve. No matter how much data scientists collect and use to make predictions, we're still talking about wild animals. The truth is no one really knows."

Lyman points to Missouri's whitetail deer as an example of animals thriving in the dense Missouri forests.

"The scrawny whitetail deer in our cities and dead along our highways are proof that there can be too much of a good thing," Lyman said.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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