Is hunting wolves key to their conservation?

August 8 2011

Hunters have been credited with being strong conservation advocates for numerous game species in multiple countries. Would initiating a wolf hunt invoke the same advocacy for the carnivores?

It's a pressing question as gray wolves were removed from the federal endangered species list in some western states this past May and are poised for delisting in 2012 in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and other areas of the Midwest. But newly released public opinion surveys conducted in Wisconsin and the northern Rockies suggest that wolves are in a class by themselves and that existing deer, elk, and other game hunts are poor models for a potential wolf hunt.

University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers Adrian Treves and Kerry Martin surveyed 2,320 residents of Wisconsin, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming — including both hunters and non-hunters — between 2001 and 2007. Their findings, appearing in the August issue of the peer-reviewed journal Society and Natural Resources, reveal hunter attitudes toward wolves that are largely inconsistent with stewardship.

Questions assessed a range of factors including acceptance of management policy, tolerance of the carnivores, willingness to kill a wolf illegally, adherence to hunt regulations, and expected financial support of conservation.

"Hunters were some of the least tolerant of wolves among our respondents, and the closer you got to wolf range the less tolerant they were," says Treves, a professor in the UW-Madison Nelson Institute for

Environmental Studies.

One issue may be that hunters often view wolves as competition for deer and other game. Opening a wolf hunt may not immediately shift that perception to viewing wolves as another game species to be conserved.

Treves was also surprised by the level of support expressed for a regulated wolf hunt among non-hunters and those living outside wolf range. In Wisconsin, for example, he says, "You find a surprising amount of support for a public regulated harvest of wolves even in places like Madison, Fond du Lac, or Sister Bay."

But these endorsements tend to be conditional, he cautions, and the conditions vary. For example, many people support the idea of a "sustainable" hunt — though "sustainable" was undefined in this context — or hunting as a way to reduce attacks on livestock and other conflicts between wolves and humans.

"To me that says that people see hunting as a tool for enabling coexistence," Treves says.

But the evidence simply isn't there to indicate that hunting wolves would affect depredations of domestic animals. No depredation data were reported following a hunt in Idaho and Montana conducted during a window of time in 2009 when the animals were not federally protected. And though wolves have been hunted legally in Alaska for decades, the scarcity of domestic animals and difference in landscape make it nearly impossible to draw conclusions that would apply to the lower 48.

A risk map Treves and others published in June shows that wolf attacks on livestock in Wisconsin are highly localized and attributable to a relatively small number of packs. The majority of packs do not cause problems despite living in close proximity to humans, which raises

significant questions about the efficacy of a general hunt to alleviate perceived problems.

"The assumption that hunting and reducing the number of animals will reduce livestock losses would be proven false if hunters are targeting the wrong animals, such as animals in wilderness areas," he says, adding that it will be important to understand hunter motivations. "Wolves in wilderness areas don't kill livestock, it's the wolves on the edge in agricultural areas. Do hunters want to hunt in farmland? I'm not sure."

The uncertainty of how hunting would affect wolf populations could also become a legal issue, says UW-Madison law professor Stephanie Tai, citing a precedent of legal challenges of federal delisting decisions. "People have challenged delistings for a number of reasons, and some of those have been successful," she says. "Often, successful lawsuits bring up factors the Fish and Wildlife Service may not have considered, which could include the effect of allowing hunting."

The challenge, Treves says, is to balance human needs with the need to conserve wolves as an essential component of ecosystems. In a viewpoint piece published in the August issue of the journal BioScience, Treves and Jeremy Bruskotter, an environment and natural resources professor at The Ohio State University, present some possible scenarios for the future of wolf management in the U.S. Those scenarios include reclassifying the wolves as threatened, which would permit lethal control under certain circumstances, or enacting specific federal protections outside the Endangered Species Act, such as those currently in place for bald eagles, wild horses, and migratory birds.

They advocate geographically tailored approaches that will permit local-level control within a federal framework to strike a balance between wolves and humans. Sound long-term management can include a public regulated hunt, they say, but it will unquestionably require compromise.

"A public regulated harvest is a collaboration between hunters and the state, which requires give and take. I think the next few years in Wisconsin will reveal how well that collaboration works," says Treves.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison