

Attitudes about knowledge and power drive Michigan's wolf debate

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MSU research has identified the themes shaping Michigan's wolf debate and offers some potential solutions as the debate moves forward. Credit: Courtesy of Michigan DNR

With both wolf proposals shot down by Michigan voters on election day, the debate over managing and hunting wolves is far from over.

A Michigan State University study, appearing in a recent issue of the

Journal of Wildlife Management, identifies the themes shaping the issue and offers some potential solutions as the debate moves forward.

The research explored how different sides of the debate view power imbalances among different groups and the role that [scientific knowledge](#) plays in making decisions about hunting wolves. These two dimensions of wildlife management can result in conflict and stagnate wildlife management.

The results indicate that tension between public attitudes about local knowledge, and politics and science can drive conflict among Michiganders' stance regarding wolf hunting, said Meredith Gore, associate professor of fisheries and wildlife and co-lead author of the study.

"Given the trend in wildlife management toward increased stakeholder input, finding solutions that approach science and politics as complementary, rather than competing, approaches may aid the public participation processes," she said.

This study represents a first attempt at defining and describing the association between knowledge and power in contentious management of a species recently delisted from endangered status. This study focused on wolves, but it has applications for other endangered or invasive species, added Gore, an MSU AgBioResearch scientist.

These findings shed light on why the voting and support for the issue appears to be muddled, at least in terms of traditional quantifiers. Knowing these splits explain, in part, why the issue won't likely be resolved by swaying the pro- or anti-hunting vote.

Gore and Michelle Lute, former MSU fisheries and wildlife graduate student and co-lead author who's now at Indiana University, unearthed

these disparities by conducting in-depth interviews with many stakeholders close to the wolf debate. Rather than trying to prove a specific theory, the researchers allowed the interviews to reveal the main criteria driving the issue.

The researchers unearthed four themes and offered potential solutions to each.

- **Mistrust among decision-makers** – Some interviewees view wildlife management agencies as political agencies rather than supporting what's best for wildlife. Increasing transparency and gathering more stakeholder input could increase trust.
- **Special interest groups leaving many voters disenfranchised** – Strong lobbying groups leave some individuals feeling powerless and their votes meaningless. Striving for equitable distribution of risks and benefits among all stakeholders could address these feelings.
- **Political influencers overriding science** – Some believe that scientific studies are downplayed by political officials. Equitable sharing of responsibility, risks and benefits may ease perceptions of tension between politicians and scientists.
- **Decision-makers ignoring local sources of information** – Some interviewees felt cast aside, and their knowledge was labeled as mythology or folklore. Processes that seek shared-learning outcomes may balance local and scientific knowledge.

"Our research shows that as any management process moves forward," Gore said, "all sides should address the issue from the perspective of these four criteria. Regardless of how people voted, these aspects may represent common ground for all sides."

Provided by Michigan State University

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