

Fear and caring are what's at the core of divisive wolf debate

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Fear and caring are driving the wolf-hunting debate. Credit: G.L. Kohuth

To hunt or not hunt wolves can't be quantified as simply as men vs. women, hunters vs. anti-hunters, Democrats vs. Republicans or city vs. rural.

What's truly fueling the divisive debate is fear of [wolves](#) or the urge to care for canis lupis. The social dynamics at play and potential options for

establishing common ground between sides can be found in the current issue of the journal *PLOS ONE*.

"People who are for or against this issue are often cast into traditional lots, such as gender, political party or where they live," said Meredith Gore, associate professor of fisheries and wildlife and co-lead author of the study. "This issue, however, isn't playing out like this. Concerns about hunting wolves to reduce conflict are split more by social geography and less by physical geography."

It's definitely an us-versus-them debate, she added. However, it took the concept of social identity theory to better reveal the true "us" and "them." Applying principles from [social psychology](#) revealed how the two groups were interacting and offers some potential solutions to get the vying groups to work together.

The team's findings are comparable, in part, to civil uprisings in the Middle East. The region is far removed from the United States, in terms of geography. Americans, however, tend to identify with a distant, threatened identity group, said Gore, an MSU AgBioResearch scientist.

"The concept of how our identity drives our activism is quite interesting," said Gore, who co-led the research with Michelle Lute, former MSU fisheries and wildlife graduate student who's now at Indiana University. "Our findings challenge traditional assumptions about regional differences and suggest a strong role for [social identity](#) in why people support or oppose wildlife management practices."

The majority of the nearly 670 surveys were collected from Michigan stakeholders interested in wolf-hunting as a management response to wolf conflicts. However, a small percentage of the data was gathered from participants in 21 states. While the study focused on [gray wolves](#) in Michigan, its results have implications for other states' policies on

wolves as well as other large carnivores such as brown bears, polar bears, mountain lions and other predators, Gore added.

Noting that there's sharp polarization in debates about wolf management is not new. However, providing empirical evidence of its existence is new and meaningful because it provides a framework for improving engagement between the fighting factions.

For example, communications may be better directed toward each identity group's concerns of fear and care for wolves. These missives could be more effective than messages simply directed toward pro-hunters or anti-hunters. Identity-specific communications may also help build trust between agencies and stakeholders.

"These types of communications may not only build trust, but they can also contribute to a sense of procedural justice," Gore said. "This, in turn, may increase support for decision-makers and processes regardless of the outcome."

Also, by shaping and discussing the issue in terms of care and fear, rather than traditional qualifiers, may help usher in a greater agreement about management strategies.

Provided by Michigan State University

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