

Cultural, belief system data can inform gray wolf recovery efforts in US

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Humans regularly exert a powerful influence on the survival and persistence of species, yet social-science information is used only sporadically in conservation decisions.

Researchers at Colorado State University and The Ohio State University have created an index depicting the mix of social values among people across all 50 states, providing data that can be useful for wildlife conservation policy and management.

As a specific illustration, the research team found a supportive social context for gray wolf reintroduction in Colorado. Last fall, citizens in the state voted by ballot initiative to mandate the reintroduction of gray wolves. The data and maps in the study reveal that Colorado's [social environment](#) is far more conducive to wolf recovery than states like Montana and Idaho, which currently have state legislative efforts to reduce wolf populations.

The study, "Bringing [social values](#) to wildlife conservation decisions," was published online June 3 in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*.

Michael Manfredo, the study's lead investigator and head of CSU's Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, said the research reveals how people fall into the categories of traditionalists—those who believe animals should be used for purposes that benefit humans, like hunting and medical research—or mutualists, those who believe that animals deserve the same rights as humans. Mutualists view animals as companions and part of their social networks and project human traits onto animals.

"You can see what the 'flavor' is of the state or county, and what policies or initiatives people are likely to support or be opposed to," said Manfredo.

Highly modernized states, including California, Nevada, Colorado and Washington, are leaning more toward mutualism, according to the research. North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana have more residents with traditionalist values.

Tara Teel, CSU professor and a lead author on the study, said that the data is relevant for other hot and new topics and drills down to the county level.

"This study builds on a 50-state study on [America's Wildlife Values](#)—the largest and first of its kind," said Teel. "It is one of the first broadly accessible social science datasets to inform wildlife conservation efforts across the United States."

Data provides insight on conservation decisions

While the results are particularly relevant for the U.S., the technique used by the team could be applied to better account for human factors in [conservation decisions](#) for addressing issues like [climate change](#), species reintroductions and human-wildlife conflict globally.

The research team used data from a survey conducted from 2017 to 2018 of 46,894 U.S. residents and applied a sociocultural index to inform decision-making through an understanding of public values toward wildlife. Scientists measured mutualist and traditionalist values, which have previously been shown to be highly predictive of attitudes on a wide range of policy issues. The team subsequently developed state and county maps.

'Values don't change quickly'

"Previous research has found that there is a strong relationship between the laws passed in any given state and people's values," said Manfredo. "In the last two decades, there's been a substantial change in how people value wildlife," he added.

"Values don't change quickly," he said. "They're not like how a person

feels about political issues. Values are formed in a person's youth and stay with you forever."

Manfredo said data showed that as far back as the early 2000s, people in Colorado were in favor of wolf reintroduction. But in places like Jackson County, a sub-alpine valley in northern Colorado, people were not so excited about wolves.

"Society is changing, and there's been a backlash from traditionalists who feel that their values and their voices in decision-making are being threatened," he said. "Ultimately, state and local agencies need to pay more attention to constituents. That means everybody in the state, not just a segment or a particular county. Policies need to fall more in line with the values of the public."

More information: *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/fee.2356](https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.2356) , [esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley ... doi/10.1002/fee.2356](https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/fee.2356)

Provided by Colorado State University

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