

# Managing Washington's gray wolf population—through fear

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The high-profile reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 is generally considered a conservation success: Gray wolf packs inside and outside the park gradually established new populations. In Washington, wolves were largely absent for decades until a pack was identified in the northeastern part of the state in 2008.

But wolf recovery also has been controversial. Over time, various federal

and state protections have been placed, then lifted, then placed again. Conflict often arises when [wolves](#) return to rural landscapes that are also used for grazing, where they sometimes attack and kill livestock, and where anti-wolf sentiment is often high. In northeast Washington in February, six [gray wolves](#) were found dead, and an investigation later found they had been poisoned. Earlier this fall, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife killed two wolves from a pack that had preyed on cattle, and mistakenly shot a wolf pup.

Such instances in Washington are relatively rare, but they underscore the very specific challenges between humans and wolves, explains Rob Anderson, who studied this issue as part of his doctorate in geography from the University of Washington. He is lead author of a paper on nonlethal wolf management tactics recently published in *The Canadian Geographer*, with co-authors including Alex McInturff, a UW assistant professor of environmental and [forest management](#).

"While other states in the American West have been much more aggressive about allowing killing wolves, the state of Washington has made a major effort to minimize lethal management," said Anderson. "That really puts the emphasis in Washington on the nonlethal techniques for, as they often say, 'changing wolf behavior,' which is where fear comes into the picture."

Anderson, who is now a research associate at Boston University studying deer management in suburban Massachusetts, spoke about wolves in Washington with UW News.

**People might think that any way to manage wolves, short of violence, would be reasonable. What are some considerations in managing by fear?**

Rob Anderson: In one sense, what needs to be "managed" is not wolves themselves, so much as wolf-livestock conflict. That's done in a range of nonlethal ways, many of which are essentially to use wolves' fear of people, or fear of being persecuted by people, to reduce attacks on livestock. That can include fencing, lights or sirens—or even just human presence on the range—to keep wolves away. There are also other approaches to reducing wolf conflict, such as adapting how livestock behave to reduce their vulnerability, or changing how people manage livestock, in terms of where and when they allow them to graze in territory where wolves also live.

But in Washington, a lot of efforts have really focused on the approaches that use wolves' fear of people to try to prevent conflict. And yes, many people would agree that using fear is reasonable, and wolf conservation advocates would certainly say it's preferable to lethal control. So my point is not to say that manipulating wolves' fear is a bad thing, but to acknowledge that that's what people are trying to do, and to better understand how it works and what it means.

For instance, there are a lot of ideas tossed around about "sending a message" to the wolves, whether it's by using nonlethal tools, or by killing a wolf that has attacked livestock. But there's not a lot of evidence about whether and how wolves are actually getting the message. So I would suggest that wildlife managers, and livestock producers, and anyone invested in this issue, carefully examine what they're aiming to accomplish with these fear-based techniques. People's ideas about what it means to change wolf behavior vary widely, and it can lead to misunderstanding and greater social conflict over an already-tense issue.

**Q: Does management by fear change animal behavior, long-term?**

RA: That's one of the questions I aim to raise in this research! Based on my conversations with [wildlife managers](#), such as the staff at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, most would say that the goal isn't long-term change. When they talk about "changing wolf behavior," they are usually just talking about getting a particular wolf, or wolf pack, to stop coming after livestock. But they also will often talk about how wolf fear is "innate," suggesting that it's hard-wired into the wolf to be afraid of humans.

There's a tension there, between what kinds of behaviors can be changed through human intervention, and what is instinctive and unchangeable. Many wolf biologists will say that wolves' [fear](#) of people is an evolutionary adaptation: Because people persecuted wolves for so long, and killed off the more aggressive (or just curious) wolves, more fearful wolves survived to pass on their genes, and to teach their offspring how to survive.

It's certainly possible to imagine that contemporary management interventions could also have those kinds of longer-term consequences on the so-called "nature" of wolves. In that sense, this emblematically "wild" animal is responding to, and ends up changed by, human actions and activities. That's a real challenge to how we tend to think about wildlife conservation.

**Q: How can stakeholders, such as landowners, environmental advocates, policymakers and the like, incorporate these ideas into decision-making?**

RA: Wolf conservation is already a very divisive issue, especially when it comes to lethal wolf removal. Some people really want to see the state taking more action to address wolf attacks on livestock, but many others are fiercely opposed to lethal removal—and the conflict over this issue

has escalated pretty far, to the point that some people are even out there poisoning wolves.

The state of Washington has made an important investment in nonlethal approaches, but there's still a great deal of confusion around how they work, and what it means to change [wolf](#) behavior, whether that's through lethal or nonlethal methods. I don't think there is any single solution to the problem, and people hold very different ethical values and positions, which may not always be possible to resolve. But in light of the level of social conflict and controversy around this issue, I hope that decision-makers can use our research to be as clear as possible about what the various approaches on the table are aiming to accomplish.

**More information:** Robert M. Anderson et al, The socioecology of fear: A critical geographical consideration of human-wolf-livestock conflict, *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/cag.12808](https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12808)

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