

Policy framework for coexisting with wolves, bears and mountain lions could benefit people and the environment

August 23 2023, by Neil Carter



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A [video showing a close encounter between a hiker](#) in Utah and a mountain lion defending her cubs went viral in 2020. The video, during

which the hiker remained calm as the mountain lion followed him for several minutes, served as a visceral reminder that sharing the land with carnivores can be a complicated affair.

For [conservation scientists like me](#), it also underscored that Americans have a fraught relationship with [large carnivores](#) like wolves, bears and mountain lions. My colleagues and I have proposed a [federal policy](#) that, when combined with other initiatives, could allow for sustainable coexistence between people and [carnivores](#).

Major state and federal government efforts are underway to [reintroduce grizzly bears](#) to the Northern Cascades and [gray wolves](#) to Colorado. These are places where stable populations of these animals have not roamed for many decades.

More [human development](#) and, in some cases, expanding carnivore populations have led to more encounters between humans and carnivores. [Coyote attacks](#) on pets are more common, [alligator bites](#) are on the rise in some regions, and the [killing of livestock by wolves](#) has spread.

Increasing conflict with these species may unravel [decades of conservation success](#).

From conflict to coexistence

To manage these risks, people too often default to the widespread killing of carnivores. In 2021 alone, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services [ethanized nearly 70,000](#) bears, wolves, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes and foxes.

In the same year, controversial laws passed in [Idaho](#) and [Montana](#) that substantially [reduced wolf numbers](#) because people perceive these

animals as risks to livestock production and game species hunting.

Thousands of animals die every year in wildlife [killing contests](#) that often target carnivores such as coyotes and bobcats. These contests are legal in more than 40 U.S. states—under the guise that they help with wildlife management and protect livestock.

But research has found that extensive carnivore killing to reduce levels of conflict is [largely ineffective](#), [ethically tenuous](#) and [undermines their conservation](#).

Instead, coexisting with carnivores can benefit both carnivores and people. For example, the presence of [wolves](#) and [mountain lions](#) lowers the frequency of vehicle collisions with deer, saving money and human lives. Foxes, likewise, [reduce an abundance of small mammals](#) that carry ticks, likely reducing cases of Lyme disease in humans. [Sea otters](#) maintain healthy kelp forests that support tourism and fisheries and capture carbon.

However, the U.S. has no unified approach for making interactions with carnivores more peaceful in the spaces that people share with them. Shared spaces—like multiuse forests and grasslands, coastlines, croplands and even cities—constitute over 70% of the continental U.S. by [one estimate](#).

These spaces will grow more crowded as [human development](#) and [population growth](#) pushes people into greater contact with carnivores. Currently, however, the management of conflicts with carnivores is [piecemeal](#) across states and municipalities. It [lacks sufficient resources](#) and [polarizes the public](#) over how to manage these animals in the future.

And [mitigating conflict](#) as a policy objective is a [short-term](#) and [partial solution](#) that doesn't enable long-term coexistence.

Policy for enabling coexistence

A federal policy [like the one my colleagues and I propose](#) that sets goals for sharing spaces with carnivores could allow for coexistence between people and carnivores while also recognizing local priorities.

While much of wildlife management takes place at the state level, having a federal policy framework could provide resources and incentives for states and communities to adopt specific coexistence strategies relevant to the carnivores in their area.

Large-scale policy goals may include lowering conflicts, increasing human tolerance to risks and fostering self-sustaining carnivore populations.

Coexistence strategies should prioritize using proven, [nonlethal](#) deterrence methods such as properly disposing of trash or other attractants, bringing pets inside, erecting barriers to separate livestock from carnivores in risky places and times, and working with guard animals such as dogs that are trained to protect herds from carnivores. These strategies not only [reduce carnivores' impact](#) on human property and well-being but also [facilitate carnivore recovery](#).

Several local projects demonstrate that nonlethal deterrence programs work. In Montana's [Blackfoot watershed](#), natural resource managers and local residents coordinate the disposal of livestock carcasses away from ranches. This prevents grizzlies and wolves from approaching the ranches.

The city of [Durango, Colorado](#), has supplied its residents with automatically locking bear-resistant trash containers. These containers keep bears from damaging property or scaring residents while looking for food in them. [A study found](#) that these new trash containers reduced

trash-related conflicts with bears by 60%.

Negative encounters with carnivores still occur in these cases, but now that the communities are collectively adapting to them, they are less severe. And these carnivores are less likely to be euthanized.

Some states are also taking incremental steps toward coexistence. For example, to reduce animal suffering, New Mexico passed the [Wildlife Conservation and Public Safety Act](#) in 2021 that bans the use of a trap, snare or poison to kill an animal on public land.

In 2023, [Maryland](#) and [Colorado](#) authorized provisions that help fund provisions to prevent lethal encounters with black bears and gray wolves, respectively.

A broader coexistence framework

These local and state-level successes are encouraging, but not enough to address the issue at a broader, national scale. A federal coexistence policy could harness the insights from these individual communities' coexistence efforts and encourage other communities to adopt these techniques.

For example, members of universities, businesses, tribes, government and nongovernmental organizations and the public could come together at regional [coexistence workshops](#) to showcase their coexistence actions, receive support for new ideas and share tools and best practices.

A federal policy could allow states and communities to try out high-risk, high-reward initiatives, like [Pay for Presence](#) programs. One such program, established in northern Mexico near the U.S. border in 2007, compensates landowners for the [documented presence of jaguars](#) on their properties.

A [federal policy](#) might also facilitate the adoption of market-based solutions like [predator-friendly](#) meats. The predator-friendly certification enables ranchers who do not use lethal predator control to sell their meat products at a premium price.

A federal coexistence policy could also support community outreach and education programs. Teaching communities about carnivore behavior can help them to [avoid potentially risky situations](#), like jogging with a dog or leaving children unattended in [mountain lion](#) territory.

By reducing negative encounters, these programs can enhance the adoption of nonlethal coexistence strategies, foster more positive attitudes toward carnivores and share the [benefits carnivores offer humans](#).

There are promising signs that the federal government and some states are starting to pay [more attention](#) to coexistence with carnivores. As the segment of the American public that views wildlife as [deserving of rights and compassion](#) grows, translating an ethic of [coexistence](#) into good policy could better align policy with public values.

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