

The Big Bad Wolf or Symbol of the American Wilderness? Gray Wolf Reintroduction in Idaho

by

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Background

The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) once roamed throughout the northern hemisphere, but today occupies only a fraction of its historic range (see Figure 1). Gray wolves were extirpated from the northwestern region of the United States by the 1930s, largely due to extermination efforts by private citizens and government entities seeking to remove the threat these predators posed to livestock and game species. In 1974, gray wolves were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As a result of the protections afforded and management required under the ESA, the gray wolf once again inhabits Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, eastern Washington, and eastern Oregon.

Adult gray wolves average approximately 0.75 m (2.5 ft) tall, 1.5–1.8 m (5–6 feet) long, 35–60 kg (80–130 pounds) in weight, and vary in color from white to black. Wolves are apex predators, and as social animals, generally live and hunt in packs. Because they expend significant energy during a hunt, wolves feed mainly on large ungulates such as elk, deer, and bison, and only rarely prey on small mammals.

Gray wolves began returning naturally from Canada starting in the late 1970s, with formal reintroductions beginning in 1995. Wolves that returned naturally were designated as endangered, but reintroduced wolves were classified as non-essential, experimental populations. Under this designation, the federal government affords greater flexibility to State management in an effort to “reduce local concerns about excessive government regulation on private lands, uncontrolled livestock depredations, excessive big game predation, and the lack of state government involvement” (USFWS 2004).

ABBREVIATED POLICY HISTORY:

- 1974** – Gray wolf listed as endangered; federally protected in U.S.
- 1980** – Recovery plan drafted by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS).
- 1995** – First reintroduction: 35 wolves in Idaho, 31 in Yellowstone.
- 2002** – Recovery goals met.
- 2008** – USFWS issued rules to delist.
- 2008** – Relisted as endangered.
- 2009** – USFWS reissued rule to delist.
- 2010** – Relisted as endangered.
- 2012** – Congress delists all gray wolves; management returned to States.

Figure 2. Abbreviated policy history for gray wolf management, 1974–2012 (USFWS 2012).

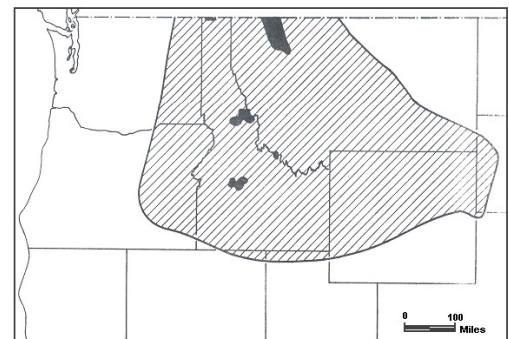


Figure 1. Historic distribution of gray wolf in NW U.S.; solid areas indicate 1980 distribution (USFWS 1987).

The Delisting Process in Idaho

In March 2008, the USFWS finalized a delisting rule that gave the State of Idaho full management responsibility for wolves. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) prepared the “Idaho Wolf Population Management Plan 2008–2012,” designed to manage conflicts between wolves and human interests while stabilizing the wolf population to 2005–2007 levels (Figure 4). The plan also provided guidelines for wolf harvest opportunities once wolves were fully delisted from the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The March 2008 delisting was challenged in federal court by a coalition of environmental groups and, in July 2008, a ruling returned ESA protections to wolves in Idaho.

The USFWS delisted the wolves again in 2009 and turned control over to Idaho. Opponents sued over this decision and its proposed hunting season, but the suit was blocked as they failed to show a likelihood of irreparable harm to the wolf population. Wolf-hunting seasons were conducted in Idaho beginning in fall 2009, with the season extending through March 2010.

In October 2010, the wolves were re-listed again. The State of Idaho relinquished management control to the federal government.

In 2012, the gray wolf was delisted again and the management control now rests with Idaho.

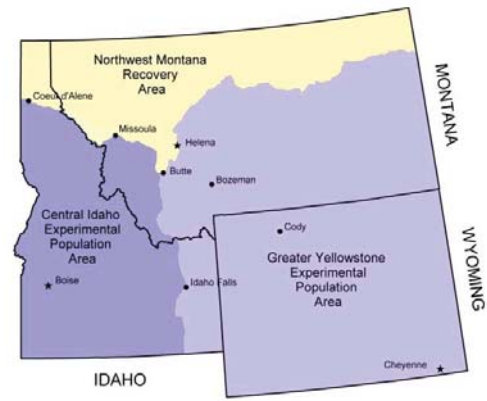


Figure 3. Recovery areas established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore gray wolf populations (Holyan et al. 2011).

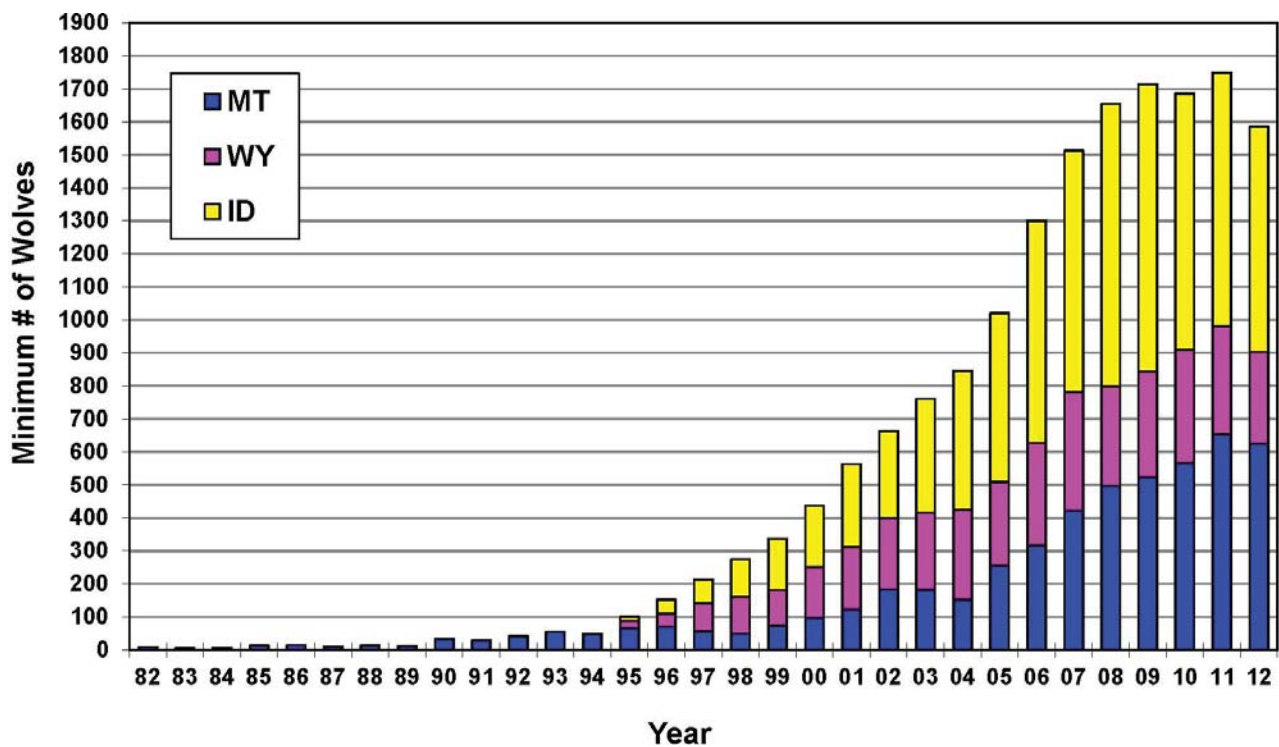


Figure 4. Trends for minimum wolf population sizes in Idaho (ID), Montana (MT), and Wyoming (WY) from 1980–2012 showing how wolf numbers have responded to recovery efforts (USFWS 2012). Gray wolves were listed as endangered under the ESA in 1974; regional recovery began in 1995.

Economic impacts of wolf reintroduction

Hunting is a large part of both Idaho’s economy and IDFG’s budget. According to IDFG’s current budget, 37% of IDFG’s revenue comes from hunting or fishing licenses (IDFG 2013). Out-of-state hunters not only pay more for licenses, but also bring in tourism money (IDFG 2013). As of 2008, there were no decreases in tag sales, even though more elk were killed due to wolf predation (IDFG 2008). In this same year wolves generated \$35.5 million in eco-tourism in the Greater Yellowstone Area (Duffield et al. 2008). This has not expanded outside of this area (IDFG 2008). The brunt of the economic hardship due to wolves is borne by ranchers. Even though depredation events

account for less than 0.01% of the regional ranching economy, ranchers inevitably lose more when they are only compensated for livestock that they observed being killed or can prove were killed by wolves (Muhly and Musiani 2009).

Social perceptions – public opinion of wolves in Idaho

As both human and wolf populations expand, the potential for conflict increases. The greatest of these conflicts involves wolves and the livestock industry. A report in 2010 recognized 450 depredations (mostly cattle and sheep) caused by wolves. This constituted a relatively small proportion of all livestock losses throughout the northwestern U.S. region, although areas with resident wolf packs may have been disproportionately affected (USFWS 2011). Compensation programs exist to cover a portion of wolf damages, mainly livestock deaths, and management includes lethal control of problem wolves. Between 1982 and 2004, humans caused over 80% of all documented wolf deaths in the northwest U.S. (e.g., legal control, illegal killings, and vehicle accidents; Murray et al. 2010). Potential conflicts may also include hunting hound depredation and competition with hunters for surplus wild ungulates.

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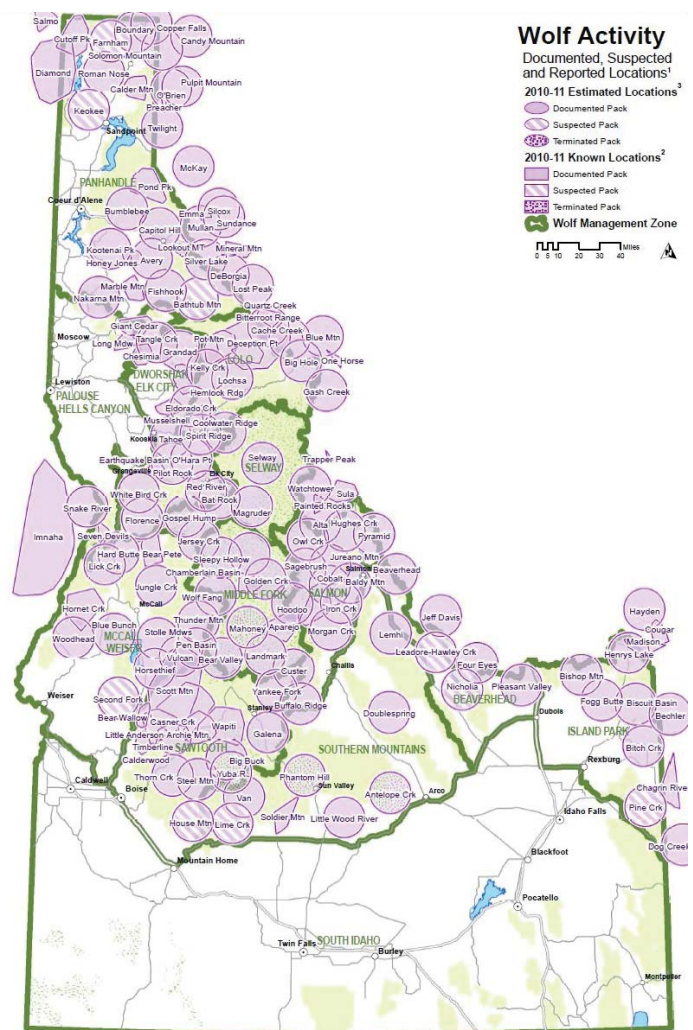


Figure 5. Distribution of documented and suspected wolf packs in Idaho, 2011 (Holyan et al. 2011).

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Hunter Stakeholder Group

Community Background

The setting is a large town of 10,000 people in a Central Idaho valley that has been expanding rapidly in recent years. Along the valley bottom, ranchers and farmers make a living much as their families have done for generations. Surrounding the town, in the mountains, there is ample National Forest land that provides for ever-popular elk hunting, seasonal grazing and even attracts tourists from nearby states for winter recreation, sport hunting and wildlife viewing. Given the quaint small town feel and easy access to the mountains, the town has seen a recent influx of out-of-staters moving in more permanently. Over the past few years the wolf population has also increased exponentially both in and around the town. Tensions are running high as different people have opposing views about what to do regarding wolves.

Stakeholder: Hunter

I've been hunting elk in northern Idaho for the past thirty years. When I first started hunting, I would get an elk every year. Every couple of years I would even get a nice-sized bull. Each of my buddies from out-of-state paid over \$800 a year for their tag and license. That may seem like a lot of money, but, in those days, a good hunter could pretty much count on getting an animal. That was all before the Canadian wolves were introduced into Idaho. You should see what those wolves are doing to the elk population! Every year it is harder to get your elk. Population numbers are so low that out-of-state hunters are buying fewer tags, costing the state of Idaho valuable revenue. We need to start hunting wolves and protecting the elk. Wolves are generally bad for the local economy. I went to school with a rancher and he is always telling us stories about how the wolves are killing off his cattle. Of course the environmentalists in Boise and D.C. love the wolves and think that they are a natural part of the forests. However, those folks don't have to live with the wolves.



Videos to Watch Before Class

General overview: <http://youtu.be/mm5xKa9qNwU>

Hunter point-of-view: <http://youtu.be/BuUeK1kPnHE>

Questions

1. What are the major issues—economic, safety, animal rights, civil rights—for hunters as a group? What are your most important priorities?
2. Taking all factors into consideration, what, in your opinions, is the best management plan for the gray wolf population?
3. How would you advise and help guide the thinking of California's officials when wolves inevitably get established in that state?

Rancher Stakeholder Group

Community Background

The setting is a large town of 10,000 people in a Central Idaho valley that has been expanding rapidly in recent years. Along the valley bottom, ranchers and farmers make a living much as their families have done for generations. Surrounding the town, in the mountains, there is ample National Forest land that provides for ever-popular elk hunting, seasonal grazing and even attracts tourists from nearby states for winter recreation, sport hunting and wildlife viewing. Given the quaint small town feel and easy access to the mountains, the town has seen a recent influx of out-of-staters moving in more permanently. Over the past few years the wolf population has also increased exponentially both in and around the town. Tensions are running high as different people have opposing views about what to do regarding wolves.

Stakeholder: Rancher

I'm a third generation rancher in Idaho. My family has successfully raised cattle on private and National Forest Service land for fifty-three years. Our ranch feeds people, creates jobs, and stimulates the local economy. These days are hard economic times and the wolf problem just makes life more difficult. We invest a lot of money into each cow and are finding more and more dead, wolf-maimed carcasses on our grazing allotment. Some packs get a taste for cattle and start preying almost exclusively on farm animals. We get reimbursed for some of the “depredation” but we have to prove that the death was wolf-caused and reimbursement takes time. The damage from these large Canadian timber wolves goes beyond ranching—hunters and the hunting-based economy are hurt too. Idaho simply can't afford to have such a large wolf population. Of course, environmentalists love the wolves and think that wolves belong in Idaho, but they don't have to live with wolves.



Videos to Watch Before Class

General overview: <http://youtu.be/mm5xKa9qNwU>

Rancher point-of-view: <http://youtu.be/cslyKq34a9w>

Questions

1. What are the major issues—economic, safety, animal rights, civil rights—for ranchers as a group? What are your most important priorities?
2. Taking all factors into consideration, what, in your opinions, is the best management plan for the gray wolf population?
3. How would you advise and help guide the thinking of California's officials when wolves inevitably get established in that state?

Environmental Enthusiast Stakeholder Group

Community Background

The setting is a large town of 10,000 people in a Central Idaho valley that has been expanding rapidly in recent years. Along the valley bottom, ranchers and farmers make a living much as their families have done for generations. Surrounding the town, in the mountains, there is ample National Forest land that provides for ever-popular elk hunting, seasonal grazing and even attracts tourists from nearby states for winter recreation, sport hunting and wildlife viewing. Given the quaint small town feel and easy access to the mountains, the town has seen a recent influx of out-of-staters moving in more permanently. Over the past few years the wolf population has also increased exponentially both in and around the town. Tensions are running high as different people have opposing views about what to do regarding wolves.

Stakeholder: Environmental Enthusiast

As an avid hiker and backpacker, I am thrilled to have wolves back in the state of Idaho. Wolves are a natural part of the ecosystem and deserve to be here as much as, or more than, us. These majestic animals are a symbol of the American wilderness and need to be protected. There are no historical records of wolves harming people in the United States. In fact, wolves help people by stimulating the local economy through eco-tourism. Elk populations are unnaturally high, causing over-browsing of vegetation and changes in the ecosystem. Wolves lower elk and other prey numbers to a natural state, and there is evidence that they strengthen elk herds—why would they want to decimate their prey base altogether? Some hunters say that wolves make hunting too difficult, but I say that hunting has been unnaturally easy. Ranchers complain about wolf depredation, however, non-profit organizations and the government reimburse ranchers for farm animals that are killed, and I know some ranchers that are finding ways to live sustainably with wolves.



Videos to Watch Before Class

General overview: <http://youtu.be/mm5xKa9qNwU>

Environmental Enthusiast point-of-view: <http://youtu.be/qK1mZ4fL6Pk>

Questions

1. What are the major issues—economic, safety, animal rights, civil rights—for environmental enthusiasts as a group? What are your most important priorities?
2. Taking all factors into consideration, what, in your opinion, is the best management plan for the gray wolf population?
3. How would you advise and help guide the thinking of California's officials when wolves inevitably get established in that state?