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A biologist's perspective on wolf restoration

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Guest Commentary

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Recently I spoke in Carbondale and Aspen about restoring the gray wolf to the public wildlands of western Colorado. Some have claimed that my presentations were misleading. They were not. I stuck to reliable facts and concluded with an important truth: coexisting with wolves is a straightforward affair.

This is hard for some to accept. The centuries-old myth that the wolves are marauding beasts that exercise their predatory desires at will is powerful and widely believed.

But the myth is as wrong as it is strong.

When considering wolf restoration five issues deserve attention: human safety, depredations on livestock, predation on native prey, ecological consequences and natural recolonization.

Wolves pose an infinitesimal threat to humans. Wolves are shy and retiring around people and avoid them. Encounters between the two are rare and overwhelmingly not threatening.

If wolves are restored to western Colorado some will kill livestock, but not many. Montana, Wyoming and Idaho support about 6 million cattle and 1 million sheep. On average, 117 and 235, respectively, are killed annually by the state's 1,500 wolves. Considering just Montana, the state supports about 2 million cattle and 450 thousand sheep. On average, 50 and 65, respectively, are killed annually by about 500 wolves.

The western half of Colorado supports about 500 thousand cattle and 175 thousand sheep. If wolves were restored and depredated on livestock as they do in Montana, 99.99 percent of the cattle and 99.97 percent of the sheep would not be involved in depredations.

Some depredations go undetected and in very specific situations wolves can modestly inhibit weight gain by livestock. Compensation payments for wolf problems could be adjusted upward to account for both.

Ranchers have always been challenged to promote the survival of livestock and proper weight gain before slaughtering for profit. For nearly all of them, wolves would not add to the challenge.

Montana, Wyoming and Idaho support robust deer and elk populations and abundant hunting opportunities. The approximately 1,500 wolves that live there have not diminished those opportunities.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife estimates that the state supports over 700,000 deer and elk after hunters have annually killed an average of about 85,000 of them. A wolf can maintain good health by consuming an average of 10 lbs. of food per day. Consequently, 250 wolves could be expected to annually consume the equivalent of 2,500 adult elk and 7,500 deer. This represents less than 2 percent of the state's elk and deer population that exists after hunters have killed their fill.

While wolves might impact hunting opportunities in some specific areas, a wolf population in western Colorado would not disrupt existing abundant hunting opportunities.

Wolves could actually benefit hunters by making game more wary and a greater challenge to kill. Wolves could also help curb the spread of diseases, like chronic wasting disease, that compromise the health of game herds and someday may threaten humans. Notably, the Center for Disease Control recommends against consuming the meat of elk and deer that harbor chronic wasting disease.

Re-establishing the wolf is a step toward restoring an important part of Colorado's natural balance, which is a useful term for describing the ecological consequences of wolves. Reliable studies indicate that when wolves are common enough for long enough their predatory activities can stimulate a trophic cascade that promotes ecosystem health.

Natural balance also refers to the presence of all native species as originally arranged by nature. There is wisdom in this arrangement. While fully understanding this wisdom may be difficult, it is wrongheaded to deny it. It also is wrongheaded to deny the importance of each species to it. As the father of wildlife management, Aldo Leopold, opined: "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

Restoring the wolf to the public wildlands of western Colorado represents intelligent tinkering.

Some claim that wolves are naturally recolonizing western Colorado. They are not. The distance from northwestern Wyoming is too great and there are simply far too many mortality hazards along the way for natural recolonization.

Wolves that wander into Colorado are fully protected under the Endangered Species Act. Consequently, most management actions for resolving wolf-related conflicts would be prohibited. If wolves were reintroduced, however, the federal law could be relaxed and management acts employed to resolve problems. Reintroduced wolves are easier to live with than naturally occurring ones.

Facts like those above support the claim that co-existing with wolves in western Colorado would be a straightforward affair. All that is lacking is a willingness to accommodate the species.

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