

Should Predators Be Killed?

When the great Aldo Leopold, a forester and author, was young he had "never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf."

Once, when a pack of wolves sprang from the willows "in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings" he pumped lead into the pack leaving an old wolf to die and a young pup dragging its leg.



Photo U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Gray Wolf

He thought fewer wolves would mean more deer and a paradise for hunters. But as he saw the "fierce green fire" dying in the old wolves eyes, he knew "the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

Over the years, he saw state after state kill its wolves and observed many wolfless mountains. On these mountains, deer became over abundant and over destroyed the vegetation, such as young trees.

Wolves and many other predators at the top of the food web are keystone species, which means when they affect the survival and abundance of many other species.

When Yellowstone Park reintroduced wolves in 1995, many kinds of plant and animal species began to rebound.

The wolves often leave behind partially eaten carcasses of elk moose, providing food for grizzly bears, coyotes, golden eagles, bald eagles, magpies, ravens and other species.

With elk populations under control, streamside vegetation that elks had been over consuming for decades, such as young cottonwood trees, willow shrubs and aspen trees, are able to grow. This vegetation shades and cools streams, allowing native trout to thrive. It provides habitat for songbirds, insects and other wildlife. And the willow shrubs provide food for beavers, a keystone species which had gone extinct in the area. With beavers surviving, there are beaver dams that create marshy wetlands that provide habitat for a wide diversity of species such as fish, song birds, amphibians, otters, minks, ducks, insects and plant species.

The Social Nature of Wolves

“A wolf's territory represents the place where their family lives and where they're safe. If you're in your pack's territory, you have a family to help defend you, to care for you, to share food with you. Wolves are the parents, the mothers, the fathers, the brothers and sisters that we always hoped we could be. I mean there's extreme loyalty among family members, it's everything to them.”

- Ed Bangs*
Wolf Recovery Program
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

* From "Nova: Bringing Wolves Home"

The wolf packs kill about half of the coyotes, which means red foxes, weasels, badgers, martens and rodents survive. And as more rodents survive, there is abundant food for hawks.

Ranchers complain that wolves are a threat to livestock, so the organization Defenders of Wildlife have provided a fund to compensate them for losses.

Coyotes are also important to the web of life. If they disappear from a canyon, many birds go extinct. Coyotes protect birds by preying on their enemies: foxes, possums and raccoons, which eat either birds, their eggs or their young.

Leopold wrote, "The last word in ignorance is the man that says of an animal or plant "what good is it? ... To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

But the killing of predators continues. Government Wildlife Services across the country killed 87,512 coyotes in 2006. The governor of Alaska is offering a \$150 bounty for any wolf killed in certain areas -- provided the shooter turns in the dismembered legs as proof. Moreover, the Bush Administration is planning to strike down protection for Greater Yellowstone's wolves under the Endangered Specie Act, which would result in the states of Wyoming and Idaho killing a majority of wolves in Yellowstone's wild country and central Idaho.

They say wolves endanger livestock. But the National Wildlife Research Center in Fort Collins, Colorado, is trying innovative, nonlethal approaches that can

be used to deal with predators that eat livestock, or threaten domestic pets or humans. For instance, they are trying new scare devices and sounds to keep wolves out of pastures. These are motion sensor devices that sense movement and that are placed strategically around the pasture. If an animal trips that motion sensor, it will send off strobe lights and different alarms or human related noises such as a gunshot or a siren.

"But predators are very smart and they become habituated to some of these things, so Government Wildlife National Research Center is doing studies to see how they can make the effects last longer," said Gail Keirn, who works with the center.

They have been using a scheme from Europe called fladry, which is flags that flap in the breeze. "Wolves are very cautious. They are a little hesitant to explore new things," said Keirn. "The fladry can keep them out of pastures for up to 60 days, which is very useful during calving season. Now we are trying to go one step further and electrify that fladry. They usually bite at the flags when they go to explore. If they get that little shock, it will reinforce that they don't want to go there."

They are starting some field studies on that this spring to see if it actually keeps wolves out of pastures even longer.

"In the past, they've done a lot with guard dogs, helping people learn how to raise a dog appropriately," she said.

It shows that if we have the will, we can safeguard biodiversity and the balance of nature.