

The West needs more, not fewer, wolves

Guest column by GEORGE WUERTHNER | Posted: Monday, June 7, 2010 7:49 am

Despite the dire predictions from hunter advocacy groups that wolves are "destroying" elk herds, the real problem for Montana and other western states is not that wolves eat too many elk; rather the problem is that they do not eat enough.

Top predators like wolves can reduce populations of elk, deer and moose. Rather than view this as a problem, as state wildlife agencies are prone to do, a reduction in ungulates is a good thing for ecosystems. Fewer elk, for instance, can give favored food items like aspen and willows more time to grow. More aspen and willows can mean more songbirds and more riparian vegetation, which in turn can reduce flooding and create more fish habitat.

Top predators, by limiting other meso predators such as coyotes, can influence the survival of other species - for instance, pronghorn fawns appear to have higher survival where wolves have reduced coyote numbers. Predators can also limit the spread of brucellosis, CWD and other diseases, provide carrion for salvagers, and increase the "wildness" and alertness of prey species. Wolves perform and promote all these ecological services for free.

We hear all the time from hunters that "we need to manage predators like other wildlife." But this ignores the fact that predators are not like other wildlife. Top predators are intricately linked by social behavior that is disrupted when hunters and/or ranchers indiscriminately kill significant numbers of them, increasing conflicts with humans. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that indiscriminate killing of wolves, cougars, and bears skews the age structure toward younger animals that are less skillful hunters and are more likely to kill easy prey like livestock and/or display other bold behavior.

Plus, a predator population dominated by young animals is more likely to produce a higher percentage of young that survive - which in turn have high demands for food - and thus more likely to lead to high ungulate predation.

In reality the best way to manage predators to reduce conflicts is not to kill them at all.

Despite the growing evidence that hunting actually has the opposite effect of stated goals of reducing human/predator conflicts, state wildlife agencies are increasing indiscriminate killing of predators. Why? It's easy to explain if you understand how agencies are funded. State wildlife agencies depend on hunter license sales to fund their operations; they are not going to jeopardize their funding and growth by promoting predators.

Agencies exploit the increase in conflicts to demonstrate a "need" for more predator control. So we get a self-fulfilling situation where agencies increase the killing of predators, which in turn beget more predators that are socially disrupted and more likely to be creating conflicts with humans, thus fueling more demands to kill predators. Agencies do little to promote and/or require non-lethal measures that could reduce conflicts with livestock operations because in reality, they want an excuse to kill wolves and other predators to reduce predation pressures on ungulates as a way to appease hunters.

The only solution that will ensure reasonable consideration of predator ecological role and the public's right to see and experience predators, is to take away the direct agency conflicts and ban the hunting of top predators. California did just this with cougars. Despite ominous warnings that un hunted cougars would devastate elk and deer, California continues to enjoy not only plenty of deer and elk, but also abundant cougar. Every year some cougars are killed by wildlife officials, but such killing is done surgically to remove individual animals that may have grown too bold, not to appease hunters.

Similarly, in Minnesota where the hunting of wolves is still illegal, deer herds and deer hunting continue to thrive. Despite the presence of more than 3,500 wolves there are nearly a million deer in Minnesota. To put this into perspective, 3,500 is more than twice the number of wolves that exist in all three Rocky Mountain states, which collectively are four times as large as Minnesota.

It is clear that wolves and other predators are not going to "destroy" hunting opportunity - though they may at times, in some places, significantly reduce ungulate numbers - which is exactly what they should be doing.

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