

A Look Beyond

So You Want to Work with Wolves?

by John Shivik

Growing up with three older sisters was a bit like being raised by wolves. One of their favorite games was called “stop hitting yourself.” To play, I was immobilized, and then with my arms overpowered, I was forced to repeatedly pummel my own noggin while they uttered the name of the game. Watching yourself hit yourself, feeling the pain and humiliation, yet being unable to stop is somewhat like being a federal biologist working with wolves. I’ve learned humility from my experiences but also formed the opinion that

if you want to work with wolves, first consider medication; if that doesn’t help, at least develop your sense of humor.

But I have other characteristics that help me in my vocation. For example, the thing that enables me to work most effectively with wolves is that I do not consider myself a wolf biologist. If nothing else, this allows me to investigate and work with these animals (which I really do

consider to be pretty cool) with a certain amount of relaxed levity if not complete objectivity.

Part of my problem is that I didn’t go into wildlife biology because I thought I could change or improve the world, because I love our Mother Earth or Brother Wolf, or because I thought I’d learn how to hunt more deer, which were the reasons given by most of my undergraduate wildlife management colleagues. No, I think I did it just because I liked to be outside and thought animals were fascinating. Then, I began to study human-wildlife conflicts because the problems were so interesting, nearly intractable puzzles that really challenged one’s mind. Lastly, I became



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interested in wolves because they were the new, rapidly growing issue for someone who was dedicating his life to resolving conflicts between humans and predators.

I admit that working with wolves has been a little more difficult than I originally thought. From a purely scientific perspective, it was really easy to devise a simple solution to the controversies regarding these animals. My first purely biological solution was to kill all of the wolves, and/or all of the livestock, and/or all of the people. That was shot down pretty quickly. I came up with other modest proposals too, such as designating land (i.e., “zoning”) as preferential habitat where wolves would be free to roam without harassment. Sure, this would have added some hardships to the residents of Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth and Moose Lake, who would have been required to move to Mesa, Arizona, after their homes and offices were demolished to improve that area’s habitat for wolves and game. But

hey, with a proper compensation program, I bet they would have been fine with it.

That’s been the difficult part, factoring people into the equations. Adding more people to the discussion is like adding more bullets to a revolver before going first in Russian roulette. For example, my collaborators and I have been assigned various appellations such as “contemptible fraud” and “Himmler,” and our work developing nonlethal methods has been described as “expensive, silly, stupid, impractical, foolish, absurd, idiotic, ridiculous, childish, inane, outlandish, asinine, juvenile, hare-brained, preposterous, and just plain dumb.” Luckily, I’ve learned not to take it personally.

The point is that values and opinions about wolves are independent of so many other things. One “thing” that is usually not part of the discussion is reality. I like working with wolves because they are fascinating animals. Other people like killing wolves because they are fascinating

animals. Some people change their names to Lupophilia and “educate” the public about wolves because they are fascinating animals. By “educate,” I mean indoctrinate, because the two most frequently asked questions are “Why don’t more people like wolves?” Answer: “Because they just don’t know (yet) that Little Red Ridinghood was not a literal account of a historic occurrence. If they were just less ignorant, then they’d invite wolves into their homes.” And “What will happen when wolf populations continue to grow?” Answer: “Death, destruction and devastation of biblical proportions. If people were just less ignorant, they’d kill all the wolves.” Information is subjective, and often unreal.

And there we are, stuck somewhere in the middle, catching fire from both sides. So, if you are thinking about studying wolves, educating people about wolves, or at least trying to learn how to live with them, it is important to note that there are a lot of other things that get mixed in and frustrate your efforts. Of course, by “frustrate” I mean “destroy,” and I call these “things” “Maalox moments.”

For now, my goal is to re-create wolves as animals—just predators—because this would make my life as a biologist much easier. There will be downsides, in that it will put my therapist out of work, but also upsides: one day we will be able to all come to the table, realize that wolves are pretty cool animals both for the good things that they do and for the bad things they do. With an even playing field, we might even find a biological solution or two for the conflicts that separate us. ■

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