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## **Wolf Recovery**

Wolves are not the only way to explore the ethics of humanity's relationship to animals. They have, nonetheless, a special resonance in many human cultures -- as beasts of waste and desolation, as vital ecological agents, as creatures exemplifying the best of humanity, as wild beings we can respect in all their familiarity and strangeness. Wolves move people, pro and con, and this opens up possibilities for dialogue about human-animal relations.

From an ecological perspective, wolves are an indicator of landscape health. They are indispensable 'top carnivores' that promote the health of ecosystems, as well as a 'flagship species' whose cache helps protect or restore other animals and plants that are not so charismatic. Yet the ability of wolves to thrive in wild and humanized landscapes may also be a cogent indicator of our own moral health. If we can learn to live with wolves – large predators require substantial habitat and human tolerance – then we will per force have taken significant steps towards living in a sustainable manner. If this were to occur, wolves would be both one instance of, as well as a model for, our ability to coexist with a more-than-human world.

The recovery and presence of wolves (and other predators) in a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing world raises old fears and new issues. Learning to share both natural and humanized landscapes with wolves is a difficult personal and cultural shift of perspective for some. It also entails real and unavoidable possibilities for social and political conflict. We should expect such difficulties when we try to optimize the well-being of people and wolves. To help mitigate or resolve such conflict, we need an ethics of wolf recovery. This ethics should not only help reveal the moral issues at stake, but provide guidance on how we ought to live with wolves in a shared landscape.

When speaking about ethics and wolves, one can get caught up in particular ethical theories and what they might say about wolves. This does little to advance our thinking. Ethics is not about rigid rules or dogmatic theories. It is really about the moral values that inform (or should inform) how we ought to live. With this in mind, let us look at several of the topics that have emerged in recent debates over humanity's relationship to wolves.

### **Ethics, Science and Public Policy**

The first topic is the relationship between ethics, science and public policy. How do we conceive of ethics and the role of ethics in science and public policy?

There are competing definitions of ethics, as well as ideas about how ethics applies to animals like wolves. At root, however, ethics is dialogue about 'how we ought to live' (from Plato's *Republic*, Book II, 312d). Moral dialogue and the insights that come with it help people envision how they can live so as to improve the well-being of people, animals and nature. Such dialogue also helps them critique those actions and institutions that detract from our well-being.

Ethics is especially helpful as a moral compass for public policies about wildlife and the environment. One frequently hears that such decisions should be based on science. There is nothing to argue here if this means science is an indispensable element of such decisions. But if it means that

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science is the only basis for making such decisions, then it is manifestly false and in need of correction. Why? Science can help us make decisions through findings of facts, by outlining possible courses of actions, and by projecting foreseeable outcomes. Yet science cannot tell us what we ought to do, or put another way, what is the right thing to do. This is always an ethical decision. However obscured by the disappointments of everyday politics, ethics is at the root of our struggles over articulating, adopting and implementing public policy. By integrating scientific and ethical information, we are in a better position to 'triangulate' on the best public policy.

As we can see then, our individual and public decisions to live with or without wolves are not best conceived of as a matter of following our own opinions, much less our economic or political interests. Nor are they about balancing the preferences of citizens, pro or con, in a setting where stakeholders bargain from their own self-interest or policy perspectives. Instead, they are ethics-laden deliberations and negotiations about whether to share the landscape with a large predator like the wolf.

### **Intrinsic Value**

The second topic is whether wolves have intrinsic value. The idea behind intrinsic value (sometimes called inherent value) is that one has importance or worth in and of oneself, without reference to what one's value is to someone or something else. Do wolves have intrinsic value?

Through the course of history, people have disagreed over the intrinsic value of both people and animals. Racism, sexism and ethnocentrism are, at their heart, attempts to diminish the intrinsic value of a person or group that is seen as different or 'other' than one's own. Speciesism is a related phenomenon, and has been an ongoing problem with how some societies relate to wolves. For example, the First Nations of North America by and large respected the intrinsic value of wolves, and saw them as fellow residents in a common landscape. In contrast, European colonialists denied intrinsic value to any animal except human beings, and saw the wolf as a pest to be eliminated. When someone says a creature is 'just an animal', that is a clue as to how they assess the moral value of other beings.

To better understand this issue, we have to first appreciate why people are said to have intrinsic value. Human beings are intelligent and social creatures - we think, feel and relate. We are aware of our surroundings as well as our individual 'selves'. This is why we are termed *Homo sapiens*, the 'wise earthly ones'. Because of our self-awareness, we have an individual worth independent of the use anyone has for us. This belief in our own 'intrinsic value' is the core reason why we are taught to treat people with respect, and why we have developed ethical principles to guide our thought and behaviour. Moreover, our well-being can be helped or harmed by others as well as by social policies. It is no wonder then that love and friendship and democracy and justice are so important. They are interpersonal and institutional ways that help us treat individuals and communities with the respect that moral beings like ourselves deserve.

Some believe that since wolves are not human beings, they cannot have intrinsic value. Instead they have extrinsic value (sometimes called instrumental value). To have extrinsic value is to be of use to someone or something else; one's value is extrinsic or outside of oneself. The roles wolves play in ecosystems, or their economic worth (or cost) to human beings, are examples of extrinsic value. From this extrinsic point-of-view, controversies over human-wolf relations are addressed through a policy process that sees wolves as a 'natural resource' available for 'sustained harvest' and requiring 'rational' wildlife management as driven by 'science'. This is coded language. It implies that wolves

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are no different than any other agricultural commodity, or that they are simply functional units of ecosystems. To think otherwise is to be muddled, emotional and irrational.

Ethically, there is a problem with claims that wolves have only instrumental value. The wisdom of native cultures, cognitive ethology and common sense tell us that wolves are also intelligent and social creatures. This was so obvious to some early civilizations that they modeled their societies after wolves. Wolves were amongst the first animals to socially interact with human beings, and may have been the direct ancestors of the domesticated dog. Think about the extraordinary communication between handlers and their hunting, herding and working dogs, or between a child and a puppy at play. The special emotional and social bond that has evolved between people and dogs required a species like wolves, who like us, can think, feel and relate. And like people, the well-being of wolves can be helped or harmed, most particularly by human actions. From this point-of-view, wolves are moral beings too, creatures with their own intrinsic value independent of someone's use or antipathy for them.

Note that wolves are not the same kind of moral beings as people, and we should not try to treat people and wolves in the same way. They have no right to free speech, although that does not mean that there are not right versus wrong ways to treat them. A better way to think about wolves is that they have a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic values, what is termed co-value. As individual creatures they have an inherent value in and of themselves. As members of a pack and predators in an ecological community, they also have an instrumental value. Again, this is not too different from the co-value of humans. We are moral beings who matter in and of ourselves, and we are instrumentally valued (or undervalued) by employers (for example) for whom we are primarily human resources.

What all this means is that wolves likely have some kind of intrinsic value, and their well-being ought to be taken into account as we debate, adopt and implement public policies about wildlife and land-use. Unfortunately, we rarely give explicit voice to these ideas in public meetings, even though they are one set of background understandings that powerfully inform the debate over wolves. This voice may speak in many tongues, including that of religion, spirituality, psychology, and emotion, all of which may approach the value of wolves from somewhat different directions. The key to understanding this diversity of voices is to look for the underlying meanings, and not to bicker over terminology. Overall, whether one thinks wolves are moral beings or not, we must appreciate that this belief is a core element of the wolf debate, and a legitimate reason why people care so much about wolves.

### **Land-Use**

The third topic to have recently emerged from debates about human-wolf relations is land use. The focal concerns here are whether and how to coexist with wolves in humanized landscapes.

As noted, ethics is a key element in the policy making process. It helps to ensure we are clear about both the facts and values which are the basis of our policy judgments. This is especially important with respect to wolf recovery. The heat of political and cultural conflict over wolves is more intense than that of any other wildlife issue. Without both ethics and science to keep our positions grounded, the debate over wolves can quickly dissolve into unproductive name-calling.

So what kind of creatures should be allowed to live in humanized landscapes? Where the basic needs of wolves are concerned, most experts note that wolves inhabit a range of habitats, need neither wilderness nor untouched forests to survive, and frequently live around human communities

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including large cities. The ecological needs of wolves are therefore not a serious barrier to their flourishing. Rather, wolves will thrive with sufficient prey, habitat and solitude as long as we exercise the ethical and social discipline to leave them alone.

This insight becomes more powerful when we understand that our beliefs about intrinsic value influence our willingness to share the landscape with wolves. A case in point is the vilification of wolves in North America. Historically, anti-wolf sentiment took the form of a moral argument against wolves. Wolves were considered villains, varmints and vermin; criminals preying on blameless deer, cattle and sheep; the spawn of Satan despoiling the land. We do not call violent criminals or sex offenders 'predators' for no reason. It is a carryover from a cultural bias that equates predation with victimization. As a consequence of this reasoning, humans tried to exterminate wolves with a vengeance, and in many portions of the wolf's range we succeeded.

Over the last century, scientists, ethicists and advocates challenged this view of wolves. Scientists argued for the value of predation in the natural world and demystified what it means to live with wolves. Ethicists debunked the idea that wolves are evil, malicious or immoral. They also clarified the moral reason why we should respect their well-being. Advocates mobilized broad public support for the defense of wolves as an endangered species, which is crucial to conserving biodiversity. Taken together these efforts have interjected more reasonable ecological, social and moral criteria into public policy. These efforts have also transformed our relationship with wolves. Where that relationship was formerly one of outright hostility, it is now more diverse, with the largest segment of the public supportive of coexisting with wolves.

With respect to how we can coexist with wolves, there are inevitable conflicts that need to be addressed. Wolves occasionally prey on livestock and companion animals. Neither of these are substantial problems for our society or our economy. For example, the number of livestock lost to wolf depredation is miniscule when compared to the number of cattle and sheep that die of disease, accidents, weather and other natural causes. Even so, the overall statistics can mask the substantial economic and/or emotional impact on individuals who lose companion animals or livestock.

In response to these legitimate concerns, three proactive strategies have arisen – education in living with predators, range management practices, and compensation funds for lost livestock and working dogs. The education programs teach people the importance of wolves to a healthy landscape, as well as how to avoid conflict with them in the first place. Wolves are attracted to easy meals, so bringing pets indoors at night and securing our garbage are examples. The education programs may also touch upon best practices for range management. These include predator-proof fencing, temporary pens for livestock birthing, purpose-bred guard dogs, and aversion technologies such as motion-controlled sound devices. Compensation funds either pay individuals the fair-market replacement cost of livestock or working dogs lost to wolves, or subsidize the purchase and use of the best practices mentioned above.

Note, however, that there is also a growing debate over whether a natural background rate of predation should be accepted in landscapes with wolves. National and other levels of government frequently subsidize livestock production, as well as the 'wildlife services' that kill wild animals to benefit agricultural interests. Wolves are often killed in an effort to reduce their depredations (however small in number), and little attention is given to proactive measure of conflict mitigation, much less other improvements in herd management that would reduce the overall mortality of livestock. This raises the question of whether citizens should, for moral and economic reasons, be

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footing the bill to kill wolves and other predators instead of both requiring and helping agricultural communities transition into more predator-friendly modes of operation.

In addition, there is an increasingly tense debate about the scale and kind of development activities that people should practice in ‘wolf country’. The conversion of wild into agricultural or urban landscapes has been an ongoing feature of human settlements for thousands of years. The scale and impact of this development has picked up rapidly in the last one hundred years, due not only to the explosive growth in human population, but the intensification of resource use. We now refer to this as the problem of sprawl. Sprawl is of two sorts, urban and economic. It involves the expansive growth of low-density urban landscapes (think strip malls and track housing), and the development of formerly wild or inaccessible areas for agriculture, forestry and extractive industries. Sprawl destroys agricultural and wild habitat around cities and towns, fragments wild land into smaller and smaller blocs of less species-rich habitat, and brings people into closer proximity to wild animals like wolves. Controlling sprawl requires comprehensive land-use planning at local, regional and national scales.

### **Wolf Management**

The final topic relating to ethics and wolves is about the practice of wildlife management. This involves questions of how one monitors and intervenes in the lives of wolves whether for scientific research or for the administration of wildlife policies.

In any discussion of predator management, you are likely to hear quite a bit about ‘sound science’. Sound science is supposed to be the evidentiary, theory-rich baseline for managing wildlife and making public policy. Yet when science is substituted for ethics, our moral compass fails and we are likely to be led astray. Wolf management provides a particularly powerful example of the moral controversies that can arise from a seemingly technical subject.

The techniques used to study and manage wolves are frequently intensive and intrusive. Wolves are radio-collared, monitored, tranquilized, assessed, captured, incarcerated and killed on a regular basis. We still have much to learn about wolves, and there are undoubtedly legitimate scientific reasons to study them using such techniques. Managing wolves in this way may also be required to meet certain goals of wolf recovery. It is, for instance, a necessity in the Red wolf recovery program, where monitoring and managing wolf pairings helps prevent hybridization with coyotes. Even so, the use of these techniques is not a sustainable model for long-term recovery. They are expensive propositions in terms of time and labour, and a burden on under-funded and under-staffed organizations, as well as an annoyance to individuals and communities. As noted before, with sufficient food and space, wolves will flourish. Over time, they will establish their own population levels and distribution in dynamic relationship to the habitat and other resources they need for survival.

There is another more insidious reason for conducting intensive wolf management, namely to appease vested human interests that oppose our coexistence with wolves. This kind of management is not undertaken for the benefit of science, much less for the well-being of wolves. Although sometimes justified as maintaining the ‘social carrying capacity’ of wolves, intensive management in this context involves killing or removing wolves with little attention to other proactive measures for mitigating human-wolf conflicts. This approach is also behind the artificially low population goals in some wolf management plans, the designation of certain wolf populations as expendable, and land-use planning that effectively creates wolf-free zones. Wolf recovery and conservation may be the

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stated goals. The reality of this type of management is quite different; it amounts to an institutionalized system of species cleansing that tries to exclude wolves from the vast majority of the landscape.

Vested interests that distort wolf management are ethically problematic in their own right. Equally disturbing is employing lethal and other blunt-force techniques with little apparent concern for the well-being of individual wolves or their packs. For wolves, the social disruption of intrusive management can be severe. Pups without parents starve or are preyed upon. The loss of adult members that teach younger wolves how to survive in the wild, as well as around humans, can lead to heightened mortality and further conflict with people. Wolf packs that are exterminated are replaced by new packs, which may be even less familiar than its predecessor with how to avoid the danger of particular humans on the landscape. What we have here is the makings of a vicious cycle that, from an ethical point of view, we should try to break.

A growing number of voices are objecting to wolves being isolated in a gulag of isolated habitats, surrounded by exclusion and free-fire zones, and subjected to routine and invasive management. From an ethical perspective, such questions raise the possibility that our current wolf management practices detract from the overall well-being of wolves. For all these reasons, debate over this relatively recent topic of wolf recovery is likely to grow increasingly intense in future years.

**See also**        Animals and Public Policy  
                     Ethics  
                     Human-Animal Studies  
                     Practical Ethics

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