



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

When the wolf comes to town

Few subjects in wildlife conservation are as fundamentally polarizing and explosive as the topic of wolves. And like most subjects in our “Breaking News” zeitgeist, the hyperbole skills on all sides of the wolf issue seem to work in feverish piques, pandering to our baser emotional responses, and often ignoring outright any evidence contrary to their own cherished narrative.

In other words, we hear mostly from the mostly unreasonable.

Which makes the conversation very difficult to have at all. But columnists are frequently meant to paddle against the current, and since wolves will eventually reestablish themselves along the eastern Cascades, now seems a good time to offer up a few thoughts on how we might have a more profitable discussion.

First: if you are one of those so strident in your love for wolves, or the idea

of wolves, that you do not believe they occasionally kill for mere sport, or that they can, overnight, decimate a livestock herd, you are living in a fantasy world of extraordinary proportions. It might be far more effective, and a convincing overture, for those interested in wolf preservation to finally accept the destruction wolves can cause as an evidence-backed reality.

And if the closest you’ve ever been to a wolf pack in the wild is your flat screen television, perhaps let the late Timothy Treadwell, who was eaten alive by a brown bear — one among many he claimed to have befriended in the wild — serve as a cautionary tale in the milk-and-cookies approach to apex predators.

And maybe, somehow, try to muster some empathy for livestock producers whose livelihoods can be severely impacted by wolf predation. If you truly desire to sponsor reasonable dialogue that may ultimately benefit wolves, save your energy for disputing the extent to which those claims are true.

Conversely, if you believe the only good wolf is a dead wolf, recognize that to others you may sound intellectually impaired, and possibly incapable of adult conversation — which is a nice way of saying hair-trigger dumb. Joining the Shoot, Shovel, and Shut-up crowd makes one sound more like a honky-tonk nitwit than a visionary problem-solver.

Perhaps, if you hate

wolves, or the idea of wolves, try to accept that “The absence of top predators appears to lead inexorably to ecosystem simplification accompanied by a rush of extinctions.” This is known, scientifically, as The Paine Effect, and it is worth studying because it suggests that having wolves around will eventually prove beneficial to a parallel goal, which is a healthier ecosystem from which deer, elk, and humans alike will all benefit.

And ranchers, who typically live much closer to wolves than the average urban wolf advocate, probably deserve something more generous than didactic lectures about grazing fees when they ride up on a pasture of defenseless heifers or ewes ripped apart in the night by wolves.

Finally, maybe everyone can avoid taking easy potshots at those people tasked with both the execution and enforcement of wolf management — which is like nurturing a mindless hatred for cops because you don’t like traffic laws. Far better, it would seem, to spend that energy becoming an effective member of one of the numerous working groups who hammer out wolf management policy in the first place.

Often left out of the discussion altogether is this notable bit: There is evidence, from top-down predator studies around the world, that encouraging controlled hunts of apex predators may ultimately help sustain populations of the animal in



PHOTO BY DOUG MCLAUGHLIN

question. It works, in part, by bringing vital economic benefits to communities — so that, turning the usual dynamic on its head, the animal is endowed with intrinsic value, and so communities that once carried out eradication campaigns evolve into stakeholders in preserving manageable populations of the species.

In that scenario, every reasonable voice in the discussion gets something of what they want, and a model that has proven to work for bears in Romania, and tigers in Russia, and the people who live and work amongst them, might prove workable for wolves in America.

Wherever one might stand on the topic, one thing seems relatively certain: there remains opportunity for all sides to move off of positions often dominated less by reason and research,

and more by emotional embellishment and historical prejudice. Like it or not, we know that wolves are coming this way, and so it might be timely to redouble our efforts at understanding what wolves are, and perhaps more importantly, what they aren’t.

And while we are better informing our opinions, maybe we can also keep in mind, as author David Quammen wrote in his excellent study of apex predators, “Monster of God,” that “The universe is a very big place, but as far as we know it’s mainly empty, boring, and cold. If we exterminate the last magnificently scary beasts on planet Earth, as we seem bent upon doing, then no matter where we go for the rest of our history as a species — for the rest of time — we may never encounter any others.”

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