

Rehabilitating the gray wolf's image in America

By Oliver Milman, The Guardian, 06.02.16



Some animal species are wiped out through sheer human carelessness as we go about building ever-spreading cities, towns and highways. America's gray wolf, on the other hand, was almost gleefully eliminated. Its near-extermination was driven by a mixture of deep disgust and fear.

Recovering the wolf is as much about the animal's image as it is about its numbers. This is not a straightforward issue. Throughout history, wolves have been pictured in a variety of terrible and frightening ways. In the children's story of Little Red Riding Hood, for example, the wolf is a crafty killer capable of wearing the clothes of an elderly woman after devouring her. More recently, in the 2011 film "The Grey," a pack of wolves are the merciless tormentors of an exhausted Liam Neeson.

People tend to have strong feelings about wolves, said Doug Smith, the project leader for the wolf restoration project at Yellowstone National Park. "Some people just hate them."

Rehabilitating The Wolf's Image

Smith's team has worked tirelessly to improve the animal's reputation. They give more than 200 public talks a year and plead with the media to treat wolves in a fair way.

Endangered Species Day on May 20 is another opportunity to reverse their bad reputation. It is also a good time to reflect upon what is perhaps one of the most celebrated attempts to bring a species back from near extinction.

Between 1995 and 1997, following a 60-year absence, 41 wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone. At the time, the reintroduction was highly controversial, but in the long run critics' fears proved to be groundless. "One congressman said there would be a dead child within a year. Well, we are 21 years on and no one has even been bitten," Smith said.

Keeping An Ecosystem In Check

Today, the reintroduction is widely seen as a case study in how large predators are essential for the environment.

In the absence of wolves, Yellowstone's elk population exploded. The elk were free to strip the landscape of willow, aspen and cottonwood trees, which adversely affected beavers and birds. Animals that rely upon the remains of elk killed by wolves also suffered.

The return of the wolves changed the whole landscape. Elk numbers were kept in check. Songbirds and beavers returned. Even the structure of rivers changed as elk, harassed by a new predator, were unable to casually dawdle on the riverbanks.

Positive Publicity

Some wolves became famous, enabling people to feel a little warmer toward them. A wolf called No. 9 had the first litter of eight pups and was known as the "matriarch of Yellowstone." A male was labeled Casanova, for his unusual habit of luring females away from different packs so as to mate with them. A female was known for her hunting skills and was mourned when she was shot outside the park in 2012.

The success of the reintroduction — there are now 100 wolves in 10 packs — has spurred a worldwide "rewilding" effort. Another result has been much-needed positive publicity for wolves in general.

“Fifty years ago, everyone hated wolves,” Smith said. “Now, half the population hates wolves. We are progressing; it’s getting better. We are arriving at the idea that we can live with them.”

Up to half a million wolves once roamed across the United States. They lived in harmony with Native Americans who revered them for supposed healing powers.

This affection was not shared by European newcomers who systematically exterminated wolves, piling their skulls and skins high. The animal was reviled as dangerous vermin and a threat to cattle.

From the 1960s, the wolf began to recover, going from a small band of holdouts in the Great Lakes region to viable populations in a handful of states. Federal protections followed. In the western states, 1,904 wolves were counted last year, with an additional 3,600 in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Fear Persists

Wolves generally like to steer clear of people, so attacks are rare. In 2013, a 16-year-old boy was lounging outside his tent at a Minnesota campsite when a wolf clamped its jaws around his head. In 1996, an 11-year-old boy was dragged from his sleeping bag by a wolf in Ontario, Canada. Neither human died.

Still, fear persists. Montana wants to triple the number of gray wolves that hunters and trappers can kill in an area bordering Yellowstone, over concerns that too many elk are being killed.

In New Mexico, federal attempts to introduce infant Mexican gray wolves, weighing just a pound each, are being fiercely resisted by the state. Legal action has been launched to stop the repopulation.

“It threatens families, it threatens their pets, it threatens their private property,” said Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers’ Association.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the unauthorized killing of wolves. Such poaching is driven by the still-strong feeling that wolves should be wiped out.

“People will never fully accept wolves,” Smith said. The most we can expect, he added, is that they will learn to put up with them.

Still, despite all the threats they still face, wolves are back. Their return from near-extinction is certainly something worthy of celebration.