

The Creature of McCone County, Part II

Creature Feeds Conspiracies, Controversy

By Hal Herring, 3-30-06

Editor's Note: This is the second in a two-part series on the creature of McCone county. [Click here to read the first installment.](#)

In Eastern Montana, permits had been issued and a plan formed to take care of a wandering creature, wolf or not, that had killed 36 sheep and injured some 71 more.

But the level of frustration in the prairie communities continued to build, further feeding a divide between two cultures -- one rooted to the land the animal was wandering, and the other filled with regulations designed to protect the animal.

Some of the first questions about how to deal with the stock-killer concerned the CM Russell Wildlife Refuge. Among the least popular of the federal government's many, many unpopular endeavors in the region, the CM Russell's one million acres (including the vast acreage of the surface of Fort Peck Reservoir) has been a flash point since it was set aside as a "game range" in 1936, following the general exodus of human population from the region in the wake of the Dust Bowl years. Among the extremely hardy agricultural people who did not leave, who stayed on, year after year, building larger and larger holdings in order to survive, there is ongoing suspicion that the Refuge, which has been the site of prairie dog town recovery (an idea that disgusts many ranchers who have battled the rodents for decades) is also the secret site of wolf re-introductions. Such secret re-introductions, it is theorized, will have the conspiratorial effect of bringing down even more federal regulations on ranching operations and have the wolves killing stock that will help to ease ranchers into the financial abyss.

That event will force the sale of private property and begin the creation of the Big Open, or the even more despised notion of the Buffalo Commons, a huge, unpeopled, wildlife reserve, running through the parts of the Great Plains states that have suffered big declines in agriculture and population since the

1920's. The re-introduction of protected wolves has long been seen around Jordan as the first sign of a resurrection of the Buffalo Commons idea, a new strategy for the urbanites and nature worshippers to begin the destruction and removal of the farming and ranching culture of the Plains. Everyone, from Carolyn Sime, who directs the wolf program for the state, through the officials at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, says that there is no evidence that wolves have ever been released on the Refuge, nor are there plans to ever do so. But the idea has taken root in Garfield County. "This question came up over and over," Sime said.

What if the Wildlife Services agents have to pursue this stock killer into the CM Russell National Wildlife Refuge? What if it attacks stock on the thousands of acres of leased grazing allotments inside the Refuge boundaries?

On March 14th, Montana Senator Conrad Burns organized a meeting in the small town of Circle, the county seat of McCone County, to review the options (as Cohagen rancher Alan Pluhar told me, "It's an election year. We wish that he would respond like this all the time, but we'll take what we can get.")The meeting drew a crowd of more than 100 people. Most of the ranchers who had lost stock were there to present their stories. According to Carolyn Sime, "there was a lot of frustration. It was a passionate, but civil, meeting ... You know," she continued, "with this wolf stuff, common sense and restraint sometimes disappears. It is extremely visceral, it goes way back, and it is all happening in the context of our time ...an age-old story, now juxtaposed to rising fuel and land prices, low commodity prices ... it is frustrating."

One of the direct results of the meeting was that the agents from Wildlife Services were granted permission to pursue the stock killing predator, whatever it turned out to be, onto the Refuge. Agents have the right to remove two wolves or wolf-like canids from the area, and from inside the Refuge. Ranchers who hold grazing leases on the Refuge would have the same rights to protect their stock from predation as leasees of other federal grazing lands, by killing the animal if it is attacking their stock, or by harassing it away if it seems like a threat. An indirect result was a difficult bit of legal wrangling to give the McCone County predator contractors the right to kill the animal. In the end, local predator control pilot, Jeff Skyberg and his shooter, Les Thomas agreed to volunteer their services to the FWP, and the FWP agrees to be responsible for their actions. It is a risk, but one worth taking, said Sime. "I was in McCone County with the landowners, and we had a good talk," she said. "We made a verbal agreement, and by the following Friday, we had everything legal." Skyberg and Thomas have what is left of the 45-day period following the stock attacks on March 11 to pursue and kill the wolf legally. After April 25th, if there are no more attacks, that permit will expire.

According to Larry Handegard, of the Billings office of Wildlife Services, agents are actively pursuing the creature now in Garfield County, using aircraft and traps. Jeff Skyberg is still flying and searching. They are joined by a good number of men and a few women, all of them busy and out on the prairie calving or lambing right now, who will hold to the time-tested doctrine of "shoot, shovel, and shut up," a doctrine that received some air time at the meeting in Circle, and probably much more at the Hell Creek Saloon in Jordan. A rancher who asked not to be named said this, "We are calving now, and there is no way we can afford to lose any stock. No way. If you are out there, and there's no vehicles in sight, and you see this animal, you will shoot it. SSS. And if anybody gets charged for that, we are going to band together, every one of us, and support that person."

Jim Whitesides, a rancher who lost 21 ewes, and an unknown number of unborn lambs to the animal, discussed the leverage that he and other landowners have over the FWP, if a solution to the predation problem cannot be found: "We have been in Block Management for 18 years, and we kind of initiated the idea of working with sportsmen, getting them access to land in return for them writing letters and helping support our predator control programs. I don't do any hunting -- I don't have time for it -- but we have worked very well together with the hunters. Now, if we can't work this out, I'm thinking of taking my land out of Block Management."

Over all of the ranchers on this part of the prairie, a cloud seems to hang, of an increasingly difficult future, made the more so, intentionally or not, by wildlife, and by rules made a long way away, by people whose motives seem ridiculous or incomprehensible. "This is bigger than Jordan and Circle having a little wolf problem," said another Jordan resident who asked not to be identified. "The USFWS is an out-of-control bureaucracy. The more rules they make, the more fines they bring in, the bigger they get. There so many encroachments on us now, from reducing AUMs on the BLM lands to way back under Nixon when some bleeding heart banned 1080. Why are people so upset over this? It is because everything seems to point to the idea that we can get rid of out farmers and ranchers, even while we import forty percent of our food ... if we don't watch out, they'll have a fence around this state. We've all seen the UN biodiversity maps, there's not much of Montana left over for human use."

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By Hal Herring, 3-30-06 | comments (33) | email story | print story

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By Jenny Shank

<p>Above: Gary and Diana Banbury of Virginia are building their dream home at the base of Sheep Mountain, on a lot in the Wild Horse Ranch subdivision created by Brooks Realty and Advisory Group. Gary Banbury, a mining engineer who once lived in Encampment, says,

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Comments

By Brodie Farquhar, 3-30-06

Given time, wolves will likely show up on the refuge on their own. Everyone gets excited about the 1,000 wolves in the Northern Rockies, but don't forget that the Great Lakes area has almost 4,000 wolves (3,000 in Minnesota) and individual wolves have already been seen in North and South Dakota. I haven't looked into Canadian wolf data, but it wouldn't surprise me if wolves drifted south into eastern Montana.

Wolves can range 500-plus miles looking for a mate and empty habitat to set up a new pack.

Who needs some furtive, federal conspiracy when Nature is so capable?

By Helena, 3-30-06

The idea that the Montana FWP or U.S Fish and Wildlife somehow planned to and released wolves in eastern Montana without anyone knowing about is an insult to both agencies. I grew up in and lived in eastern Montana for 30 years and am shamed by how ignorant people are about this.

By The Westerner, 3-31-06

Two interesting articles, written from a perspective not often seen from journalists writing on these type issues. I linked to both articles.

<http://www.thewesterner.blogspot.com>

By Todd in Bozeman, 3-31-06

I've been away from the northern Rockies for several weeks, only to return and find Hal Herring's excellent reporting on "the Creature from McCone County."

Do any of the Baby Boomers out there remember a wonderfully campy film in the 1970s titled "The Legend of Boggy Creek"?

The subject of that little cinematic gem was Bigfoot.

Also like Mary Shelley's fine prose, Hal's piece has it all: A rural area, plagued by an unknown creature, possibly planted secretly by government biologists or an evil scientist as in the X-Files, eating livestock. The only things missing are Agent Muldur, cattle mutilations coinciding with flying saucers and reports of black helicopters, passages from Nostradamus, and missing children.

But seriously, thanks, Hal, for a thoughtful, serious, and entertaining read. You reported this one just right.

I feel sorry for the ranchers who have lost sheep and if it's proven that wandering wolves killed them, I hope the federal government pays compensation which seems the right thing to do.

By john, 4-01-06

I wonder if many times more money is going to be spent on killing this (these) animal(s) than actual damage that they did. After all, aircraft and personnel time cost money, and a lot of it. Only in America...

By Paul Hill, 4-01-06

Great story! Demonizing those tree-hugging nature freaks, bashing the feds, prairiedogs, and buffaloes all in one felswoop, while making unabashed heroes & heroines out of the hard working ranchers of the high plains. In our future HBO movie "High Plains Creature", I suggest Charles Manson play the part of the hippie conspirator (we can do evil closeups from his jail cell); Tommie Lee Jones might be available to play the fed with divided loyalties, and maybe we can digitally morph old John Wayne footage with him portraying the righteous avenging rancher. Ok, that's silly. Let's get Clint Eastwood. I almost forgot "the creature." There's a ton of unwanted pit bulls banished from Denver and surrounding towns; one of them would probably jump at the chance for one last bite of glory...

By Connie, 4-03-06

Yes, this article and the comments are entertaining. But, seriously, doesn't the article inflame the situation? Do we really need that?

By j. black, 4-03-06

"some bleeding heart banned 1080"

Unbelievable comment! Can you imagine what just a few ounces of compound 1080 could do in the hands of any terrorist. Wow!....what planet is this person from? There's only ONE plant that still makes this toxin and there will soon be senate hearings aimed at banning 1080's manufacture. National security will be the issue.

By Marion, 4-03-06

I have no doubt the wolves would have finally migrated into Yellowstone and Wyoming, but of course they would have probably remained much wilder and would not have provided the entertainment the trucked in wolves do. And of course it would have lacked the power factor, of being able to force other people to bend to the environmental will.

I don't think the issue is nearly as much with the thousand admitted wolves, but the speed with which they attained those numbers. You have to admit 60 to a thousand in 10 years is pretty impressive reproduction. It won't take us long to get to 3 or 4000 at that rate.

The Great Lakes told us in 95 that the things would never be delisted, they had been waiting 10 years.

Frankly I think this was a great article and told the "other side" pretty well.

By Paul Hill, 4-03-06

I think what the article demonstrates is the widening gap between the two camps: those who want the indigenous animals of the region to prosper (they were there first before most were wiped out), and those hard working people who must make a living on the unforgiving land. Predators have been part of the human landscape for thousands of years, and they always have and will continue to compete with man for limited resources. What is relatively new on the scene is the "third rail" of government. Well

intentioned most of the time, but dictated by political considerations that often have nothing to do with the natural world, the regulators are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

By Marion, 4-04-06

Paul, I think you have done a good job summarizing the whole thing. Studies have shown that a lack of control or losing control over one's life is one of the stressful things that can happen to a person. The way the ESA is presently being used is taking basic day to day control over the lives of a certain group of people away from themselves. Those already drunk with power are taking over and controlling almost to the point of survival. The incredible thing it is our food producers that are under assault.

By Todd in Bozeman, 4-04-06

Marion,

With all due respect, I'd like you to elaborate a bit on your statement:

"The way the ESA is presently being used is taking basic day to day control over the lives of a certain group of people away from themselves. Those already drunk with power are taken over and controlling almost to the point of survival. The incredible thing it is our food producers that are under assault."

That's a pretty broad and indicting statement about the ESA, but in the absence of evidence, this kind of pronouncement speaks to the very same kind of hysteria now surrounding "The Creature from McCone County."

I've been writing about the environment for over 20 years and I have yet to find any evidence that the ESA, as a law, is threatening the survival of farmers and ranchers as a group. Nor have I seen evidence that the administrators of the ESA with the Fish and Wildlife Service are "drunk with power." Nor have I found compelling evidence that the ESA has seized control from farmers and ranchers over the day to day decisionmaking on their land. There may be exceptions, sure, but those exceptions are rare.

It isn't good enough, based upon your statement, to cite a few farmers and ranchers who have a horror story or two when what you are really saying is that the ESA is threatening the survival of food producers. Please show me evidence that American food production has been seriously impaired as a result of the ESA, or that more farmers and ranchers are giving up because of the ESA rather than market forces; droughts; kids leaving the family-run business; etc. etc. I am open to the idea that you

might be right about the ESA, that it is onerous and steals away Liberty from mom and pop farmers and ranchers. But show us proof that in Wyoming and Montana this is the case.

Hal Herring's piece spoke to the hysteria surrounding the Creature. Your comments paint the federal government and the ESA with the same brushstroke. Marion, please back up with facts what you are saying.

By Brodie Farquhar, 4-04-06

I've often thought that antipathy directed against the feds and ESA and enviros is largely misdirected.

The real pressure on ranchers is applied by free-trade floods of foreign beef and wool; market manipulations by the packers; not-so-friendly bankers; market jitters over mad-cow disease; drought; misperceptions about what does and does not constitute overgrazing; and the internal conflicts inherent in telling the feds "Give me more money and leave me alone because I'm a proud, independent, self-sufficient cowboy."

The anger about ESA, feds, griz and wolves is all the more intense because of helplessness in dealing with the real, structural problems.

By Marion, 4-04-06

If you think a whole lotta wolves are not having an impact on day to day ranching decisions, you are not paying attention. There is considerable information about hanging stuff on fences, using noises where once quiet and calm prevailed, hiring help that they cannot afford to keep a 24 hour watch over animals to try to keep wolves out.

I don't think foreign imports are near the concern for ranchers that it will be for the general population if we have to depend on foreign dictators to eat like we depend on them for fuel.

No predator can be given nearly total protection from victims and survive. This is true whether they are human or animal.

Anyone who thinks protecting a certain rat by stopping the use of farmland, and the building of homes is not a misuse of power is just not thinking. What diseases do those rats carry that may be fatal to humans. Does it really matter to those who are, yes drunk on power? Look at the water diverted from raising food to prioritizing minnows, power again.

By Todd in Bozeman, 4-04-06

Marion,

Once again, let me ask for some proof that the ESA is having a significant impact in driving farmers and ranchers from the land.

You write:

"If you think a whole lotta wolves are not having an impact on day to day ranching decisions, you are not paying attention. There is considerable information about hanging stuff on fences, using noises where once quiet and calm prevailed, hiring help that they cannot afford to keep a 24 hour watch over animals to try to keep wolves out."

I have been paying attention to the ongoing story of wolves in the West since the first day they were reintroduced to Yellowstone, and I grew up in a state, Minnesota, where the hysteria associated with the animals was disproportionate to the reality of their impact.

Here's a profound irony: The state of Wyoming is stubbornly writing its own wolf recovery plan that is based more on hysteria than fact. Montana and Idaho both have drafted plans that have been deemed acceptable by the Fish and Wildlife Service. If Wyoming did the same, the livestock producers would have more flexibility to kill wolves that come in contact with their livestock. Moreover, the Fish and Wildlife Service has done a pretty good job of aggressively following up on incidents of wolf predation on wildlife.

Drunk on power, you say. All I'm saying is serve up some facts. Instead of speaking in generalities, show some facts, name the names of the people you say are drunk on power, identify the ranchers who have been driven out of business or are pushed to the edge of solvency by wolves, show some specific examples of where the ESA has had a significant impact on the local economy.

And, you write: "I don't think foreign imports are near the concern for ranchers that it will be for the general population if we have to depend on foreign dictators to eat like we depend on them for fuel."

Okay, please show us some evidence that the ESA is having even a perceptable dent in the U.S.'s ability to produce food.

By Todd in Bozeman, 4-04-06

P.S. I wrote: "Moreover, the Fish and Wildlife Service has done a pretty good job of aggressively following up on incidents of wolf predation on wildlife."

It was a mistake. It should have read that the Fish and Wildlife Service has done a pretty good job of aggressively following up on incidents of wolf predation on livestock.

By the way, Marion, over the years you've been very vocal in your antagonism toward the federal government. What did the federal government ever do to you to make you feel the way you do?

By Marion, 4-04-06

You prove to me that having thousands of dollars worth of livestock killed does not impact a rancher. First if all, proof is very hard to come by, especially when babies are concerned, the whole thing is consumed so there is little proof of how it died. DOW only pays for confirmed kills, and that means those that cannot be explained away by any other means. When a pasture of 30+ dead sheep are found together and only one is "confirmed" by FWS, it is pretty glaring evidence that DOW is the one protected. The others were too "deteriorated" to confirm, are we supposed to believe they were just scared to death?

My problem is not with the federal government per sey, it is with those influenced by special interests. I worked for IHS for a good number of years and loved it.

"Here's a profound irony: The state of Wyoming is stubbornly writing its own wolf recovery plan that is based more on hysteria than fact. Montana and Idaho both have drafted plans that have been deemed acceptable by the Fish and Wildlife Service. If Wyoming did the same, the livestock producers would have more flexibility to kill wolves that come in contact with their livestock. Moreover, the Fish and Wildlife Service has done a pretty good job of aggressively following up on incidents of wolf predation on wildlife."

Take a look at what yu wrote, Wyoming want to write it's OWN plan, and that is where the problem is, we were supposed to write the federal plan like good little boys and girls. At least be honest, what will work for the state is not acceptable to FWS, because we cannot defend it to the environmental groups". All we would gain is the bill for doing it their way. Bangs wants out from under the costs of this whole thing.

As for having the contro that Montana and Idaho have go back and pay attention to the article and the situation that started this particular controvercy. State management my foot!

By mike, 4-04-06

Well, I'm reading all of this stuff about how the poor ranchers are having a hard time coping with wolves and, to anyone who didn't know, it might look like the sky is falling. The trouble that I'm having is that I know some of the people who are speaking about the ranchers' problems and they aren't ranchers, as

usual. In fact, the same people seem to have empowered themselves to speak on a whole lot of topics, from snowmobiles to now wolves, with which it turns out they have no significant personal experience, again as usual. I bet you can guess what I think that kind of opinion is worth.

I am a rancher. I live and work with other ranchers and, admittedly, many of them get real upset about predators and environmental this and that and a whole lot of other things; but, frankly and contrary to popular mythology, ranchers are not all rustic savants at some high level of intelligence and range-bred wisdom. Many are some of the wisest and most perceptive individuals you will ever find; but, those are the ones that are too focused, too busy and too tired from productive hardwork to have the time or inclination to be out socializing and flapping their jaws. Many others are neither intelligent nor enlightened nor industrious. In fact, a few are lazy dope fiends living off inherited assets, just like some city folks. Unfortunately, these are the ones that have the most free time to impart their opinions.

My herd is small; but, still, over the past seven years that I have had this particular herd and to the best of my records and gestation calcs, I have only lost two calves, one to a cow who had developed a uterine infection and a second to a freak early freeze. I ranch on the edge of a wolf reintroduction area and have what sure appear to be wolves and what certainly are lions around my small herd on a routine basis, although I keep it to myself because I don't have problems with them and see no need to either get others involved gawking or, worse, ranting to me that the sky is falling and that I have a problem when I have yet to see it.

Admittedly, my situation is a bit different. I raise longhorns; my cows can scratch their rumps with their horn tips; and they behave differently than the grotesque waddling northern european breeds that have been so carefully selected for fat and the lazy stupidity that enables them to put on that fat. My cattle are fast, agile, and lean from moving to graze evenly across the range. Perhaps more important, my herd works together intelligently. When you approach a new angus calf, an angus herd, including the bull, will scatter as fast as they can waddle and leave the calf to try to fend for itself and catch up. When you approach a new calf in my herd, you will look up to find yourself surrounded.

Now, I don't raise longhorns only because of their resistance to predation. I have never had to pull a longhorn calf; their grazing behavior is a bit easier on the range; and, with only a third of the fat and three quarters of the cholesterol compared to other beef, they are a better health bet for me and most other Americans. You are what you eat and my cattle sure look and act more inspiring than some helpless waddling hereford.

I can understand the frustration of ranchers who lose cattle to predators and, if a predator has taken to killing livestock, then it needs to be culled to prevent it from teaching bad behavior. At the same time and from what I have personally witnessed, the big mean bad old government certainly seems to make an honest effort to cull wolves that have become a problem. In fact, the notion boggles me that any fit rancher will be put out of business by wolves before he can either find a way to get the government to deal with it or get the wildlife enviros to reimburse enough to get by in the meantime. If he is that close to the edge, then he is either going under from other causes anyway or is spending his money on things that he shouldn't.

I guess I wasted too much time on this posting; but, I get so tired of hearing the same old bull from the same types of know-it-alls, most of whom hire help to work their own herds or have no herds or are just play-babies living off inheritance or just have no real knowledge of anything. Yes, predators can be a problem, so can lack of rain or too much rain or chainsaws that kick back or chainsaws that don't run well enough to kick back or too many elk on your place or never seeing any elk on your place. Some people can't stand to be outdoors because they are always too hot or too cold or the sun is too bright or... The fact is that the same things that weak people whine about are often the things that inspire strong people and keep them going. People ought to grow up or, in some cases, shut up.

By Paul Hill, 4-04-06

Amen (hopefully).

By j black, 4-05-06

Mike.....It's unconceivable that anyone would attack the wisdom and honesty of your comments.

I can only say that I wish you had more time to spend writing.

Thankyou for taking the time to comment.

By Marion, 4-05-06

I agree that Mike certainly has the right to his opinion. I happen to believe that both sides of the issue have the right to be heard.....and to change their minds as circumstances prevail.

I'm sure you would never expect the rancher who has lost dozens of sheep to be as thrilled as the person in NYC who comes to hear them howl.

I wish all of the best for Mike, and hope he is one of the lucky ones and does not have to eat his words.

By George Wuerthner, 4-05-06

I don't think anyone so far is asking the right questions. I want to turn this discussion on its head. The question that should be asked is whether ranchers should be allowed to transfer or "externalize" their cost of business on to the rest of us and the natural environment.

One of the underlying issues that is missed in all these discussions about ranching/farming in places like Eastern Montana is whether it is ultimately a good place for agricultural endeavors at all. I would argue the only reason ranching/farming has survived here is largely due to environmental and economic subsidies. Most of the real costs of agricultural production in places like eastern Montana are transferred to others--i.e. real taxpayers--or are reflected in a degraded natural environment including soil erosion, ground water pollution, riparian damage, and loss of habitat for native species like prairie dogs, wolves, bison and so on.

Montana and most of the West should have never been settled on by people intent on imposing an agricultural paradigm on an arid, low productivity, landscape. The costs are far greater than the limited amount of food production that results. It is a good example of "overshoot" whereby we colonize and try to exploit lands that are inherently submarginal--and the long term decline of farming/ranching in the region is merely a reflection of this fact. And that decline would have occurred much more quickly if society had not been subsidizing these operations for generations.

One of these subsidies is illustrated by this predator issue. Montana and much of the West is arid. Aridity has its costs, not the least of which is that you need more acres to support one cow here than say Missouri or Georgia. More land means you can't monitor your livestock easily. In Georgia you can realistically put your animals in a barn at night or keep your lambs in a shed. In the West ranchers must allow their animals to wander widely increasingly significantly their vulnerability to predators.

So instead of absorbing these extra costs, the ranching community successfully transferred these costs to everyone else including people like me who love wolves. They use my tax dollars to kill predators. They destroy native wildlife that I want on my lands. They are not unlike those who put rip rap in rivers to "protect" their property from floods--but merely transfer all those costs on to everyone else by increasing downstream flooding and stream bank erosion. Instead of being asked why they should be permitted to build their homes in the flood plain in the first place, in most states we let people "protect" their property with rip rap--without acknowledging that we are destroying other people's property or other values like a free-flowing river. We should be asking why it's OK for ranchers who choose to operate in an arid, low productivity environment should be permitted to transfer THEIR costs on to the rest of us.

I won't go into the multiple ways that taxpayers subsidize ranchers/farmers in Montana, but without these subsidies, I guarantee you that most of these operations would cease. Not only would that be good for the land in the end, it would be better for farmers in other parts of the country where it makes

sense to farm or grow livestock. Our country is awash in farm products. We don't need produce from marginal operations in Montana. We won't starve if every farm and ranch in Montana disappeared, but I guarantee that farmers in places like Missouri and Georgia will eat better--and with fewer government subsidies as well if we stopped subsidizing marginal agriculture in the West.

By Marion, 4-05-06

We see where you are coming from, don't we? Get rid of the food producers. If Georgia would be such a great place for wolves why weren't they trucked over there?

You object to your tax dollars being used to control predators (I'm assuming only the 4 legged kind), while I'm complaining about my tax dollars being used to fly and truck in predators to kill off livestock.

This is one of the problems I have with environmentalists. They want to write the rules, they invest nothing, and take no responsibility for the results. I'm sure you don't like the idea of cow poo on your fancy hiking shoes, none the less ranching is paying a big share of the economy.

By George Wuerthner, 4-05-06

Marion

I never said get rid of food producers. I said let's not subsidize marginal food producers. I am a "wise use" proponent. I hate seeing waste. All agriculture destroys natural ecosystems and has costs. Yes we need to absorb some of these costs if we are going to feed ourselves, but that doesn't mean all agriculture is needed or necessary. We should be looking at those costs and whether the "benefits" in food production are worth the costs. If we are going to produce food, we should be doing it in places where we get the most bang for buck. You can grow a cow on a couple of acres of land in Georgia while you might need several dozen or hundreds of acres of land per animal in much of the West. Both have impacts, but you get a lot more meat per acre in Georgia than per acre in Montana.

Plus since nearly all farm products are sold on a national market, competition from submarginal producers in Montana negatively impacts the bottom line for producers in more productive landscapes like Georgia or Missouri. Farmers in these places are struggling economically as well--and in part because of overproduction which drives down prices. Reduction in marginal farms/ranches in Montana and elsewhere in the West would improve the financial situation of farmers in regions where agriculture makes more sense.

As for trucking in predators for restoration, I would suggest that the people who should be paying for wolf restoration are the ranchers themselves. This is not unlike billing a company that has polluted a river or ground water for the mess. For instance, the clean up of the Clark Fork from mining wastes is

being paid by the companies that polluted the Clark Fork as it should. Ranchers are the main reason we killed off the wolf--and they should be paying for the restoration. Instead they whine about being imposed upon. It is the ranchers who have imposed their industry upon the rest of us.

By Marion, 4-05-06

"As for trucking in predators for restoration, I would suggest that the people who should be paying for wolf restoration are the ranchers themselves. This is not unlike billing a company that has polluted a river or ground water for the mess. For instance, the clean up of the Clark Fork from mining wastes is being paid by the companies that polluted the Clark Fork as it should. Ranchers are the main reason we killed off the wolf--and they should be paying for the restoration. Instead they whine about being imposed upon. It is the ranchers who have imposed their industry upon the rest of us."

Indeed, are you going to try to convince us that wolves only lived in Wyoming, Idaho and Montana? That just goes to show how wrong a person can be, I thought they were pretty well spread across the country. Bet your ancestors even nailed a few....unless of course you are a late comer to the country.

You obviously have no idea of how much ranchers and farmers contribute to wildlife, to say nothing of local economies. I'll bet the loss of your income wouldn't hurt the country much either, but I suspect it would hurt you. If those ranchers have been successfully ranching since the 1800s when wolves were a problem, it must be better cattle country that you realize.

By Marion, 4-07-06

I came across the numbers for this year's Northern Elk Herd.....3649!!!!!! Bad counting conditions of course, which is I guess why FWS did not release it.

To find the article go to <http://www.jacksonholenews.com> and then to the daily news.

By George Wuerthner, 4-07-06

Marion:

I presume you are implying that somehow wolves are going to wipe out the elk herds in Yellowstone. There is no evidence from anyplace in an open system (not an island or other situation where there is no exchange between subpopulations and larger meta population) where predators can wipe out completely their prey. So I am not concerned about the count whether it is low due to bad weather conditions or simply due to predator effect.

Secondly, recent studies have demonstrated that hunting outside of the park, plus grizzly bear predation are major influences on the elk populations--so be careful about implicating wolves as the sole cause of this decline.

Third, drought is also a factor since vegetation growth and productivity is almost completely correlated with rainfall.

I don't know how long you have lived in the region, but a long running controversy has been the supposed negative impact of elk on the region's vegetation, in particular, shrubs like willow and trees like aspen. A decline in elk will lead to an increase in productivity of elk forage. In the end this will lead to a higher elk population at some point in the future. All of this may take decades to play out, but there is nothing to be alarmed about.

By Marion, 4-07-06

Drought: Every elk herd in the GYA is up except those impacted by wolves. The drought was pretty consistent everywhere in the 3 state area.

Hunting: I believe there were 100 licences this year in an area that had thousands before wolves. I don't know how many got their meat.

I am not implying anything, just presenting the count of a herd that was 19,000 prior to Canadian wolf introduction, and is now 3649. Everyone can do their own math as long as they have facts.

By Paul Hill, 4-07-06

Re George's comment: Its interesting you should mention wolf populations in open systems vs closed. Just happens to be one such closed system on a 850 sq. mile island in Lake Superior: Isle Royale. Wolves and moose have been living in relative balance here for as long as anyone can remember, and it is exceptional not only due to its geography, but for the fact that this interaction represents a single prey/single predator system. For more info, visit <http://www.isleroyalewolf.org/>

In addition, what are not enough elk to one in Montana are way too many in Colorado. Down here, the elk have overpopulated, and homeowners near Rocky Mtn Nat'l Pk and other areas on the Front Range have taken to erecting 12 ft "elk fences" around their land to keep them from the domestic vegetation. The elk in their effort to find more food and unoccupied habitat have in fact been drifting into the edges of the cities of Loveland and Fort Collins.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), afflicting not only mule deer but now probably elk, is a direct result of overcrowding and stress among their respective populations. There are simply too many of them for the limited resources the land can provide. Send us your wolves, the eatin' is good down here.

By Marion, 4-07-06

To Paul

If you want to get rid of the RMNP elk, these wolves are the guys to do it. Now whether the elk fences will protect Bowser and Fluffy is anybody's guess.

As for how many elk are too many in Yellowstone, that will not be a concern if there are many more years like this. I doubt they actually took 6000 elk the last year, probably last year's count was high, and this years low, but none the less if you look at the numbers prior to the wolves being hauled in, that is overall a drop of about 15,000 in 11 years.

As for CWD, your hypothesis is that only. Overcrowding does no explain how it shows up in diverse places. So far I don't believe the roll of predators in spreading the disease has been studied either has it? It might be a good idea to do that before you make a bad situation worse.

By Paul Hill, 4-07-06

"Each year, people who come to Yellowstone hoping to glimpse a wolf spend around \$35 million in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, according to an intensive study of visitors by John Duffield and others."

...from an article in today's Billings Gazette:

<http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2006/04/07/news/state/25-wolves.txt>

Perhaps ranchers should be asking for a share of this pie...

By Marion, 4-07-06

Unfortunately there are no details of where the money comes from, nor how & where it is spent. Two towns are relatively near that is Cooke City Montana and Silver Gate Montana, Gardiner, Montana is the other nearest town. Take a good look at those towns and see how many new restaurants and motels there are in the last 11 years. Those areas should be booming even if no other place is, check them out.

I could throw out numbers about what it has cost the states in reduced hunting opportunities, decreased ranch income, etc, but it would be a guess, and I suspect that is what this is.

As for the ranchers asking for a share of the pie, I suspect it is all on paper.

By Marion, 4-07-06

Oh yes, one interesting fact the Yellowstone visitation numbers are down from the all time high....pre wolves. There is no place to go see wolves except in Yellowstone, so where is all of this money spent?

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