Senior Canadian Wolf Ecologists Oppose BC Wolf Kill

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Oliver, BC
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As two of Canada’s senior wolf biologists, we are disturbed that the BC government is implementing massive wolf control with the low probability of recovering a few small, isolated, range-edge herds of mountain caribou. As university-based biologists, we have run the longest, most intensive, telemetry-based wolf research program in Canada. We have published 2 books on our wolf research and many scientific papers including 2 on what constitutes valid biological evidence to assess the role of predators in limiting prey numbers.

Assessing the ecological consequences of a major intervention such as predator control is a complex task filled with uncertainty. The need for the government to explain itself is underlined by an amazing statement in its 2014 “Wolf Management Policy.” “Attempts to control wolves to reduce predation risks on caribou has been a provincial priority since 2001....Wolf densities have been reduced, however, at this time, a correlation between reduced wolf densities and caribou recovery cannot be substantiated.”

Why has past wolf killing not worked? The government’s chosen reason seems to be that wolf killing needs to be more intensive, more than 80%, and more long lasting – that choice is inferred in the Wolf Management Policy. But another possibility is that no rise in caribou numbers is possible because of habitat destruction, irregardless of the presence of wolves. Starvation, climate-caused winter kill, predation by bears and/or cougars, accidents such as avalanches and other unpredictable events take their toll.

We would place our bets, however, on a third reasons that wolf killing has not lead to caribou recovery. Over much of BC an “ecological phase shift” has happened. Ecologists know of such shifts - witness the fish and wildlife tragedy of the Bering Sea, and the non-recovered cod fishery of the Atlantic. Phase shifts are based on one-way environmental alterations in trophic and other complex ecosystem interrelationships. New species crowd out the potential for recovery of old ones. Recovery is generally beyond the scope of management intervention.

Across much of BC, massive forest cutting has resulted in gross habitat alteration. Moose, benefiting from early successional forests after logging and other land uses have greatly extended their range in BC. Numbers of elk and deer have adjusted, too. However, caribou, especially the southern mountain ecotype, have declined due to a loss of critical older-growth, lichen-clad forests. They have been victims, too, of habitat fragmentation preventing herd-to-herd “metapopulation” flow that once reduced risks of local, herd extinctions.

Ecosystems are made up of interacting parts. Removing predators constitutes a major perturbation. It is a slippery slope, where, when you start, you are doomed to increasing intervention with unknown consequences. With fewer wolves, will moose and elk populations increase? Will their browsing inhibit forest regeneration? Should they be killed, too? (In BC’s 2010 plan for an aerial wolf kill, moose reduction was a management prescription, too!) If caribou were to increase, would grizzlies and black bears become more common predators on caribou? What then – kill them? (In the Revelstoke region, bears – grizzly and black – were indeed the major predator on caribou between 1992 and 2006, according to an internal Ministry report.)

And how long do you keep on intervening in dubious and unpredictable ways? It takes 75, maybe 100 years to grow forest stands with the structure to maximize arboreal lichens that fed caribou as of old. In the meantime, what does climate change deal out?
Yet more ecological evidence argues against the government wolf kill. In two landmark scientific publications a straight line graph links wolf populations to “prey biomass” (live weight of regional prey). It is simple. More prey, more wolves. Recover caribou to any reasonable population size and wolf populations will increase too. The government knows this too. Quoting from its 2014 Wolf Management Policy, “When (wolf) reduction ceases, wolf populations and predation rates quickly recover.”

What then? Just keep killing? The government could make a case for permanent drawdown or virtual elimination of wolves over the 10,000 to 15,000 square kilometres involved, but if that is its unspoken objective, such a brutal form of wildland management surely needs public discourse.

Realistically, caribou days in the southern part of their range are numbered. It is biologically futile to kill wolves to get back to before.

But much more than biology is involved. What about ethics and attitudes towards nature? We add our perspective as wolf biologists. We thought the days of manipulating wilderness in such insensitive ways were over. Recently the wolf was removed from the red species list of globally endangered species due to impressive recoveries in many European countries and in the lower 48 states. In the latter, wolf numbers have increased since 1973 - but at a recovery cost of over 6.2 million dollars per year. We, in contrast, are about to spend some 2.5 million dollars over 5 years to kill them. Not without an encouraging amount of public protest, however. Across much of their global wolf range, wolves are far more accepted now, and people wear wolf t-shirts and buy wolf memorabilia. Could it be that just the government is out of step?

Killing of one of the world’s most highly developed social species for such arrogant reasons as manipulating wilderness is reprehensible. In our past research in Algonquin Park and elsewhere, and present research with recovering wolf populations in Yellowstone and Arizona, we have come to appreciate their contribution to the iconic character of wild lands. Knowing them as personalities and as remarkable social animals, it becomes abhorrent to kill them for such dubious, pseudo-scientific reasons.

We are encouraged that so many others in BC, across Canada and elsewhere have registered their concern. BC is out of step with current principles of wildlife ecology and environmental ethics.

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Sign petition: PacificWild.org

Letters:
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