The wolves are coming to Utah; we must plan how to get along

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Schmidt, Robert H. The Salt Lake Tribune; Salt Lake City, Utah [Salt Lake City, Utah] 06 May 2001: AA7.

ABSTRACT

Contrary to common belief, monetary compensation is not the salve that heals all wounds. Compensation programs never pay the full cost of losing animals. Sometimes livestock is killed but never found. Animals important to a producer's breeding program might be killed; compensation programs pay for lost meat, not lost genes. And predation management strategies are still being developed. These management strategies will include capturing and killing problem wolves. Wolf managers are getting better at responding quickly and effectively to depredation complaints, but much needs to be done. In Utah, we have a choice. We can try to hang the "wolf-proof curtain," with a minuscule probability of success. Wolves will come in. Wolves will go out. The question is only where and when. We can be passive and let the wolves make it if they can. Of course, we might not like where they end up! If this happens, then what do we do, who does it, and how is it paid for? Alternatively, we can plan for the inevitability of wolves rejoining the cadre of plants and animals, and people, that collectively define Utah. We can prepare the people of Utah, the economy of Utah, and the ecosystems of Utah for the return of gray wolves. Planning for increased human population growth expected by the year 2030 is a good thing. Planning for wolves in Utah is, without question, another credible and intelligent step. Why plan for wolves? Quite simply, the dance is ready to begin.

FULL TEXT

"Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf." Aldo Leopold, 1949

When gray wolves were transported to Yellowstone National Park in 1995, the news was carried coast to coast, and around the world. Wolves were returning to Yellowstone! Pictures of Canadian wolves dashing out of their transport cages splashed on the front pages of thousands of newspapers. Talk show hosts from Florida to Washington discussed the event and its biological and social ramifications. Network television crews jockeyed for position to be the first to report that the wolves were back and to interview unhappy and angry ranchers. Supporters of wolves celebrated that Yellowstone National Park, and the greater Yellowstone eco-region, would be better places with wolves, bringing greater pleasure to those visiting the park and to those who simply wanted Yellowstone to be "complete."

Conversations about these wolves occurred throughout Utah as well. Some cheered, while others grumbled. Those cheering delighted in knowing that, after an absence of more than half a century, elk and moose would hear the howl and feel the fang of the wolf, and that the eternal, co-evolutionary dance between predator and prey would resume.

Grumblers thought of yet another government intrusion into the lives of honest, tax-paying citizens. They worried for the ranchers of Montana and Wyoming, sympathizing with those who might lose private property -- especially cattle and sheep -- and be hassled by additional government restrictions, bureaucracy or red-tape. They thought about elk not born, and deer not hunted. The howl of the wolf brought not the expression of wonder, but a scowl of disappointment or anger.

In both groups, it brought forth a cascade of whispers: "Could there ever be wolves in Utah?" Those whispers are getting louder as the wolf population in Yellowstone continues to grow, expand and disperse. I hear discussions on the establishment of a Southern Rockies gray wolf population centered in Colorado and spilling over into Utah via
a Grand Junction corridor. Some people are discussing whether there is a role for Mexican wolves in southern Utah. And the Yellowstone wolves keep coming closer. The conversations are not all pro-wolf. A large number of people, albeit a minority, think management programs should be developed to keep wolves out – in effect, hanging a wolf-proof curtain of aggressive, anti-wolf policies around the entire state.

The potential path of gray or Mexican wolves into the state lies south, west or north: south along the Bear River or through the High Uintas, west into the Book Cliffs, or north into the Grand Canyon eco-region. A wolf-proof curtain is exceedingly unrealistic, and can be temporary at best.

Aggressive predator management policies eliminated gray wolves from Utah as a dominant predator by the early part of the 1900s, and the last known wolf was killed in 1929. This trend paralleled the demise of gray wolves throughout the West and Midwest, resulting in a small, remnant population surviving in upper Minnesota. With the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, and an aggressive management program of protection, Minnesota wolves expanded in range and numbers to a population today of over 2,500, and additional wolf populations became established in Michigan and Wisconsin. In the northern Rocky Mountain region, Canadian wolves dispersed into northern Montana and gained a foothold around the north fork of the Flathead River and Glacier National Park. This northern Montana population remains tenuous. The release of gray wolves into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 proved biologically viable, and those populations are exceeding established recovery goals, bringing these wolves closer to Utah.

The lessons of Yellowstone and Idaho have taught us many things. Gray wolves don’t like coyotes, except as rag dolls to pass back and forth. Coyotes can be tolerated if they know their place, which is not close to a carcass claimed by an alpha pair of wolves. Elk and moose are learning to be wary, since unwary animals are soon turned into wolf molecules.

There are still plenty of coyotes, elk and moose; they are simply doing things differently with wolves in the picture. A predation process that was missing without the wolves has returned. Prey watch out for predators. Predators look for prey. It is a dance as old as time. Wolf viewing may supplant bison, elk and bear viewing as the most sought-after ticket. Wolves are popular. Public attitude surveys continually demonstrate that there is broad support for gray wolves to exist in Yellowstone National Park specifically and in the West in general.

Learning sometimes hurts. Some released wolves were involved in depredation incidents, killing or maiming privately owned livestock. This has continued throughout the tenure of wolves in the west, and cannot disappear. It would happen in Utah as well. Some might say, “A cow here, a ewe there. Who will miss these few animals?” Livestock owners and managers, that’s who. People with dogs and horses, fearful of the powerful wolf. These are valid concerns.

Contrary to common belief, monetary compensation is not the salve that heals all wounds. Compensation programs never pay the full cost of losing animals. Sometimes livestock is killed but never found. Animals important to a producer’s breeding program might be killed; compensation programs pay for lost meat, not lost genes. And predation management strategies are still being developed. These management strategies will include capturing and killing problem wolves. Wolf managers are getting better at responding quickly and effectively to depredation complaints, but much needs to be done. In Utah, we have a choice. We can try to hang the “wolf-proof curtain,” with a minuscule probability of success. Wolves will come in. Wolves will go out. The question is only where and when. We can be passive and let the wolves make it if they can. Of course, we might not like where they end up! If this happens, then what do we do, who does it, and how is it paid for? Alternatively, we can plan for the inevitability of wolves rejoining the cadre of plants and animals, and people, that collectively define Utah. We can prepare the people of Utah, the economy of Utah, and the ecosystems of Utah for the return of gray wolves.

Planning for increased human population growth expected by the year 2030 is a good thing. Planning for wolves in Utah is, without question, another credible and intelligent step. Why plan for wolves? Quite simply, the dance is ready to begin.

Robert H. Schmidt is a certified wildlife biologist living in Logan.