

Confronting the Traumatic History of Wildlife Management and Violence in
America: We can do Better this Time

Oregon's wolf management plan is flawed. It's troubled with biological uncertainty and vagueries, and avoids a satisfactory vision of an ideal future where wolves, humans, elk and deer can thrive. But more than being flawed, which is perhaps unavoidable in the development of such a tensely contested plan: it's haunted. The department of fish and wildlife and its advisory board has been struggling for the past ten years to deal with the wolf's return to Oregon – not because they are unfit for the job, but because the process is incredibly painful.

We know, of course, that the history of the American wolf is a nasty one. It was systematically and thoroughly destroyed, with the encouragement and insistence of federal, state and county governments (including the enthusiastic endorsement of our great conservationist president, Theodore Roosevelt). But when people were killing the wolf, they were also living through and perpetrating three shocking centuries of colonization, expansive chattel slavery, and countless human violences and brutalizations that eventually invented the United States. There were ugly times, and violent things, and those things are the fabric of the world we still live in.

The wolf coming back to the west, and Oregon, is that past come back to us, too: a ghost that wasn't ever really set down to rest.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife readily admits that the history section of the current Wolf Management Plan has problems. The new biological status review, for its other short-comings, provides a useful critique of the worrisome citations in the original plan that attempted and failed to convincingly establish the extent of former wolf populations. If the goal of plans like this is to restore wildlife populations to their historic numbers and range, the lack of solid information we have about those facts is a conspicuous quandary – but it’s a story in which the absences begin to crystallize and form a coherent, arresting narrative.

The commission, along with a lot of the public, acknowledge the fact that wolves were extraordinarily and violently exterminated from Oregon, and the rest of the United States, via unprecedented execution of federal and state mandate. And they concede that such a track record is a blemish on and an embarrassment to the history of state wildlife “management.” It’s tough to look at the pictures of 1930s Oregon, and see bounty hunters hanging up their wolf skins, stretched dry on barn walls in still, dry, January snow. It’s tough to read close accounts of the capture and torture of wolves in colonist journals from the 17th century, and wonder what drove people – terrified, alone, ill-suited as they were – to trap a captured wolf in a pit, and watch for days as it slowly died. I am struck by the monstrous curiosities that would marvel at and mock the starvation of an animal, and I am uneasy, because such stories aren’t really unfamiliar. And while it’s easy for histories to claim that New England pilgrims “hated” wolves because they offered competition for wild game and threatened the livestock of the poorly equipped,

clueless colonists, the historical parallels of the story of wolf eradication tell us that resistance to the wolf is also about something else. Our current conflicts are no different.

After the establishment of the Plymouth Colony, it took only ten years for the colonists to draw up a bounty system for wolf hides. As the frontier moved across the United States, a pattern developed, where new governments in far-flung territories were consistently created and convened by the “problem” of the local wolves.

In Oregon, the first-ever governmental meetings of European-Americans occurred in Champoeg and Gervais in 1843, where a gaggle of propertied men agreed on a bounty system for predator mammals. Although exchange rates for coyotes and mountain lions were also implemented, the gatherings are known colloquially as the “wolf meetings.” Indeed, wolf furs fetched the highest pay-off, regardless of the predator’s proportional capacity for damage and loss. But the haunting, hunted figure of the wolf thus gained prestige, and special status as an enemy of propertied people. And the absence of wolves marked the civilization of former wilderness, and the arrival of a new dominant culture.

Concurrent with the eradication of the wolf in the west, European Americans established a system of private property ownership that fundamentally disavowed the humanity, society, culture, history, and laws of the people who already lived on the suddenly occupied territory. As more indigenous people and peoples of the west were murdered, removed, assimilated, silenced, and severed, the symbolic spectre of the wolf as the savage, cruel, unsettlingly persistent beast that lingers on the borders of known worlds took shape. It’s impossible to ignore this connection, and this history needs to

inform how we move forward in our environmental policy today. Decisions about land use are inextricably mixed with the politics of race, community, and identity, and the power that decides what kind of land use is prioritized above others.

The wolf is, now, the stranger in our midst: conspicuously foreign, oblivious to local custom and courtesy, and marked with criminality. Our new wolves are the descendants of the re-introduced Yellowstone wolves, and their opponents are not going to forget it. The claim persists that those animals, brought in from Canada in 1996, were in fact *totally different* from the “real” native wolves that used to occupy the lower forty-eight. When one visits the forums and message boards of folks who oppose wolf existence, phrases like “stop the importation of canadian wolves!” or “Stop the invasion of these foreigners!” are commonplace. They are accused not only of violent destruction and causeless obliteration, but of criminal otherness. People say that these “new” wolves are different from the ones that used to live in Oregon – a bigger, bloodthirsty, dangerous, pack-hunting cruel breed that kills for pleasure indiscriminately – that should be dealt with immediately, lest they infest the countryside and take over the world as we know it.

Such wide-eyed declarations against the horror of a predator’s return reverberate with history. They mirror the language that’s been used repeatedly for centuries to vanquish the non-European history from the land we live on, and that was employed to legally obstruct black Americans from moving to this state in the 19th century. These syllables are haunted with the traumatic memories of the west that inform our lives everyday. And such rhetoric chillingly echoes the present racist hysteria that marks immigrant bodies as inhuman criminals, and resurrects the pressing ideology that people of color are a constant, inherent threat to the dominant whiteness of America.

It's one thing if a coyote kills a dog, or a neighbor's dog kills a sheep, a duck, or a calf. But when the wolf – this “newcomer” – to a country claimed righteously and obdurately by the century-old boot prints of blustering white men stomping down fence poles on the prairie – takes livestock, it's an active threat to the capitalist containment of property, and the ultimate idol of productivity above all else. Lobbying groups and movements like the Oregon Outdoor Council cry out for the defense of the “rights” of people whose rights, you might think, were not currently being assailed. The story of the wolf as a danger to children, deer, cows, elk, and the purity of daughters invokes the image of a scourge of invading, insidious criminals, swarming safe *American* homesteads and dragging their claws along the precious liberties of brave white hunters. It echoes the rhetoric of anti-immigration campaigns, and the droning whines about the terrible oppression of “political correctness.” How dare *you* come in here and threaten my rights, my liberties, my *freedom*?

It's something *different* coming in, to a place where we already got rid of it, and now it is trying to take something back.

Famously shy and skittish of humans, environmentalists (and biologists) will tell you that wolves are unlikely to cross roads, live close to people, or extend any accidental interaction. But that story is often revised in the narratives of people who live or hunt in wilder country, and don't want any wolves around. They say that the danger of the wolf is actually massively underestimated. They *are* dangerous to people, report countless internet comments, forums, personal blogs, and activist websites with sections on “dispelling the myths” outrageously spread by the conservationist animal-huggers.

Wolves *aren't* afraid of us, these sources warn. It stood on the crest of the hill, and looked right at us. It saw us. But it didn't run.

Over everything else, the wolf's storied refusal to scatter in terror is the thing that is too much to bear. Its final, unforgivable crime – a fiction, invented by its enemies – is its lack of submissive deference to a noted greater power. It's one thing to joyously and contentedly gaze out at the wild through the rearview mirror in a truck, the scope of a rifle, the lenses of binoculars, or the window of a cabin in the rain. Pleasure can be experienced with the feeling of stable human dominance firmly set in place. But what unsettles the hierarchy, and terrifies the dominant establishment to its core, is when the wild thing suddenly looks back.

With this history, and its present reverberations in mind, we need to think about how the past has informed our current conversations regarding wildlife, public land, natural resources, people, capital, and what responsibility we owe to the pieces of dirt we live our lives on. And then, we need to accept that what we are planning now is going to shape the future of our state.

Developing a wolf plan that looks to the future provides us with an opportunity for foresight. We can't change the fact that one million more people are expected to move into our state in the next 15 years. And we can't pretend that such a population influx, in a state like ours, that is so vividly marked by emptiness, is going to make a big difference. It will matter in the cities of the valley, where most of the new residents will arrive – but the effects of such an increase of newcomers will also undeniably fan out across our forests and public lands. It is foolish to ignore such impending dramatic shifts

in the basic statistics of the state we are charged with managing, especially regarding the stuff in Oregon that we love and treasure above all else.

It's true that, considering the population center of the wolves currently living in Oregon, residents of Wallowa County and Eastern Oregon are currently feeling it more than the rest of us. And those residents are poised to feel the presence of wolves in a way that a lot of us in Western Oregon won't ever experience or fully understand, because our livelihoods are not wrapped up in the late-stage years of industrial animal husbandry. But that doesn't mean the rest of us aren't ready, willing, and prepared to deal with a charismatic mega-fauna transforming our forests and wilderness spaces. The stewards, defenders, visitors, lovers, and taxpayers responsible for the enjoyment and well-being of Mt. Hood National forest will be willing to accept the possibility of risk.

We can decide that the unpredictability and risk that the emergence of a thriving wolf population in our western Oregon forests poses is *worth it*, for the sake of the restoration of wild ecologies and ecological complexity. We are willing to accept that our relationship to forest lands and forest recreation, and even our presumptions of guaranteed bodily safety, might shift and adjust. But we are willing to prioritize the opportunity for our national forest(s) to settle into a long-lost ecological balance, and then provide the opportunity to explore manifold scientific opportunities available with such a restoration.

The history of the united States, marked periodically through the history of wolf meetings, bounties, eradications, efforts, and finally, activist responses, tells us at least one thing: once the wolf is gone, people are *scared as hell* of having it come back. Implications of theory and culture and everything aside: when people get used to raising

their cows somewhere where nothing tries to eat them, and hunting for deer that have very little reason to be afraid – they get kind of mad when the things that can eat cows and deer come back. Considering the projected population changes and increases in Oregon in the coming years, we need to act *now* to make *sure* the wolf comes back – not just in remote locations in the eastern part of the state, but in the most closely linked, visited national forests, like Mt. Hood. We need to establish the wolf here *now*, so that as new people arrive and embed themselves in our community, they recognize wolves as a significant, remarkable, special, and integral piece of the landscape. We have to do this now, because we will not get another chance.

The debt we owe in re-introducing and stewarding this creature is not only to repair the injustices of the past done to animals that new Americans couldn't deal with or understand. It's about recognizing that our wildlife management systems are built for the purpose of domination, not balance, and that they are built for certain people, and not others, and that they are built to constantly reproduce the unquestionable certainty that the only way to save animals is to kill them.

When we continue to work within a legal system that has such a tangled, painful history, without recognizing and confronting that history fully, we reproduce its historic violences, and we train ourselves to think that our current attitudes toward property, land use, and management, among many other things, are unassailable and natural, when really, they are nothing of the sort. We have the opportunity, this time, to do better.

The people of western Oregon deserve the chance to cope with the reality of a new species before huge, violent management interventions take place. Let the wolves

get here, and let us see what happens. Let them come in droves if they can. Let us see what they will do here, what they have to offer, or to take away. Give the western side of Oregon the opportunity to grapple with a world we ought to live in, had we not messed it up so terribly before hand.