

DIGNITY VERSUS POWER:
THE WOLF IN THE YUKON

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English 100
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April 4, 1993

The current wolf-kill being conducted in the Yukon has attracted attention throughout North America and Europe. The controversy surrounding this wildlife management program is generated only partially by concern for the wolf as a life-form with its own dignity; much of the impetus for the anti-wolf-kill movement is generated by incorrect information and simplistic assumptions about wolves, ^g and about conditions in the North. ✓

This is compounded by "environmentalists" to whom the wolf, and the Yukon, have become temporary tools to help them assuage their guilt over past and present environmental destruction of their own areas. ^{maybe not just guilt but anger towards other abuses}

Wolves are one of nature's most successful predators, and have changed little physiologically over the past million years. They were once "the most wide-ranging animal on the planet, with huge populations on every continent except Africa. In North America, wolves were found from Mexico north . . ." (Rezendes 210). Their relationship with humans has, however, been markedly unsuccessful, and their success as predators has led to their virtual elimination throughout most of the world. Only 2 of the 32 subspecies of wolves left have healthy populations; the tundra wolf, and the timber or gray wolf of Alaska, Yukon, ^g and the Northwest Territories, comprise more than half of the 100,000 survivors world-wide. ^{good}

Wolves have been hunting in North America for millions of years longer than humans. The earliest relatives of the wolf were likely the miacids of 40 million years ago, but not until 15 million years ago did they start to develop as true canids. ^{define} With their origins in the Western Hemisphere, wolves as we recognize them now had by the early Pleistocene extended their range into Eurasia by crossing over the Bering land bridge (Olsen 3,16).

Until about 100,000 years ago, wolves and humans shared the forests and tundra around the world with little competition between them. "Fleeter

and with more endurance than their human counterparts, wolves concentrated their diet on deer and the like (as they now do), while human beings preyed intensively on the easily captured giants* [mammoths and rhinoceroses]*. (McLoughlin 77).

Although the causes are the subject of continuing speculation and controversy, it is clear that "between 50,000 and 10,000 years ago, perhaps 80 percent of the genera of animals weighing more than 100 kilograms became extinct . . ." (McLoughlin 78). Among the species that died out were the specialized predators, such as sabre-toothed tigers that had depended on the large game. The wolf, adaptable then as now, was able to adjust its hunting techniques to whatever species survived.

Unfortunately for the wolf, though, humans were also adaptable, and this period marks the start of the wolf's problems with humans that continue to this day. By 10,000 years ago, they were in direct competition for the same game. This situation also brought into clear focus the similarities between wolf packs and the early hunter-gatherer societies:

1. Both are comprised of social units that are relatively small in number. Both are capable of hunting over open ground or wooded areas, pursuing rather large game and exerting considerable physical effort and energy over prolonged periods to accomplish their goals. Both use hunting methods that require a pack, or team effort rather than that of a lone hunter. (Olsen 16)

Wolfs and humans were also both opportunistic hunters, and when it was possible, they would take advantage of each other's kills. This was particularly effective for the wolves because of the mass-killing techniques occasionally used by humans, such as driving entire herds of herbivores over cliffs. Only a few animals were used, "the rest being left to rot in a manner sharply contradicting the modern myths that propose that Stone Age hunters were somehow so totally in tune with their environments that they

wasted nothing" (McLoughlin 86). Wolves were sometimes intentional guests of humans. The Bella Coola Indians would sing a song to invite Wolf when they had killed a bear; they would take the hide, but believed that Bear "did not wish to be eaten by humans" (Lopez 104).

The combination of the wolf's adaptability, the similar social organizations and roles of wolves and humans, and the increasingly close relationship between the two species introduces a factor which continues to confuse humans' view of wolves to this day: the domestication of wolves and subsequent breeding of dogs. The oldest confirmed domestic dog found in the world is from Iraq, dated at 12,000 years B.P. (Olsen 72). In North America a great deal of controversy surrounds the issue; the oldest confirmed find is from the Jaguar Cave, Idaho, with an age of 9140 years (± 550 years), but skulls found in glacial muck north of Fairbanks may be slightly older (Olsen 20), and a mandible from Old Crow has been estimated at as much as 30,000 years old (Canby 1979 in Olsen 85).

The process of domestication eventually crippled the wolf strain involved, as their jaws ~~always~~ get shorter and their teeth crowded, eliminating one of their main hunting advantages, extremely powerful jaws combined with very specialized tooth development. Although some huskies continue to treat humans as equals (as do wolves in captivity), none of the 200 distinct breeds of domestic dogs are anything like wolves: "That loving terrier . . . is a fraction of a wolf - delightful, but a fraction, nonetheless, of the old wolf potential. As a illustration of this important fact, brain size in a wolf-sized domestic dog is often as much as 20 percent smaller than in wolves themselves" (McLoughlin 92). Despite this, humans today continue to think of wolves in about the same way they do their spaniel. Unable to contemplate the wilderness because they have so

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successfully insulated themselves from it, they often try to use their dogs and wolves as a 'bridge' to understanding, much to the detriment of the dignity of the wolf.

Concurrent with the selective breeding of domesticated wolves was the slaughter of wild wolves. Wolves have been killed by humans ever since they started competing with each other for survival; the killing increased dramatically once the hunter-gatherer societies started herding and agricultural activities. Initially a matter of self-defence or of protecting domestic animals, the wolf somehow became a symbol of everything that was wicked, and it turned into an often mindless slaughter, reaching a sickening climax in North America. Between 1865 and 1895, "virtually every wolf from Texas to the Dakotas, from Missouri to Colorado" was killed (Lopez 178). No one knows how many wolves were killed during this period: "Perhaps 1 million wolves; 2 million. The numbers no longer have meaning" (Lopez 180). It is important to keep in mind because of the way it affects current attitudes towards hunting that the wolf was not the only victim, merely the one that was the object of vindictive slaughter, of "biocide". Adding in the buffalo, passenger pigeons, antelope, Indian ponies and other animals, Lopez (180) estimates that 500 million animals were killed on the American prairies between 1850 and 1900!

Wolves in Canada did not escape the slaughter, it just came later, and as a consequence of the smaller number of people, was not as complete. But the attitudes were similar to those of the Americans; in 1886, the Dominion Fisheries Commissioner wrote regarding the game in Rocky Mountains Park (Banff): "Skin hunters, dynamiters, and netters, with Indians, wolves and foxes have committed sad havoc" (Foster 27). And the 1892 Ontario Royal Commission on Fish and Game stated that the depletion of game was due to

the advancing civilization, "the ravages of wolves and the indiscriminate hunting of the human assassin . . ." (Foster 10). Despite the fact that wolf bounties were in place in Ontario by 1793, the West reacted much slower to the "menace", with Alberta placing a bounty in 1899, British Columbia in 1909. But the carnage did not reach its peak until 1955, "when most of the wolf range in northern Canada was covered with poison bait stations (some of them poisoned wolf carcasses) served by airplane . . ." (Lopez 194).

The Yukon, as in most matters, was affected last by this hatred and killing; if the Alaska Highway had not been built as the anti-wolf frenzy in Canada was nearing its peak, the wolves in the Territory ^{might} ~~may~~ have been spared. Yukoners occasionally used their isolation to their advantage:

↗ Virtually the entire population of the Yukon from 1900 to about 1941 were wildlife users. The powers of self government allowed them to resist the imposition of many outside ideas about wildlife, which ideas in any case bore little relevance to the Yukon situation. (McCandless 154)

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With the opening of the highway, this isolation ended. A large percentage of the newcomers were from Alberta, and in 1945 they established the Yukon Fish and Game Association, which "drew many of its ideas and its support from Alberta". They were immediately influential with the Territorial government, and by 1946 they were pressuring the government to reduce the wolf population so that "there would be more moose or caribou for men to hunt" (McCandless 91). In 1948, the Alberta government unleashed "an astonishing arsenal of poison" on wolves. There is no record of the number of wolves that were killed by the 106,100 cyanide cartridges, 628,000 strychnine pellets, and 800 sodium fluoroacetate poison bait stations, but among the "incidental killing" were 246,800 coyotes (Lopez 195).

In the Yukon, poisoning wolves "had been . . . illegal for decades and

there was a deeply ingrained fear of poison, especially among the Indians" (McCandless 91). But the newcomers increased pressure on the government, and by the mid-fifties, poisoning programs were in place all over the Territory. They were fairly short-lived, but were cancelled for economic, not environmental reasons. Scientific knowledge regarding wolves, their impact on a wilderness area, and humans' impact on them, was extremely limited; in the Yukon, they were killed for political reasons.

The elusiveness of the wolves, combined with superstitions about them that stretch back into prehistory, have combined to make the wolf more an animal of our imagination than of fact. The first truly scientific book on wolves was just published in 1944 (Adolph Murie's "The Wolves of Mt. McKinley"), and the most reliable reference work currently available, David Mech's "The Wolf: the ecology and behavior of an endangered species", did not start to dispell the myths until 1970. In North America, humans' attitudes toward animals in general are still in a transitional stage - no longer totally ignorant, yet not fully ready to return to the Indians' view of animals as equals and partners. This particularly applies to wolves and the other two main symbols of the wilderness, grizzlies and bald eagles. Widely divergent viewpoints, ambivalence and controversy are the result of this transition, with the wolf, as always, caught in the middle.

Despite the fact that in the lower 48 states, wolves are supposed to be protected as an endangered species (fewer than 1,000 remain in isolated pockets (Rezendes 210)), they are still regularly killed by government hunters to protect livestock. The Animal Damage Control Division of the Department of Agriculture had 900 employees and a budget of \$46million last year; they succeeded in "eradicating" over 250,000 "nuisance" animals, including bald eagles, California condors, and gray wolves (Backpacker

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Aug. 92, Feb. 93). A proposed program to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone Park is currently being opposed by neighbouring ranchers who are "in the business of raising things wolves like to eat" (Backpacker Dec. 92). And some hikers are not happy either; up to 25 percent of the park could be closed to human traffic for a few years during the reintroduction. To understand the current situation in the Yukon, ⁹the southern attitudes toward wolves must be kept in the context not only of the hunting of other animals (for example, permit hunting of isolated pockets of mountain goats in British Columbia, and unrestricted hunting of the extremely rare mountain lion in Texas), but also as a small part of environmental problems such as the clear-cut logging of old-growth forests on the west coast, and the sterilizing of lakes and rivers on the east coast. The environmental destruction in the more heavily populated areas of the continent, and the world, is on such a vast scale that few people can even comprehend it.

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One of the consequences of the enormity of the problem is that people and their environment^d organizations sometimes look elsewhere for problems that they feel are of ^{or} a more manageable level of ~~complexity~~⁹. When the Western Canada Wilderness Committee was unable to stop clear-cut logging, ^{in ?} they shifted much of their energy to a similar problem in Malaysia; Greenpeace has similarly shifted a large number of their programs to focus overseas. One of the major benefits of this policy is that when the decisions made are wrong, it is very easy to move on to another project elsewhere. The North has sporadically been the target of their good intentions.

Even though most Canadians will never see the Yukon, "'the North' continues to be evocative. This is so because recent northern . . . development has been a compressed reiteration of earlier national struggles

and dilemmas, and because current outstanding issues in the North crystallize major national concerns" (Abele 309). The North is therefore seen as a place for North Americans to show that they have learned from their mistakes, that they now understand how to preserve wilderness.

Unfortunately for that idea, the Yukon is not a park for their enjoyment; people live in the North, and people have an impact. As well as the need for most people to earn a living in a basically resource-based economy,

"man is subject to this immutable natural law: all animals must kill and eat other living things in order to maintain their own lives. The only escape from this universal truth is to terminate one's own life"

(Spomer 8).

It is difficult (maybe impossible) for people living "Outside" to appreciate the differences in life in the Yukon; even some people who move to the Territory never seem to grasp the differences. The wolf-kill clearly focusses on at least two of these differences, humans as natural predators, and the determination of most residents to end the Territory's colonial status.

Humans are vastly outnumbered in the Yukon; there are 31,000 people, 50,000 moose, and 180,000 caribou. In a situation like that, "man as hunter fits within nature's scheme and need be no more ecologically destructive than any other predator species" (Spomer 8). While the average Yukon hunter has not reached the state of the pre-contact Athabaskan natives who regarded hunting and game animals and their meat as holy, he/she is far above the "blood-sport killer" as portrayed by environmentalists like Farley Mowat. In the Yukon government's Hunter Education and Ethics Development course, instilling "respect for the animal" is emphasized. Many environmentalists, though, consider all hunting to be immoral:

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1- Is it morally acceptable to kill an animal just because you've raised it in captivity? If cruelty is the issue, it can be argued that stalking and shooting a white-tailed deer that has lived unfettered all its life is more humane than castrating a calf, punching a plastic tag through its ear, branding it with a hot iron, poking it with needles, confining it to a feedlot, prodding it into loading chutes and trucks and hauling it over noisy highways to die in a 'disassembly' line. (Spomer 8)

One of the most interesting paradoxes of the environmental movement is that "affluent classes which give substantial aid to conservation groups are, in turn, prime users of the end products of those animals in furs, exotic leathers, ivory, or the special privilege of photographing or hunting them" (McCandless xiii). The Yukon wolf kill has highlighted that paradox; in 1992, the average price of a wolf pelt in the Vancouver fur auctions was \$83, but by January 1993, it had skyrocketed to \$375. Ken Darbyshire of the Yukon Trapper's Association explains that wolf pelts used to sell as "strippers", miscellaneous fur for trim, but since the wolf-kill controversy started, they now sell as wolf "trophy" pelts.

Wildlife management is not yet an exact science; researchers do not know all the variables, nor ^{all} the consequences. The ecologic balance of the Yukon is not easily broken down into formulas. In the preface to "Never Cry Wolf", Farley Mowat says that "unfortunately, (his) major thesis - that the wolf does not pose a threat to other wildlife, and is not a danger or a competitor of any consequence to man - remains largely unaccepted."

It remains unaccepted because it is far too simplistic, and in some cases is just not true. In the case of the Aishihik caribou herd (the herd affected by the wolf-kill), from 1983-1988, hunters killed 9 percent of the caribou that died, wolves killed over 29 percent, and grizzlies were responsible for over 48 percent of the deaths. (Those statistics beg the question of why the wolves are targeted instead of grizzlies; the answer

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lies in the fact that wolf populations fluctuate drastically and recover quickly, while grizzly populations are much more stable.)

The "interference of Outsiders" involved in the anti-wolf-kill movement brought to the surface long-standing resentment by many Yukoners of the amount of political power held by Ottawa in areas that many feel are more properly controlled by the Territory, particularly the regulation of non-renewable resources. In particular, "the National Energy Program treated the Territorial North as an internal colony. Developed without northern consultation, the NEP deployed northern energy resources 'in the national interest' using regulations and subsidies to implement a particular economic strategy" (Abele 327). And, more recently, the Territory was excluded from the discussions on the Meech Lake Accord. Here again, the wolf becomes a symbol instead of a living being. An informal survey of taxi passengers in Whitehorse at the height of the wolf-kill controversy showed an overwhelmingly high percentage of Yukoners, even those with no clear stand on the kill itself, were adamant that the situation could best be handled by locals, and that interference from "do-gooders from Vancouver" was not welcome. While the "Letters" section of the "Yukon News" from that period do not show as high a percentage, it is still a very commonly-stated sentiment.

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Many of the leaders of the environmental organizations that were campaigning against the wolf-kill only did so as long as the media attention lasted. The success of the ant-Alaskan-wolf-kill movement buoyed their hopes for a similar outcome in the Yukon. When, however, only 30 people showed up at a rally in Ottawa, 10 people turned out in Washington, D.C., and even the Yukon Conservation Society refused to side with them, Paul Watson and Bill Hipwell soon left the Territory (Yukon News, Feb.5, 1993).

Though the media, and the environmental organizations outside the Yukon have moved on to other interests, management of all the Yukon's wildlife continues to be a controversial, emotional issue to residents of the Territory. Most Yukoners have apparently decided to trust that the dedicated biologists from the Department of Renewable Resources, who by their own admission in many articles do not have all the answers, are nonetheless following a path that will eventually allow humans, caribou, and wolves to live side-by-side in relative harmony, with each allowed to maintain the dignity of their species.

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Excellent paper &
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