

Wolves Around the World

Symposium Studies International Status

by Cathy Harms and Chris Smith

Wolves don't often bring thoughts of ambivalence. Many people regard them as symbols of the wilderness, while others view wolves as competitors for other wildlife resources.

Wolves hold a special place in the hearts of the people of this country, and especially the people of Alaska. Because Alaska is one of the last strongholds of wolves in North America, it seemed logical for Alaska to play host to an international symposium about the status and future of wolf populations in the world. That's what Bob Stephenson of ADF&G and Layne Adams of the National Park Service thought. Largely as a result of their efforts, the symposium took place in Fairbanks August 12, 13, and 14, 1988.

Members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Committee (SSC) wolf specialist group met in Fairbanks at the University of Alaska to share information about the wolf. The symposium was jointly sponsored by the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Institute of Arctic Biology, UAF Department of Biology and Wildlife, ADF&G, the U.S. National Park Service, Northwest Territories Renewable Resources, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Yukon Renewable Resources, and the International Wolf Center.

"The purpose of this symposium is to provide the opportunity for a fruitful dialog among the professionals in the field of wolf management and conservation," said L. David Mech, chairman of the IUCN wolf specialist group. A promise of fruitful dialog was enough to draw participants from Canada, Italy, Israel, Poland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, and Mexico in addition to the United States. Representatives from Mainland China and the Soviet Union planned to attend but were forced to cancel at the last moment because of travel conflicts.

Presenters gave papers regarding wolf research and management. Research methods ranged from the relatively commonplace (marking and following animals on foot or from aircraft to note home range, diet, predation rates, or the effects on other wildlife species) to high tech (radio-tracking of wolves via satellite) to human values (public attitudes regarding reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone National Park).

Wolves have lived on earth since the last ice age, and have changed very little over the centuries, most likely because they are well designed for their job, and are extremely efficient predators. They are still numerous in areas with large expanses of wild lands and natural prey species. In general, wolf populations are most numerous in the northern regions, namely Canada, Alaska, and the Soviet Union. Smaller numbers of

wolves live in more populated, warmer regions.

Wolves are quite adaptable to extreme conditions. In Italy, where little or no natural prey animals exist, wolves survive by eating at garbage dumps. In Israel, where the weather can be very hot, the summer coat of a wolf is less than one-half inch long.

Whenever wolves live near humans, conflicts can develop. Luigi Boitani of Italy reported that in one instance two wolves killed 200 domestic sheep in 30 minutes. In Sweden, Anders Bjarvall noted that one yearling wolf killed 100 sheep in a short period. In Canada and Alaska, predation by wolves has caused or maintained declines in other wildlife species.

In spite of their adaptability, wolves are no match for humans in terms of survival. The largest threat to the wolf in some countries is large scale loss of habitat because of logging or agriculture. The timber industry changes the habitat and often reduces the number of prey animals, while agriculture replaces natural prey animals with domestics, for which there is little or no tolerance for wolf depredation. In other countries, wolves are blamed for predation on domestic livestock which is actually performed by more numerous feral domestic dogs. And yet in other countries, some people are unwilling to allow wolves to exist because they believe that wolves kill humans. In Norway, Svein Myrberget explained, a man who killed a wolf (there are only 11 wolves in the country) was considered a local hero and his neighbors rewarded him with a vacation in a foreign country.

While many countries fear for the survival of wolves as a species and struggle to save the few wolves they have, Alaska and part of Canada share a different challenge: how to manage relatively healthy numbers of wolves. The three-day symposium culminated in a panel discussion Sunday night which focused on "Significant Aspects of Wolf Management in Western Canada and Alaska." The subject was discussed before about 100 members of the public and interested agencies.

Speaking for Canada's Northwest Territories, biologist Peter Clarkson indicated that there were no pressing management problems, and that populations of wolves were stable while caribou were increasing. In the Yukon, wolf biologist Bob Hayes reported, the history of wolf management has included more controversy. Wolf control was used in the early 1980s to allow caribou and moose populations to increase. British Columbia has been the center of a large controversy about wolf management, but a staff member of the British Columbia wildlife management agency was unable to attend and report on the situation there.

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Wolves

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Chris Smith, regional management coordinator for ADF&G, acknowledged the changing role of wildlife managers in Alaska. Many years ago, the public was composed of nearly all hunters, while today's Alaskans place many values on wildlife, from spiritual (knowing it's there) and viewing ("nonconsumptive") to recreational hunting (where harvest is not always necessary) and subsistence hunting (where harvest is an essential part of the hunt). Today managers must provide some opportunity for all users.

Wolf management in Alaska has been and will continue to be controversial. The department's role includes more and better research and monitoring of human activity, in order to provide more options of management techniques and predictions of results. But there is also a social side to management responsibilities, which includes facilitating public debate and cooperation. Smith mentioned that the department has tentatively scheduled public forums to help staff members learn the values

held by the various publics, as well as helping to identify members to serve on a working committee which will work to develop a predator/prey management policy for Alaska. The schedule for forums and committee meetings will be decided in late 1988.

A common thread among all participants and observers at the International Wolf Symposium was the concern for the future of the species and protection of wolf habitat throughout the world. Compared to many places on earth, Alaska faces few of the imminent threats to survival of wolves. And with proper conservation and management, Alaska shines as a promise that wolves will continue to thrive as a valued member of the northern ecosystem.

Cathy Harms and Chris Smith serve as Game Biologists with the Division of Game, ADF&G, Fairbanks. Smith also serves as Regional Management Coordinator for the Interior.

Wolves Around the World: Where They Are

ITALY: Home to between 250 and 300 wolves which are legally protected. The population has grown over the past 15 years. Most of historic habitat is agricultural or residential land, and no natural large prey exist in the country. About 70 percent of wolves' diet includes food from dumps. They do prey on domestic sheep, although the better shepherds use dogs and have little problem protecting their herds. Wolves often take the blame for the actions of up to 80,000 feral dogs and wolf/dog hybrids which live in Italy and prey on sheep. The Italian government is considering reintroducing Red deer and Roe deer to provide wolves with natural prey species as well as a captive breeding program of wolves to ensure the continuation of the species.

ISRAEL: Home to about 150 wolves, the population has been stable for about 10 years. They have been legally protected for 20 years. Wolves in four different populations range in size up to about 66 lbs. They feed mainly at garbage dumps, but wild prey including wild mammals, birds, and reptiles can comprise up to 15 percent of their diet.

POLAND: Home to 888 wolves in 1986, up from 100 in 1974 but down from 1000 wolves in 1950. The increase in numbers of wolves since 1974 relates to an increase in the timber industry which has increased habitat and numbers of Red deer (an exception in relation to most countries). Wolves feed primarily on Red deer (55 per-

cent), bait placed by wolf hunters (33 percent), and some livestock, but they cause no serious damage to livestock. They are prized as a game animal, and harvest of wolves approaches 10 percent, well below the level which would reduce their numbers. The future looks good for a relatively stable population of approximately 1000 wolves.

FINLAND: Home to between 10 and 20 wolves, with approximately another 60 which live along the border with the Soviet Union. Wolves were exterminated in Central and southern Finland in the 1880s. Wolves present today disperse from the Soviet Union. They eat mostly moose and small game. The future is not bright as tolerance for wolves among humans is low.

SWEDEN: Approximately 11 wolves are shared between Sweden and Norway. In the northern part of the country, wolves prey primarily on reindeer, and in the southern part primarily moose cows and calves. The people have limited knowledge of wolf natural history or behavior, and much of their knowledge is inaccurate information derived from their ancestors. The government is engaging in public meetings to teach people about wolves in order to increase their tolerance for wolf populations.

NORWAY: Home to about 11 wolves (which are shared with Sweden). During at least part of the year, no wolves

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