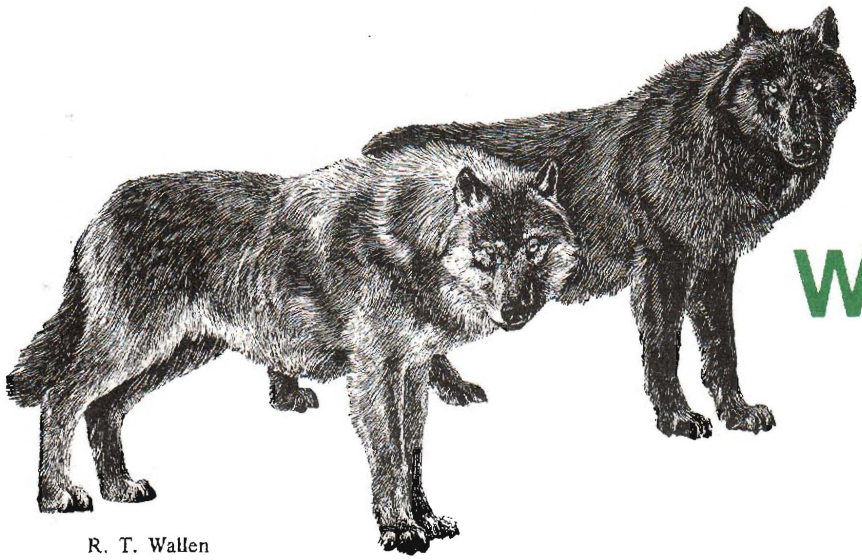
The Evolution of a Management Ethic



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WOLVES & MAN

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THE WOLF, a highly adaptable and successful species that once ranged over all of North America, Europe and most of Asia, has depended upon Alaskan big game for sustenance for thousands of years. Reliant upon game as he was, the wolf's food habits brought him into conflict with man, who viewed the wolf as a competitor for wildlife.

When prehistoric man increased in numbers and began to domesticate animals which displaced native ungulates such as deer, bison, moose and antelope, he thereby reduced the food available to wolves. Naturally, the wolf preyed upon man's domestic animals, further aggravating his already strained relationship with *Homo sapiens*.

In Alaska, confrontations between man and wolves have been primarily disputes over proprietorship of moose, caribou, sheep, deer and mountain goats. To a lesser degree, there have been problems over the use of reindeer between reindeer herders and wolves.

The management of wild animals is now a formal function of government, and initially, all management decisions were against carnivorous animals. Take the Alaskan scene as an example: when the Russians first occupied portions of Alaska, poisons were introduced in an effort to kill wolves.

In 1915, Alaska's first territorial legislature established a bounty on all wolves and coyotes. In one form or another, this bounty has persisted to this day. Hunting and trapping seasons were open continually and a hunting or trapping license was not required for taking wolves. It was legal to kill wolves in areas otherwise closed to hunting and trapping.

As recently as 1948, an eminent scientist recommended that wolves should be controlled to protect Dall sheep in Mt. McKinley National Park. In 1948 the U. S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, which was responsible for managing Alaska's wildlife, opened an office of the Bureau of Predator and Rodent Control in Alaska. This group was assigned the task of killing wolves in an attempt to increase numbers of moose, caribou and sheep. Of course, this act carried with it the assumption that wolves were the primary decimating factor causing low numbers of ungulate game species.

Intensive control followed. Methods included poisons (strychnine and cyanide), bounty, aerial shooting and trapping. About this time, shooting of wolves from aircraft became feasible as improvements were made to light aircraft.

Wolf populations were reduced in some areas; notably, the Nelchina Basin in game management unit 13. The use of poisons, however, proved to be nonselective. Poisons killed wolves; they also killed foxes, wolverines, brown and black bears, lynx, mink, marten and other small furbearers and birds.

Public outcry over the indiscriminate use of poison assisted in bringing about an evaluation of the wolf's role in game management. Wildlife management philosophies were already undergoing reappraisal and in the late 1940s and the 1950s, predator control and its effect upon predator and prey was being evaluated scientifically for the first time. Some studies in North America suggested that wolves had little influence upon the well-being of established big game populations. Furthermore, examination of dead prey animals indicated wolves were selective for the very young, very old and the physically disadvantaged; hence, predation was possibly a positive evolutionary factor.

As research probed the relationships of wolves and their prey, and the effects of one upon the other, the nation slowly was becoming more conservation-minded. That all species of animals should be preserved for future generations and that management really meant wise use of

a resource became a prevalent belief.

In Alaska, the significant happenings that changed management of wolf populations can effectively be dated from the advent of statehood. Alaska assumed authority for managing all game in 1960 and formal control of wolves eventually ceased. The use of poison was discontinued and the federal predator and rodent control effort was greatly reduced. What monies were utilized were spent to control wolves around reindeer herds.

In 1963, the Board of Fish and Game classified wolves as both a furbearer and a big game animal. About this time administrative regulations limited the number that could be killed from an aircraft in most of the northern units where they were particularly vulnerable. Those who favored elimination or great reduction of wolf numbers were not entirely quiet, however, and the Denali Closed Area in game management unit 13, where wolves had been studied and protected since 1957, was reopened in 1967 primarily in response to local pressures.

Regulations governing methods of harvest, seasons and bag limits were promulgated providing additional protection to wolves. These efforts were culminated in 1968 when the legislature gave the Board of Fish and Game authority to abolish bounties in game management units or parts thereof.

Today, bounties on wolves have been removed from all areas except game management units 1, 2 and 3 in Southeastern Alaska.

Harry Merriam

CHANGING VALUES--Alaska's wolves have been subjected to varying degrees of control during the years but are now managed on a scientific basis which allows for utilization of the resource.

In a period of 12 years we have gone from having no closed seasons or bag limits; few restrictions on methods and means of take; year-round hunting and trapping; formal control with poison, aircraft, traps and snares to a progressive management and research effort which forms the basis for a program that recognizes the positive and negative aspects of wolf populations. In other words, a comprehensive statewide management program that, while not perfect, has ensured the well-being of the wolf. During this period wolves have become reestablished on the Kenai Peninsula, an area where they were virtually absent for nearly 65 years. They are still present in the Susitna Valley near Anchorage, the Tanana Valley across the river from Fairbanks and nearly every portion of their native habitat within the state. Clearly harvestable surpluses exist and prices for their pelts are very high.

In the past ten years the wolf has gained a degree of respectability brought about in part by a conscious management and research effort on the part of the State of Alaska and enhanced by the nation's awakening environmental conscience. This newly-found respectability promises to destroy the successful management program Alaska has nutured, however. Today, there are a number of bills in Congress that would make it illegal to shoot any wildlife from an airplane. In addition, some of these bills would place wildlife management authority for many species under the Department of the Interior.

Still another bill would make it illegal for fur from animals caught in steel traps to be placed in interstate commerce. Enactment of the foregoing bills would seriously cripple major segments of the state's wolf management program without significantly benefiting any other species.

The wolf has gained respectability because the state has provided opportunity for people to use this resource according to its availability. Hence in some areas, seasons and methods and bag limits are very restrictive; in other areas liberal seasons are provided.

Furthermore, the effect that wolves have upon ungulates is still under study. We know that under special circumstances wolves can control the number of prey to the point that the wolves suffer.

In many of Alaska areas humans are utilizing moose, caribou, sheep and deer rather intensively. Wolves also eat these animals and management programs seek to maintain an equitable balance among the resource users--man and wolves. ■

Alaska FISH & GAME

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SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1971

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME