

Alberta's Wolf Failures

ALBERTA MIGHT HAVE BEEN MADE FOR WOLVES. Thousands of elk and deer thrive on the windswept bunchgrass slopes of the foothills. Further north, deer and moose thrive on abundant second-growth where industrial activity has broken up the boreal forest. Alberta may look like wolf heaven, but it is sometimes easier for a wolf to die than to live here.

by KEVIN VAN TIGHEN

Wolves were virtually eradicated from most of western Canada by a 1950s rabies-control campaign. Thousands of poison-laced meat baits were scattered across the landscape during a two-year campaign that killed off most of the wolves south of the Athabasca River watershed. But, so long as food is available, wolves will turn up again eventually. They've been coming back for years now.

I encountered my first wolf pack in 1975 in Banff National Park, west of Calgary. It wasn't long before my work as a biologist brought me into frequent contact with wolves. Later, I had an active role in managing them in southwestern Alberta.

My growing affinity for wolves, however, soon led me to realize that most of the wolves returning to the wildlife-rich southern foothills and mountains were simply coming there to die. Alberta's wolf management policies are designed so those who fear or distrust wolves can kill them. Alberta's regulatory regime makes it seem that the frontier war on wolves never ended.

The Alberta chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation is the most aggressive sponsor of Alberta's wolf kill. It subsidizes trappers who target wolves. In the winters of 2013 and 2014 alone, the sheep hunting group paid out \$32,500 in bounties to trappers for 115 wolves. In a recent email, the sheep hunting group's president asserted that "...predator growth is out of control," although he offered no evidence to support the statement.



International Wolf Center

"Is the ungulate enhancement program working and effective?" he added. "Based on these numbers, no, but the government is doing very little about predator management in this province, and this is where the WSFA... has stepped up and will continue to offer this program to the trappers of Alberta in the future."

It's hard to take seriously that oft-repeated complaint that predator numbers are out of control and the government is failing to protect game herds. Alberta's elk, deer and moose populations have never been higher. Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) is unable to sell all the big game licenses available.

And, in any case, the government does kill wolves to protect game herds. They do so both indirectly, by looking the other way when special interest groups pay out bounties (something that several municipal governments and local fish and game clubs continue to do), and directly, by conducting aggressive wolf kills where caribou populations are in decline.

The most notorious example of the latter has been going on for almost a decade. The headwaters of the Little Smoky River, northeast of Jasper National Park, were a pristine boreal wilderness when I visited in the 1980s. The river

itself teemed with arctic grayling and bull trout, as well as otters, mink and bald eagles. Its lichen-draped forests harbored a healthy population of woodland caribou, as well as a few moose, and very few wolves.

In the intervening years, ignoring a popular campaign to have the area protected as a boreal wilderness park, the Alberta government issued timber-cutting rights to a pulp company and sold oil and gas leases to energy companies that carved roads into the formerly intact watershed. As clear-cuts expanded, so did the lush second growth of willows and poplar that moose and deer thrive on. Ungulate populations grew. Predictably, so did the number of bears and wolves. The new roads and cutlines offered easy travel for the predators. Caribou numbers began to decline.

Rather than put the brakes on the actual problem, habitat fragmentation, Alberta's aggressive resource development culture required a different solution. Having declared the caribou a threatened species, the government decided to kill wolves to save the caribou.

For seven years the Alberta government used aerial gunning and a widely-banned poison, strychnine, in an effort to save the Little Smoky caribou herd from wolves. The program killed 841 wolves (154 by poisoning) as well as accidentally poisoning at least 6 lynx, 31 foxes, 91 ravens, 36 coyotes, 4 fishers, 8 martens, and 4 weasels. Unfortunately, the government allowed further habitat fragmentation by the forest and energy industry during those same seven years. There is now less caribou habitat than ever.

Even if the Alberta government were not mass-killing wolves to protect caribou or looking the other way while trophy-hunting organizations and other groups pay bounties for dead wolves, Alberta's wolf policy would still resemble full-scale war. Anyone, without a license, can kill as many wolves as they want, almost year round. In parts of northern



Alberta it is even legal to kill lactating mother wolves over bait in late spring, dooming newborn pups to starvation.

Parks Canada seems to be the only government agency regularly criticized for wolf deaths—ironic, since it actually strives to keep wolves alive. Parks Canada spent more than ten million dollars over two decades to stop wildlife deaths on the Trans-Canada Highway through Banff National Park. Wildlife-proof fencing along both sides of the highway, seven massive forested overpass structures, and several dozen underpasses have reduced wildlife deaths by over 80 percent. Wide-ranging animals like wolves no longer find their travels blocked by fast-moving traffic.

Unfortunately, wolves occasionally learn to tip-toe across the cattle guards at intersections. When one becomes roadkill, Parks Canada gets more bad press for failing to save a wolf. I retired as Banff's park superintendent in 2011—the same year I was shown a pile of decomposing carcasses near the park boundary. A trapper had snared eight wolves to collect bounty money. The skinned carcasses were left as bait for any survivors. The irony was a bit galling to me: Parks Canada had just endured

another week of public pillory for one roadkill, while far more wolves were dying, unseen and unreported, just outside the park.

The Provincial government is quick to defend its liberal killing of wolves and third-party bounties. Kyle Fawcett, the Minister of AESRD says, "There is no evidence that wolf bounties are causing a decline in Alberta's wolf population." His staff insists that wolves have increased from an estimated 4,000 in the early 1990s to 7,000 today—population estimates that they admit are based on guesstimates by trappers and wildlife officers.

AESRD is likely right that the wolf population is not threatened by the constant killing. But focusing on wolf numbers just deflects the discussion from the real questions which are, or should be: what is Alberta trying to achieve with wolves, and does the current regulatory regime achieve it?

If the management objective is simply to appease those who hate or fear wolves, then all is good. Regulations allow anyone to kill any wolf pretty much anywhere, any time. Trappers have no quotas and are encouraged to use choking snares. The use of strychnine by government wolf

control teams ups the ante further. If the goal is to kill lots of wolves painfully, the current system is working.

However, if the goal is to limit wolf numbers, that's not happening. Death and suffering doesn't stop wolves from quickly re-populating prey-rich habitat. Wolves compensate for mortality with increased reproduction, pup survival, and dispersal.

The ultimate goal should be to minimize wolf problems, not wolf numbers. Nobody wants wolves attacking humans or livestock, or to see critically threatened prey species wiped out. So how does Alberta's approach address these problems?

Human safety is a non-issue—abundant or scarce, wolves prefer to avoid us. One can't blame them. Livestock safety, on the other hand, is a real issue. But Alberta's "kill any wolf, any time, by almost any method" management regime doesn't reduce livestock losses. In fact, it probably increases them. I know at least one rancher in the Oldman River headwaters who works hard to keep "his" wolves alive. The pack currently ranging through his pastures leaves cattle alone; other wolves might not.



James Anderson
flickr.com/photos/jamesa1

His efforts are hindered by a regulatory regime that promotes random wolf killing, destabilizing packs, and creating more inefficient hunting units and disperser wolves. Those may well be the wolves most likely to start killing cattle.

For critically threatened caribou herds, predation can also be a real issue. But trying to save caribou by killing wolves is treating the symptom while leaving the disease untouched. Caribou decline is a symptom of ecosystem collapse. Declaring war on the rest of the ecosystem is a perverse solution. Alberta can afford to leave large tracts of boreal wilderness intact and to restore impaired habitats. That's the only real hope for caribou, not strychnine, aerial gunning and snares. Without habitat protection, caribou are doomed regardless of how many wolves die too.

Wolf Matters, an Alberta group promoting ethical wolf management, wants the province to ban third-party bounties, prohibit inhumane killing practices like snares and poison, and classify the

wolf as a species subject to special management. Special management might mean protecting wolves until problems develop, and then targeting specific problem packs rather than all wolves. It would probably involve radio-collaring wolves and monitoring them. While costly, that would likely be more cost-effective than the current approach. Basing 21st century wolf management on biology and ethics, rather than frontier tradition, would make more sense than today's often-cruel and counter-productive war on Alberta's wolves. ■

For Further Information
Check Out These Sites:



Alberta Environment and Sustainable
Resource Development (AESRD)
(esrd.alberta.ca)



Wolf Matters (www.wolfmatters.org)

Canadian naturalist and hunter Kevin Van Tighem is the award-winning author of several books and more than 200 articles, stories and essays on wildlife and conservation. His latest book, *The Homeward Wolf*, received the Jon Whyte prize in the Non-Fiction Mountain and Wilderness Literature category at the 2014 Banff Mountain Book Festival. Retired from his job as superintendent of Banff National Park, Van Tighem is a major contributor to a soon-to-be-broadcast documentary film, "Unnatural Enemies—The War on Wolves."

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