

Box 15

Wisconsin wolf management: a cauldron of controversy

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Wisconsin is caught in conflicting crosscurrents of controversy over its recovered wolf (*Canis lupus*) population. Like other states with recovered wolf populations that allow wolf harvest, the primary protagonists are animal welfare advocates versus hunters, trappers and ranchers. Wolves are similar to dogs, which elicits varying conservation values among people that have a strong gender bias (Kellert and Berry, 1987), with women generally more protective of wolves.

Unlike other states, Wisconsin allows hounds for hunting wolves, which makes their management more contentious (Mech, 2013). Concerned for both wolves and hounds, a coalition of humane societies and private citizens unsuccessfully sued to prevent hunting wolves with hounds (*Sportsman's Daily*, 2013).

Another crosscurrent of conflict involved the Anishinaabe tribe that regards the wolf as kin, so opposes hunting it. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reduced its wolf-take quota of 201 by 75 in deference to tribal wishes; however, the tribe believed this reduction insufficient (Johnston, 2012). This conflict is beset with misunderstandings, disagreements and changed judgements about the number of wolves Wisconsin could support with minimal conflicts. Wolf recovery and public attitudes evolved over many years. As Wisconsin's wolf population flourished, the

Recovery Plan for the Eastern Timber Wolf (1992) prescribed a recovery population goal for the upper Midwest of at least 100 wolves in Wisconsin and Michigan for at least 5 consecutive years combined with at least 1250 in Minnesota. Although this requirement for Wisconsin and Michigan might seem low now, in the early 1990s there were 30–40 wolves in Wisconsin and few in Michigan. Thus 100 in Wisconsin and Michigan, coupled with 1250 in Minnesota, seemed like a high population. The state management plan prescribed a goal of 350 wolves (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 1999).

The early thinking by biologists and citizens was that wolves required wilderness. A wolf-habitat model predicted that only 14,864 km² (11% of Wisconsin) had at least a 50% probability of supporting wolves (Mladenoff *et al.*, 1995). However, this model was descriptive, not prescriptive (Mech, 2006), so a refined model indicated that 42,017 km² (39% of WI) had at least a 50% chance of supporting wolves (Mladenhoff *et al.*, 2009). As information changed, views on the number of wolves the state could support with minimal impact on people also changed, which probably confused the public.

In addition, over time, the former goals, findings and opinions were forgotten or changed, and new players became involved. As with other wolf-recovery

areas, publicity and public involvement became intense because wolves were perceived as endangered. Thus, when Wisconsin's wolf population of 800 was delisted, much of the public rebelled at the thought of wolf reduction. Although wolf numbers far exceeded official recovery levels and Wisconsin's goal of 350, animal welfare groups and wolf preservationists filed three lawsuits between 2007 and 2013, based on legal technicalities rather than on biological issues. These lawsuits resulted in relisting twice, and a third suit is pending. They greatly conflicted with concerns of hunters, trappers, ranchers and rural residents whose dogs and livestock had been killed by wolves. Including the other issues discussed above, these strong divergent factions contributed to the cauldron of crosscurrents pervading Wisconsin wolf management.

Following delisting in 2012, the Wisconsin legislature opened a hunting and trapping season with a quota of 201 wolves, including 85 allocated for harvest by tribes. The tribes took no wolves, but 117 were harvested by the public, not enough to impact the population. In 2013, some 197 wolves have been

taken thus far from a quota of 251 wolves.

The Wisconsin recovery goal of 350 wolves has also been challenged, adding to the controversy. Although that goal is about seven times the official federal recovery plan goal, it is so much lower than the actual wolf population that some have questioned the 1999 goal itself as too small (large). The goal was publicly reaffirmed by the DNR's Wolf Science Advisory Committee in 2005 when the wolf population estimate was 435. Thus various factions, including some biologists, now reason that if the state currently supports 800 wolves, then 350 may be too low a population goal. Regardless, to reduce the population from 800 to 350 would require increased quotas.

Because of these crosscurrents, Wisconsin's wolf-management controversy persists as a far more complex issue than that of other states with recovered wolf populations. Thus, it appears that the state's cauldron of controversy will continue to boil, and there seems to be little anyone can do to quell the problems encountered with the success of the biological recovery of wolf populations.

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