

THE WOLF'S WORLD BRIGHTENS

Though prejudice lingers, a persecuted carnivore is also regaining ground in some other countries

by L. David Mech

The alpha wolf peered through the thick fir stand to the snowy valley below and suddenly stopped. His fellow pack members halted behind him in a frozen line of tense anticipation. Before them in Yellowstone National Park's Lamar Valley grazed a sprawling myriad of elk — potential dinner. After several quick rushes at peripheral stragglers, a few focused chases and a final struggle, an old bull fell to the hungry canids. It is what should have been happening for decades but only now is becoming possible again.

In a remarkable gesture to an age of shame, the U.S. citizenry is righting a blatant wrong its forebears fostered. Wolves are being returned to the Yellowstone ecosystem. Wiped out in the park by the federal government at the ranching community's behest, this magnificent creature is also being restored to central Idaho.

Although wolf restoration can never come close to compensating for all the environmental havoc wreaked by our own species, it is a heartening symbol of a new public vision. I hope it is a harbinger of a more environmentally sensitive outlook in our still-emerging culture.

And although America's citizenry has every right to be proud of this new attitude toward its surroundings, fortunately our society is not unique in its more enlightened view. Wolf restoration to Yellowstone and central Idaho is but one more success story for wolf recovery around the world.

Wolves have naturally recolonized the northwestern quarter of Montana. Minnesota now supports 2,000 wolves, and neighboring Wisconsin and Michigan have another 100 or so. North and South Dakota see dispersing wolves every year. Washington has lately had two breeding packs. The possibility of restoring the

Mexican wolf in the southwestern states is being studied seriously, and the red wolf has been reestablished in parts of North Carolina.

Wolf restoration in some of the 48 contiguous states is one of the great success stories of the Endangered Species Act. This seminal legislation enacted a little over two decades ago reflected what truly is a revolution in human thinking. In the parlance of sociologist Stephen Kellert of Yale University, society has now begun its transformation from a utilitarian view toward the environment to a naturalistic outlook.

But it is not just this country that is undergoing this environmental transformation. A glance around the wolf's original circumpolar range shows that most of the northern cultures are in synch with this trend, and that is favorably affecting their wolf populations. Close to home, both Alaska's 5,000 to 7,000 wolves (not protected by the Endangered Species Act) and Canada's 50,000 thrive despite much-protested annual harvests and control programs.

In Europe, Russia's burgeoning wolf population has spilled over into Finland, Norway and Sweden, where the species continues to increase. Poland's 1,000 wolves are putting out dispersers that have reached Germany for the first time in decades. Italy's 100 wolves of the early 1970s have tripled or quadrupled and have begun to make their way into France. Spain supports some 2,000 wolves, and Portugal another 150. All this is a result of the environmental movement.

Although environmentalism is very much alive in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, wolves there are also benefiting from the political and economic disruption of the past decade. For example, whereas helicopter gun-

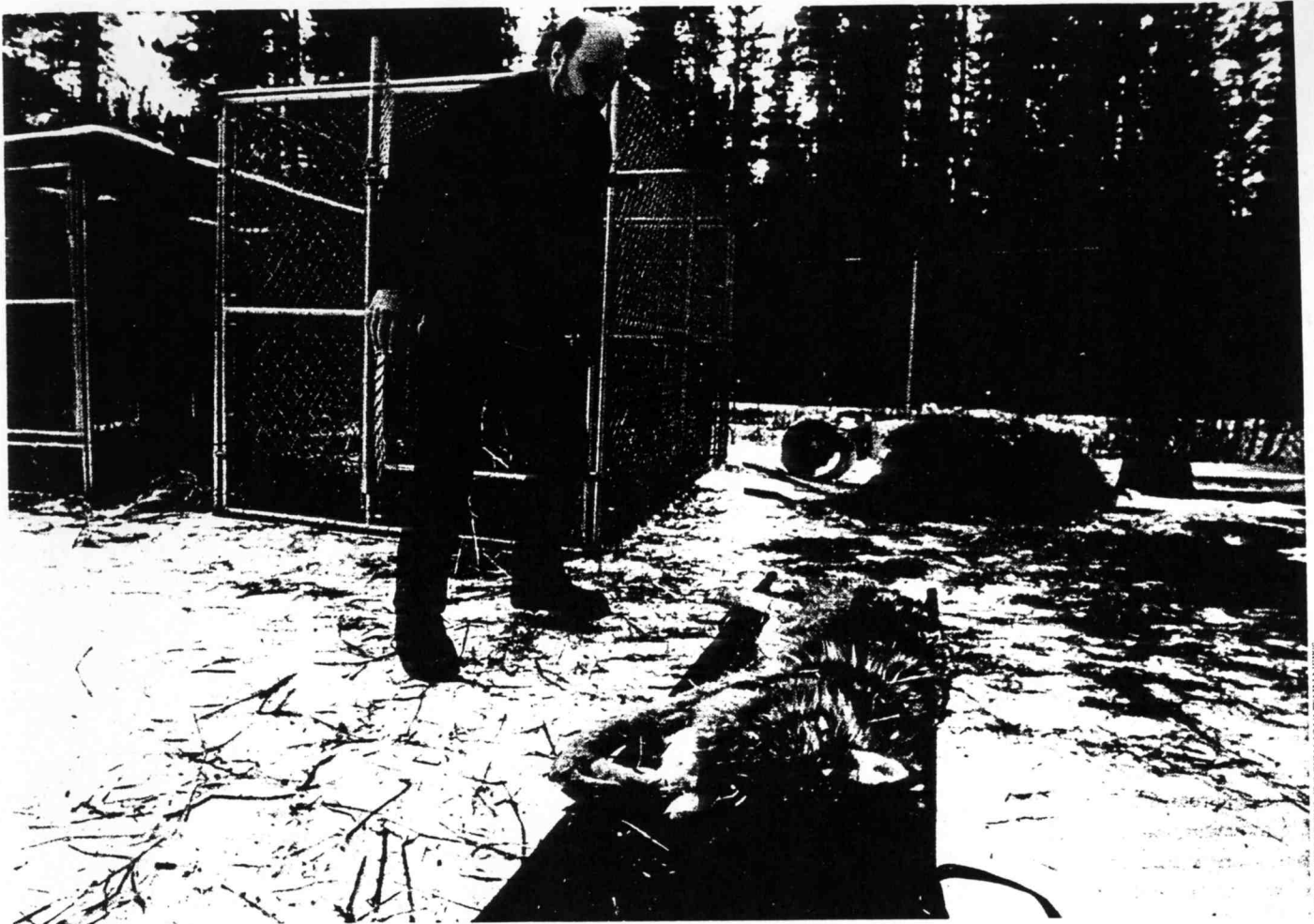
ning of wolves was the primary means of control in the Soviet Union only a few years ago, the cost of fuel now prohibits this activity. Wolf numbers have responded predictably.

All this is not to say that wolves are no longer in danger in certain areas. They are gone from about half of their former worldwide range. In such countries as Israel, India and Mexico their numbers range from near zero to perhaps a few hundred. However, at least the public and official attitudes in these areas have also changed for the better, and attempts are being made to preserve what wolves survive. In still other areas, such as Japan and Scotland, movements are under way to reintroduce the wolf.

It should be clear that wolves can respond readily to protection and favorable official attitudes. With average litter sizes of five or six and dispersal distances exceeding 550 miles, wolves need only prey and protection in order to recolonize former range. The prey can be any hoofed mammal, and even smaller animals and garbage will support some wolves.

Although these traits have long furthered the wolf's survival, they also have been the creature's undoing. Whenever wolf control has ceased for long periods, reservoirs of wolf populations have blossomed. This has led to renewed calls for control. Poland is a good case in point. The country is now in its third cycle of wolf control and protection. Similar problems are beginning to plague wolf recovery elsewhere. Italy, for example, is considering controlling its expanded wolf population as shepherds begin to rebel. Minnesota kills more than 150 wolves a year.

However, society's new attitude holds great hope here. Although there probably will always be situations that require



LINDA MCCONNELL/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

The author inspects an anesthetized female wolf awaiting shipment to the United States after being checked over by veterinarians in Alberta's Switzer Park. The hood was placed over the wolf's eyes to help keep her calm.

lethal wolf control, the hope is that a new round of outright extermination can be avoided in most areas. New methods of dealing with wolf depredations on livestock not only will decrease wolf competition with humans but will discourage reemergence of hatred toward wolves. Better animal-husbandry practices, improved fencing and use of guard dogs can all help.

When these techniques are impractical or fail, compensation for losses is also a remedy. Some states and countries pay such compensation out of public coffers. However, there is no reason why private funds cannot substitute for government payments where necessary. A prime example is the program of Defenders of Wildlife to compensate ranchers and farmers in the western and southwestern states for their livestock losses to wolves.

Not only is this good conservation and good citizenship, but it also allows members of the public who value wolves to participate in their recovery by contributing to the compensation fund.

Just as Defenders of Wildlife has taken this innovative step to compensate ranchers where government does not, so too a private organization has arisen to bridge another critical gap that government has been unable to fill, that of public education about wolves. The International Wolf Center in Ely, Minnesota, was established to provide objective and accurate scientific information about the wolf to the general public. Through memberships, displays, field trips, symposia, a magazine and the Internet, the International Wolf Center reaches thousands of opinion leaders throughout the world.

Many other private wolf organizations

around the globe help keep the plight of the wolf in the public eye. These groups form the vanguard of the environmental revolution and promote the recovery of the wolf. In that respect, all have contributed to the restoration of the wolf to Yellowstone and elsewhere.

Now that this great conservation milestone has been reached, however, let us not stop. Instead, let us hope that the new Yellowstone wolf population will prove a potent symbol of this new era of environmental sensitivity and greater resolve to respect and nurture the natural world around us. □

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