


# INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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# Seeking Common Ground:

## Building Community to Protect Wolves and People

By COURTNEY VAIL

**W**e live in a world increasingly defined by our differences. Conflict is a daily part of our lives, even as we seek to coexist with each other, human-to-human.

The story of humankind's coexistence with wolves and other apex carnivores dates back millennia to well before Euro-American colonists embraced manifest destiny and the march westward, destroying native wildlife populations and Indigenous

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communities in their path. The wolf was eliminated from many natural landscapes by the mid-1900s.

Popular and scientific literature abounds with accounts of intense hatred of wolves and their ongoing persecution by humans. In contrast, this article offers a glimpse of tempered hope and possibility borne of friendship and willingness of wolf advocates and ranchers to take a chance on each other in Colorado.

The last native wolf in Colorado was shot in 1945. But in November 2020, voters changed the course of history for the wolf in Colorado. By a small margin, voters said 'yes' to Proposition 114, mandating that the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission develop and implement a plan to reintroduce gray wolves to Colorado by the end of 2023.

Based on the results of public opinion surveys, one might get the impression that most Coloradans welcome wolves to the landscape. However, we know that not everyone does. These apex car-

nivores will place additional stress on ranching operations that already deal with predation from other species such as coyotes, and other pressures including drought and the closing of rural industries many communities depend on for jobs and economic health.

Jo Stanko and I met at a gathering hosted by Colorado State University (CSU). Jim and Jo Stanko's ranch near Steamboat Springs has been in the family since 1907; the ranch now runs mostly on cows, calves and hay. Stakeholders at the CSU meeting met to explore ways to reduce conflict between humans and predators, and more specifically to foster tolerance, acceptance and collaboration that benefits wolves and people. Jo and I made a personal connection over coffee and launched the idea to bring wolf advocates and ranchers together for a weekend of conversation, field demonstrations and other engaging programming. The goal of such an event? To foster mutual awareness and understanding about sustainable ranching and living with predators by

bringing together divergent viewpoints.

The event was held in mid-September 2022 in Steamboat Springs with the collaboration of Rocky Mountain Wolf Project, CSU, CSU Extension, the Routt County Farm Bureau, and the Stanko Ranch. We aimed to promote dialogue, build community and find common ground to live and work with wolves and other wild carnivores through programs that minimize conflict.

Although embracing the challenges that Colorado wolf restoration poses may not be comfortable, it allows us to find shared values. We begin to see each other as fellow human beings deserving of respect. It also offers hope that we can work together for a better future for wolves and people.

Studies have shown that successful coexistence with wolves may be more about social, rather than ecological, carrying capacity. For those of us working to foster understanding and soften attitudes toward wolves before their reintroduction in December 2023, engaging and communicating with ranchers and other stakeholders is imperative.





Promoting science alone is not enough to build trust. No shortcut exists for building community among diverse and often competing interests. It is hard work, accomplished individual-to-individual, one person at a time. Trust is born through shared experience and genuine interest in the well-being of others.

The rationale behind holding our meeting was simple. The scientific literature around bias, belief perseverance, and attitudinal change emphasizes the value and influence of personal relationships on peoples' preconceived notions of each other. In other words, nurturing friendships, or at least collegiality, between individuals can build bridges between entire groups. These relationships serve as stepping stones that can pave the way for civil and authentic dialogue between the extremes of opinion—and everything in between.

All of us are potential stakeholders in reducing conflict to support successful coexistence with carnivores on the landscape. *We can choose to feed the conflict, or we can work together toward solutions.*

Few things are more difficult than “loving thine enemy,” but often the enemy is of our own design and making, propped up by the stories we tell and the biases we keep. A humane and enduring future for wolves will require each of us to dismantle the rhetoric that keeps us divided.

Those who welcome wolves to Colorado and those who don't do not fit into tidy little boxes. We all are more than the labels that attempt to put us on opposite sides of a perceived divide. Nobody is completely one-dimensional, and labels don't do any of us justice.

Starting a slow and delicate process on a weekend in Steamboat Springs, the lines between rural and urban denizens blurred as participants mingled on ranchlands. Five ranches took part in a lightly facilitated weekend of conversations and demonstrations, sharing meals and life experiences. The event on the Stanko Ranch invited local producers to share their stories and operations. In a display of trust and willingness, they opened necessary conversations about the realities of coexisting with predators in ranching communities.



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If there is a “divide,” it is nothing more than a dotted line that separates those who embrace the rhetoric that perpetuates division from those who look for opportunities to understand one another. We can erase that line by demonstrating a bit of faith in each other.

Despite some media accounts, a diverse community has pulled together to support producers in northern Colorado where wolves originating from Wyoming preyed on cattle on at least one ranch. Wolf advocates took part in nighttime patrols at the ranch and contributed to efforts to install fladry (fence flagging), donate equipment and funds, and support workshops to share information about livestock management methods to reduce depredations.

While these efforts bode well, along with possibilities for emergent friend-

ships and deeper collaborations, it will take more of this hard work to temper animosity toward wolves that simmers around the borders of Colorado. Just over a month after our community dialogue in Steamboat Springs, media reports suggested that three of the eight wolves in the itinerant pack inhabiting rangeland near Walden had been shot after crossing the border into Wyoming.

Clearly, we have more work to do. But the good news coming out of northern Colorado is that civil dialogue and even cooperation is possible.

We extend our sincere gratitude to Jo and Jim Stanko and the families who shared their stories, welcoming visitors to their ranches so that we might learn, grow and better understand the challenges agricultural communities will face as we restore wolves to Colorado.

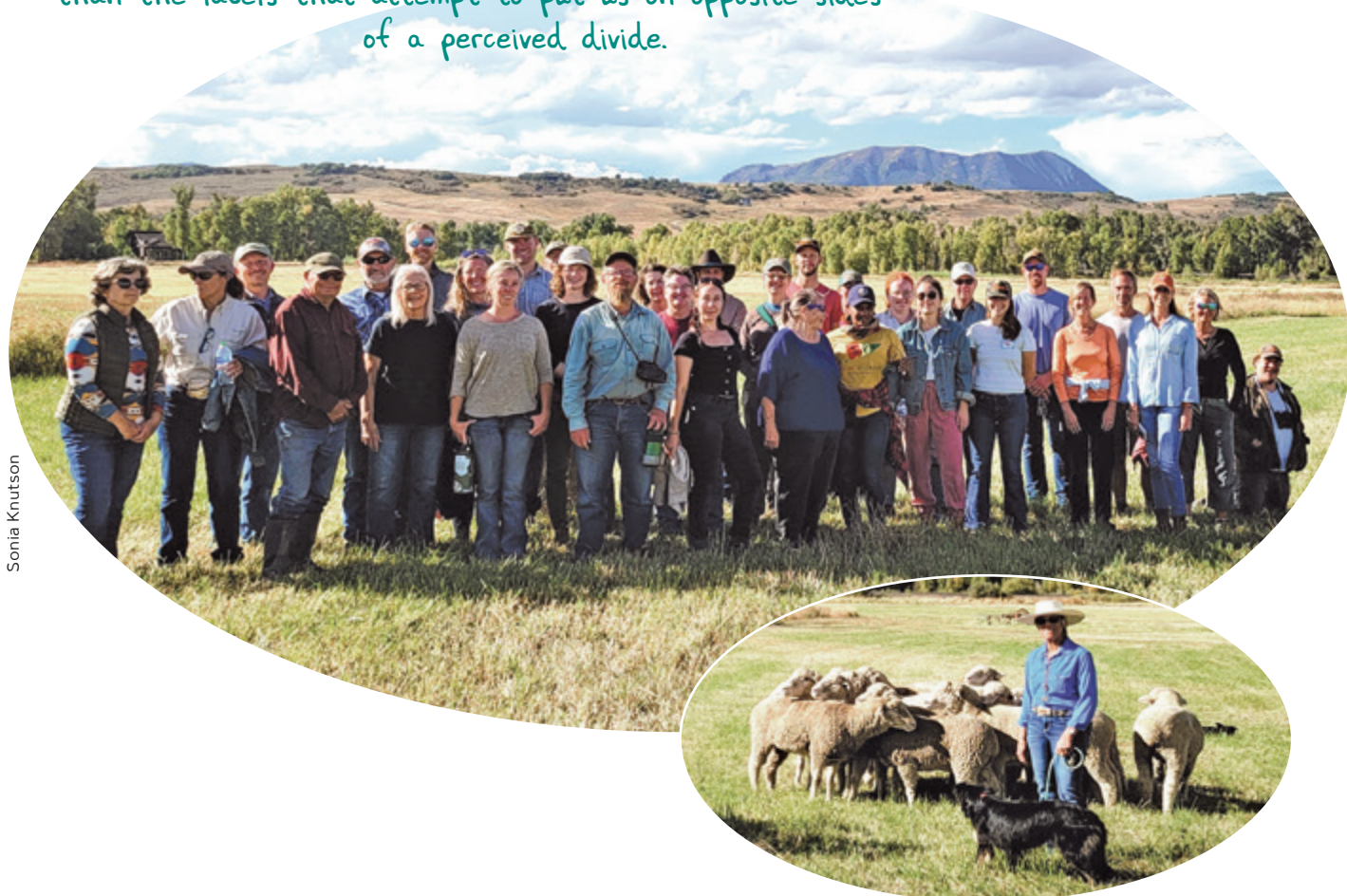
We also thank the wolf advocates who pushed through the discomfort of spending time with perceived opponents—only to find that a spectrum of attitudes towards wolves exists within the ranching community just as it does within the environmental community.

As the citizens of Colorado prepare to return wolves to the vast, wild landscape of the state’s Western Slope, this September weekend of community building and goodwill in Steamboat—with plans for more dialogues like it—offers a glimmer of hope. Indeed, the event may just mark the beginning of a framework of mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance that wolves and people desperately need. ■

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Courtney Vail is a biologist and social scientist who serves as an advisor to the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project. She supported the successful passage of Proposition 114, the public ballot initiative that will bring wolves back to the Colorado landscape.

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Sonia Knutson