

Thursday, Oct. 01, 2009

Dancing with Wolves: Natural Resources Alum Seeks Balance



Thanks to recovery efforts, gray wolves in the western United States have rebounded from the brink of extinction.



USU College of Natural Resources alum Ed Bangs, holding a sedated wolf, has led wolf recovery efforts for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for more than 20 years.

Since graduating from Utah State University in 1974, Ed Bangs has spent his days on conservation's frontline — and the conflict is intense. Yet recent developments point to progress in a long journey tackling tough challenges in a delicate balancing act: How can humans and wild predators co-exist?

Just this fall, Montana and Idaho began issuing wolf hunting permits. For Bangs, who led U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wolf recovery efforts over the past two decades, those actions by the two Rocky Mountain states represent a significant victory in an enormously controversial process involving divergent stakeholders.

These wolf hunts, activities not held in decades, indicate that the wolf population has successfully rebounded from the brink of extinction. Gray wolves are protected under the Endangered Species Act in most of the United States. The wolf was delisted in April 2009 in Montana, Idaho, eastern portions of Washington and Oregon and in areas of the Great Lakes, although wolves regained protected status in the latter region after a court challenge.

“Wolves have always evoked strong emotions in people,” says Bangs, who earned his USU degree in game management and received the College of Natural Resources Professional Achievement Award in 2001. “The two land mammals with the greatest natural distribution on earth were people and wolves, leading to a lengthy and close interaction — and a great deal of mythology.”

He notes that hunter-gatherer societies generally held positive views of wolves.

“People viewed wolves as brothers in the hunt, so to speak,” Bangs says. “They saw the wolf’s family loyalty, hunting ability, beauty, endurance and cunning as admirable traits that humans could benefit by mimicking.”

But that attitude changed when people began establishing permanent settlements and raising livestock.

“The more people love domestic animals or treat wild ungulates like livestock, the more they hate wolves,” he says.

By 1900, many people echoed Theodore Roosevelt’s view that a wolf is “a beast of waste and desolation.”

“Ironically, the first mission of the USFWS, which got its start in the early 1900s, was to eradicate wolves from the western United States,” Bangs says. “By 1930, it had succeeded.”

When wolves came under the protection of the ESA in 1974, only a few hundred animals remained in extreme northeastern Minnesota.

“As societal values changed, the USFWS’s mandate from Congress switched from being the nation’s primary wolf exterminator to being its lead wolf restorer,” he says.

Bangs says that one of the most common questions he’s asked is “Why have wolves?”

How one answers the question, he says, probably reflects where the person lives and how they make a living. A descendent of ranchers who struggles to hang on to the family’s legacy and has experienced livestock attacks is likely to oppose wolf recovery. An urbanite who loves to view wildlife in a national park or forest may have a completely different perspective. Hunters, Bangs says, tend to be evenly split on the issue and may be among key players in a successful wolf management program.

“There is no reason that hunting should not be used to help manage a recovered wolf populations in the northern Rocky Mountain region,” he says. “Wolf hunting should be just as successful at promoting the conservation of wolf populations as other forms of hunting have been at helping to conserve elk, deer, mountain lion and black bear populations.”

Bangs calls the West’s healthy recovered wolf population with a harvestable surplus a remarkable wildlife conservation success story.

“Currently, we have more wolves in more places and fewer problems with livestock than we predicted,” he says.

Even so, as human population and development grows, new ideas and technology are needed to keep the balance in check.

“The restoration of wolves is (a step) in the long progression of wildlife restoration and the ongoing national debate about what nature and wildness contributes to the quality of our American way of life,” Bangs says.

[From Oct. 5-10, USU’s College of Natural Resources hosts a week of recreational and educational activities aimed at increasing awareness of natural resources study and research at the university. To learn more, visit the accompanying article, “[Find Your Roots: Aggies Invited to Celebrate Natural Resources Week](#)”]

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