

## LIVESTOCK AND LARGE CARNIVORES--DO PROBLEM INDIVIDUALS REALLY EXIST?

By George Wuerthner 20 April 2000

A recent article "Large carnivores that kill livestock: do problem individuals really exist?" in *The Wildlife Society Bulletin* 27(3)698-705 has major implications for the restoration of wolves across the West and elsewhere. Basically the authors conclude that there is seldom a pattern of a "problem" individual that for whatever reason becomes a livestock killer. With the exception of individuals that may be in the "wrong" place--i.e. stray from a protected zone into an area where no carnivores are tolerated, all sexes, ages, etc. appear to develop into livestock killers if carnivores and livestock territories significantly overlap.

Their conclusions appears to agree with my own informal observations of wolf restoration efforts in the Northern Rockies where for the most part wolf territories that overlap significantly with livestock operations typically don't survive more than a few years without some kind of conflict--typically with at least some of the wolves being removed or killed.

For example, I know of at least 7 different wolf packs that have established themselves during the past 12 years or so along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front from Glacier National Park south to Rogers Pass. Though this is exceptional wolf habitat with an abundance of prey, low human population density and limited road access, not one of those packs survived more than two years before mysteriously disappearing, being captured or killed by government officials--in nearly all cases due to conflicts with livestock producers.

While it's true that wolf restoration in places like Yellowstone and the Frank Church/No Return Wilderness in Idaho has been successful, it remains to be seen whether wolf packs can persist on lands outside of these few protected areas.

The authors did note that this only applies to livestock that are neglected (my word). In those parts of the world where herders, guard dogs, and corralling of livestock at night is the common practice, losses to predators is significantly reduced since predators must develop specialize behavior to overcome the obstacles created by husbandry practices. It is obvious in the American West, the livestock industry has chosen to simply eliminate predators rather than adopt predator avoidance management behavior. This, as I have often argued, merely transferred one of their costs of operations--reducing predator opportunity--to the public that supports carnivores and the landscape which has lost a major evolutionary process--namely predation by large carnivores.

If the conclusions of this review are correct, then the assumption that we can restore wolves across the West and still have livestock production is apparently a false promise.

Most groups claiming to support carnivore restoration and government agencies working on wolf recovery have directly or indirectly implied the presence of "problem individuals" to avoid challenging the livestock industry. They get away with this by lumping all wolves together as one group, and fail to do an analysis that distinguishes wolves whose territories lie largely in livestock-free zones with the survival of wolves in areas with significant overlap in livestock.

I believe if such an analysis were done for wolves residing in the Northern Rockies it would clearly indicate that the only way we are going to reestablish wide-ranging predators like wolves across the landscape is to eliminate livestock production on much of the land base or at a minimum demand that livestock producers develop husbandry practices that reduces predator opportunity. Continuing the notion that there are just "problem" wolves or bears is really false. The only "problem" is livestock and livestock producers who for too long have externalized one of their real operational costs--reducing predator opportunity--on to the public and the landscape.

George Wuerthner