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DNR's Cathy Stepp: Wolf management is an art as well as a science

October 15, 2013 3:00 pm • [CATHY STEPP](#) | secretary, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

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In the interests of ensuring the public is fully informed, I feel compelled to let your readers know important aspects that were omitted from the recent article on wolf management by the [Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism](#) published Oct. 13.

If wildlife management was simply about doing research and then implementing what a study suggests, our wildlife managers would have a pretty straightforward and relatively easy job. However, wildlife management in Wisconsin and across the country is as much an art as it is a science. To ignore public sentiment and turn a blind eye to what society will accept will result in the failure of any policy, no matter how sound it may be from a scientist's point of view. That is why for over 76 years, the DNR has balanced social, biological and economic science in its decision making.

In review of the article, there are a number of important facts that were omitted.

First, several scientists, including Timothy Van Deelen and his research associate Jennifer Stenglen, have presented to the department's wolf committee on multiple occasions. The article suggests that because Van Deelen isn't a member of the committee that his inputs are not considered. To the contrary, their model has been utilized for two consecutive years to help model and project how the state's wolf population will respond to harvest.

Secondly, the article asserts a false premise that only hunters, trappers and ranchers want fewer wolves. What is not mentioned are the votes by 18 Wisconsin county boards that have passed advisory resolutions on wolf management, with 14 voting for 350 or less wolves and four voting for a goal of 350 wolves. Those counties include Ashland, Burnett, Clark, Douglas, Florence, Forest, Iron, Jackson, Langlade, Lincoln, Marinette, Oconto, Oneida, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Taylor and Vilas. This is a taste of the social side of wolf management. The DNR strives to balance many of the social aspects of wolf management with the need, and the department's responsibility, to manage the state's wolf population.

At a recent DNR wolf committee meeting, social dimension work from UW researcher Adrian

Treves was presented to the committee. In subsequent meetings the committee decided that more in-depth and robust social dimensions work needed to be conducted to better inform the department's update to the state's wolf management plan. Again, no mention was made of this fact in the article.

Next, the assertion that we will get to our goal of 350 wolves in one year ignores the science. The UW's own population model indicates this year's harvest could result in a 13 percent reduction in the state's wolf population.

Since the day the wolf hunt legislation went into effect, we have been clear that we will honor the established population goal, and we will manage the population responsibly. Last year, as we predicted, our conservative harvest resulted in basically holding the wolf population steady. The minimum population count was estimated to be 815 in 2012; after the harvest it was estimated to be 809, a decline of less than 1 percent.

Also, at the beginning of the 2014 wolf hunting and trapping season, the population is well above 809 animals. The state's wolf population basically doubles each spring when young are born. The number the department reports as a baseline is the population at its lowest point each year, just prior to pups being born. That is the origin of 809 and needs to be reported in context.

Finally, I want to take this time to thank our experts, the 12 DNR scientists and wildlife professionals who sit at the table with our conservation and federal partners developing recommendations at our wolf committee meetings. The article focuses on only a few committee members and fails to mention the makeup of our 25-member committee, which also includes representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wisconsin County Forest Association and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. The article suggests that science is not represented, that only stakeholders are making decisions. This is simply not true and fails to tell the entire story.

Once recommendations are developed at the committee level, those recommendations are advanced to the department's wildlife policy team, where seasoned managers and scientists with over 150 combined years of experience weigh the science (both social and biological) and also the management implications. Ultimately they will make the recommendation to department administration and the Natural Resources Board. That is where biology, science and public sentiment are weighed and a final decision is made. This year the wolf committee recommended a quota of 275 wolves and the NRB approved that quota unanimously.

There are some tough decisions ahead. For instance, if we want to continue to harvest wolves, we will very likely have to decide on whether 350 wolves is the correct number. We do not disagree or ignore the fact that at lower populations we need to take great care in our management decisions. If we do reach 350 animals, it may mean that public harvest is extremely limited and we are only controlling problem wolves. These are the important questions that our citizens and committee will be tackling in the coming year. In the meantime, we will continue to responsibly manage our wolf population.

Our commitment to science remains strong. We will continue to monitor the biological data collected through surveys and harvest data as we move toward our goal, approved by and written by many of those quoted in the article as well as the USFWS. No other state puts the same amount of effort into tracking, monitoring and collecting data on the wolf population and harvest as Wisconsin does. There is much to be celebrated in our recovery and responsible management of the wolves in Wisconsin.

Cathy Stepp is secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

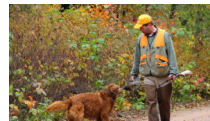
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