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Seely on Science: Of old myths and fears and a modern-day wolf hunt

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Seely on Science



Reporter **Ron Seely** has covered science and environment for nearly 20 years at the State Journal. His blog shares research news from both laboratories and the natural world — from scientific curiosities to discoveries that are likely to reshape our view of the world.

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Wisconsin's first recreational hunt for wolves is nearing an end and as the hunt itself winds down, attention will turn to analysis and to what is, hopefully, a scientific assessment of the season and its impact on the state's wolf population.

Much of that work will focus, appropriately, on population densities in the wake of the hunt and implications for future quotas.

But it would be interesting — and important — to also spend some time thinking about and studying the impact of the hunt on the public's perception of wolves.

Not long after the hunt started, UW-Madison researcher Adrian Treves released a study that confirmed what most suspected — public attitudes toward the wolf deteriorated in the months and years prior to approval of the hunting season. The survey, conducted by Treves along with colleagues Lisa Naughton-Treves and Victoria Shelley, showed that people have fallen prey to the same myths and stereotypes that have historically marked our relationship with the wolf.

The researchers surveyed 1,800 northern Wisconsin residents about their attitudes toward wolves in 2001 and 2004, then followed up in 2009 with interviews of 656 of the same people still living in wolf country. The result, Treves said, showed an eight-year decline in tolerance for wolves, including a sense that wolves were killing too many deer and, therefore, were serious competitors with human hunters. That same belief largely accounted for the bounties that led to the disappearance of wolves from Wisconsin by the 1960s.

Other negative perceptions included increased self-reported fear of wolves, increased support for a public wolf hunt and state-sponsored lethal control measures and a greater personal inclination to shoot a wolf illegally if given the opportunity.

The researchers were surprised to find that these negative attitudes were not formed as a result of personal experience. In other words, such feelings toward wolves formed primarily through anecdote and story, the kinds of tales one can hear by stopping by just about any northern cafe at breakfast time.

I've heard the tales myself. And I've seen how so many come to ardently believe that wolves are little more than dangerous pests. Recently, I interviewed Bill Vyvyan, the owner of a private hunting preserve near Black River Falls. While we were driving around the property, the conversation drifted to wolves and the wolf hunt. Vyvyan said he is absolutely convinced that wolves are becoming so numerous and so habituated to humans that he fears for the safety of children who are left outside to play.

Vyvyan told of visiting a family recently and seeing children playing outside the rural home. On the dirt road where they were playing, he said, there were numerous wolf tracks. "Remember this conversation," he told me.

I asked Vyvyan if he knew of any factual cases of wolves killing humans and he said he thought there was a case somewhere in Canada. This week I spent some time looking through numerous books on wolves — including "Of Wolves and Men" by Barry Lopez and "The Timber Wolf in Wisconsin," by the state's own Richard Thiel — and in every discussion of fatal attacks on humans by wolves, the authors found no confirmed cases in modern times. Lopez reported that even in the case of some oft-repeated anecdotal incidents, the animals involved were either wolf-dog hybrids or rabid wolves.

Regardless, hearing the passion in Vyvyan's voice, it didn't surprise me at all that, back at his taxidermy shop, I spotted a stack of bumper stickers on a counter. They showed a fierce-looking wolf with a red circle and line drawn over its head. Large black letters read "NO WOLVES."

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