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Wayne Pacelle's Blog

Celebrating 60 Years



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Data from agriculture and natural resources agencies indicate that even as wolf numbers are recovering from state-sponsored slaughter in the Great Lakes from 2012 to 2014, confirmed attacks by wolves on livestock in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have been in decline. *Photo by Alamy*

Cascade of scientific reports discredits wolf-killing activities of states

January 23, 2018 [2 Comments](#)

Fear-mongering [dominated two hearings](#) in the state capitol in Wisconsin this month, as state lawmakers debated whether to pass legislation to forbid state law enforcement officials from enforcing laws against killing wolves. Wolves are federally listed as “endangered” in Wisconsin, so hunting them is illegal, but this bill is the state’s attempt to give the green light to poachers to kill the animals with impunity. More than anything, it is a publicity stunt and a grandstanding opportunity for lawmakers frustrated the [courts won’t allow](#) an unsound and illegal delisting plan to be executed.

Proponents of wolf delisting often try to attach a social benefit to their wish to kill wolves for sport — claiming that trophy hunting, trapping, and government or private lethal control actions are needed to curb attacks on cattle and other farm animals. However, a growing number of scientific reports are punching a hole in those claims — and showing that killing wolves can even make problems worse.

For example, a [newly published study](#) by Dr. Adrian Treves and Francisco J. Santiago-Avila at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Ari Cornman, a biologist with the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians in northern Michigan, found that the state’s lethal control of wolves involved in verified livestock conflicts did not appear to reduce future losses on those farms. In fact, it found that trapping the offending wolves on the farm only shifted the problem laterally, causing other wolves to look to the neighboring farm for an easy meal instead. The study concluded, “Following recommendations for ethical wildlife management, lethal management should be discontinued, as currently the harm it causes wolves and livestock is not offset by benefits.”

Dozens of studies and reports came to the same conclusion: random killing of wolves disrupts stable family packs and sends juvenile wolves, less experienced at killing traditional prey, to get into more trouble by seeking out an easy meal elsewhere.

Here again, common sense aligns with clearheaded science: the best approach to mitigating livestock losses is to use non-lethal deterrents where the farm animals live. In a [seven-year study of open-range sheep in Idaho](#), in an area where a variety of non-lethal deterrents were used (including human herders or “range riders”), sheep losses were the lowest in the state, whereas in a nearby “control” area (where wolves were routinely killed), sheep losses were 3.5 times higher, demonstrating the relative value of non-lethal deterrents.

While we lament the loss of cattle or other farm animals to wolves, and want to take reasonable action to prevent those losses and the suffering of these domesticated animals, it’s clear that the narrative about wolf depredation is overblown. Data from agriculture and natural resources agencies indicate that even as wolf numbers are recovering from state-sponsored slaughter in the Great Lakes from 2012 to 2014 (for a time period when wolves had been delisted), confirmed attacks by wolves on livestock in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have been in decline. This is because, as the studies cited above have found, when wolves are not randomly killed, their packs—which consist of a breeding pair and their offspring—can focus on teaching juveniles to hunt their preferred, wild prey, and not look to local livestock for sustenance. The result: fewer livestock losses.

According to 2017 government statistics, wolves—and indeed, all predators combined, including domestic dogs—were responsible for the loss of less than one percent of Great Lakes cattle. It is also important to remember that according to the USDA, the greatest sources of mortality for cattle are respiratory issues, old age, and other causes, including weather and calving problems. For calves, most mortalities stem from respiratory, birthing and digestive issues.

The numbers are particularly striking in Michigan—the state’s Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and its Department of Agriculture and Rural Development records show that in 2017, there were only five livestock animals confirmed to have been killed by wolves in the state’s Upper Peninsula, the region where the state’s wolves live. This region has approximately 900 working farms, with about 50,000 cattle. Thus, wolf-caused livestock mortality in the Upper Peninsula equaled only 0.01 percent of the region’s livestock inventory in 2017.

While the state of Minnesota does not publish statistics on its annual livestock losses to wolves, a USDA Wildlife Services representative recently stated that while the state’s wolf population is continuing to recover, there has not been a concurrent increase in complaints about wolf attacks on livestock. He added that while Minnesota’s 10-year average for wolf conflicts with livestock is about 175 complaints a year, those complaints numbered only 157 in 2016, and 2017 complaints were predicted to be below average again.

And in Wisconsin, a state with 1.5 million cattle and cows on 24,300 dairy and beef farms, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) found that even as the state’s wolf population recovered from ruthless hunting, trapping, and hounding between 2012 and 2014, there is no correlation between that increase in wolf numbers and confirmed wolf attacks on livestock.

We know it’s not really about “managing” problem wolves. In a recent interview, the Michigan DNR’s wolf specialist expressed interest in fitting Michigan’s wolves with GPS collars because, he said, “We monitor

their health and abundance to guarantee to the people that put us in their trust that the wolf population is viable here. That will help us to justify a season where we can harvest them some day, and manage them sustainably.”

Remember, he uttered that comment in a state where voters have [rejected two statewide referenda](#) to allow trophy hunting and trapping of wolves for sport.

The legislation pending in Wisconsin, A.B. 712 and S.B. 604, and the numerous attacks against wolves from Congress, are scientifically groundless or suspect, cruel to wolves, and adverse for ecosystem and economic health, given that wolves put a check on deer densities, reduce deer-auto collisions and forestry impacts, and are a firewall against Chronic Wasting Disease.

It's time to put Little Red Riding Hood and similar myths to pasture. Wolves are a boon to the economy and to wild places, and they should have room to roam, free of unwarranted human attacks on them.

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Sharon Stroble

[January 23, 2018 at 6:54 pm](#)

I suggest that we look at “problem livestock producers” who don’t adequately protect their animals rather than “problem wolves. This means teaching cattle to group together, using fladgery, guard dogs, human presence and keeping cattle away from wolf denning and rendezvous sites. Also – in the case of public land, ranchers must accept some depredation as an acceptable part of using the land we all own and the wildlife who live there. Wolves are just wolves, who have to eat. Ranchers are capable of using good animal husbandry. Let’s reward producers who lose NO LIVESTOCK.

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Judy Aughey

[January 24, 2018 at 1:46 pm](#)

This is an excellent article. We have to get this message out to the general public, like presenting this to the local newspapers. I don’t think very many people really know the dire situation of our wolves. It’s despicable for the state legislators to even think about proposing such a ridiculous bill. It is an attempt for an all out slaughter of our wolves. I watched the news for coverage on the public hearing as I was there. The news reports hardly covered the true story at all. Please put this great article in the newspapers and more coverage on the television news to let the people of our state know what is really going on. Thank you.

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