CAN THERE BE PEACE IN THE WOLF WARS?

A ranching couple in Wyoming offers lessons on whether man and wolf can coexist now that the iconic predator has been removed from federal protection.

BY TODD WILKINSON / CORRESPONDENT

DUBOIS, WYO.

As ranchers in one of the most rugged corners of the northern Rockies, Jon and Debbie Robinett have had to cope with their share of animals preying on cattle. Coyotes and mountain lions prowl unfettered in the pristine Dunoir Valley, where snowshod peaks jut defiantly into the Wyoming sky and where life hasn't changed that much since Jon's great-grandfather herded livestock here – like him, from the sling of a saddle – 130 years ago.

'Congress came up with what was supposed to be a sure way to negotiate coexistence, but we've turned it into a weapon to beat each other over the head with.'

– Jon Robinett, rancher

But two other formidable species, largely erased by Jon's forebears, are now making a carefully orchestrated comeback. First it was grizzly bears that started arriving shortly after the Robinetts were hired to run the Diamond G Ranch in 1989. The bruins struck with increasing regularity, the result of federal protection enabling them to expand beyond the oases of nearby Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

In response, the Robinetts bought a pair of "bear dogs" – Great Pyrenees – to protect the herd. It worked for a while, virtually eliminating cattle deaths. But then another

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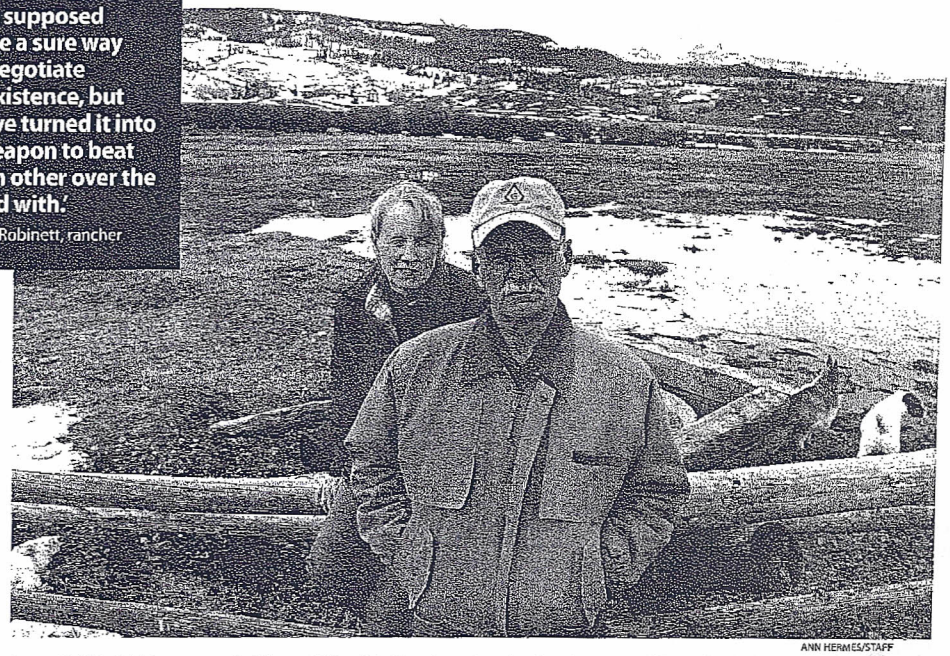

ANN HERMES/STAFF

Jon and Debbie Robinett manage the Diamond G Ranch in Wyoming, where they have lost pets and livestock to wolves. Nonetheless, the couple believes wolves have a right to exist, provided ranchers can shoot them when they attack herds.

visitor reappeared after a 60-year absence – gray wolves, offspring of animals transplanted into the Yellowstone ecosystem in 1995. A pack of wolves attacked one of their horses, then killed the bear dogs, before turning on a pet border collie, leaving it dead literally on the back porch. On top of that, wolves were taking 50 to 60 calves annually.

Over the years, the Robinetts have tried everything to keep the lobos at bay – erecting a sophisticated cordon of electric wire around pastures, deploying a gantlet of police sirens and flashing lights to scare them off, and pulling countless all-nighters baby-sitting Angus cattle. "When wolves are hitting your place, they chew into your thin profit margin," says Jon, reflecting the numeric pragmatism of someone who makes a living off the hoof.

The story of the Robinetts and the wolves is a tale of the modern West – of federal wildlife policies that have been remarkably successful in recovering nearly extinct animals and of the hardships some of those animals have caused as a result. Now, with the federal government taking the gray wolf off the endangered species list (ESL), the next chapter in this long-running narrative is about to unfold, revealing how well man and predator can coexist in the changing landscape and traditional political culture of the West.

In some respects, it will be a unique experiment. The federal government has rescued numerous species from biological oblivion and removed them from the ESL – from bald eagles to peregrine falcons to the American alligator. But never before has it revived a population of large carnivores and taken it out from under the shield of federal protection.

In May, US Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced the removal of wolves from the federal protected list in eight states across the West and upper Great Lakes. The move highlighted – dramatically – how extensive the comeback has been for an animal once exterminated from 99 percent of the contiguous United States. But it also cleared the way for wolves to be hunted, trapped, and more easily killed in defense of private property – something ranchers have long sought. Environmentalists worry this will lead to a shooting gallery for wolves and undermine one of the great wildlife recovery efforts in history.

Will they survive in great enough numbers? How should they be managed now? And what will happen on ranches like the Diamond G? The answers will affect the fate of more than just an iconic animal and a few head of cattle. It may also affect when, and how, other important wildlife are removed from federal protection – including the famed and feared grizzly bear.

"The Endangered Species Act is a great tool for bringing species back that wouldn't recover on their own," says Ed Bangs, the US Fish and Wildlife Service's longtime national wolf recovery coordinator. "But with wolves the question is, now what?"

NO ONE DISPUTES THE REMARKABLE REVIVAL of the gray wolf. In the early 1900s, the predator was hunted

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GRAY WOLVES, ONCE HUNTED TO VIRTUAL EXTINCTION, NOW NUMBER 5,700 IN THE WEST AND MIDWEST. COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

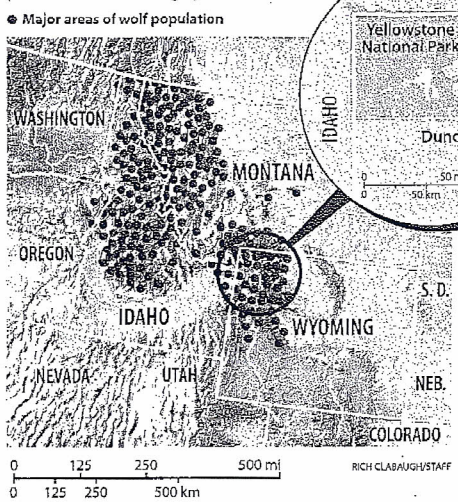
Gray wolf population

An estimated 200,000 wolves exist in 57 countries. In the US, 7,000 to 11,200 gray wolves live in Alaska. Another 5,900 inhabit the continental US after being virtually eliminated early last century – 4,200 in three Great Lakes states and 1,700 in six Rocky Mountain states. A recovering population of 42 Mexican gray wolves inhabits New Mexico and Arizona and remains under federal protection.

WOLF NUMBERS BY STATE

Western Great Lakes	
Michigan	576
Minnesota	2,921
Wisconsin	690
Northern Rocky Mountains	
Idaho	705
Montana	566
Oregon	21
Utah	n/a
Washington	19
Wyoming	343
Southwest Recovery Area	
Arizona/New Mexico	42
Alaska	7,700 to 11,200

SOURCES: US Fish and Wildlife Service, Defenders of Wildlife



RICH CLABAUGH/STAFF

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almost to extinction, largely at the hands of zealous ranchers trying to protect livestock and game animals such as elk. At the time, the wolf was so despised and feared that killing one was considered a badge of honor, even among people who lived in cities.

The wolf's near-complete demise, its role in the balance of nature, and its almost mythic place in literature and lore made it one of the original species put on the list of imperiled animals created by Congress in 1973. Today, after millions of dollars and more than 16 years of recovery efforts and confrontation in the northern Rockies, the wolf population and range the animals roam have grown even more swiftly than many scientists originally thought possible.

Some 4,200 wolves inhabit a trio of upper Great Lakes states (Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) and another 1,700 wolves live in the West (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and, more recently, Washington, Oregon, and Utah). When announcing the wolf's removal from federal protection, Mr. Salazar trumpeted it as a "tremendous success story for the Endangered Species Act," even though many environmentalists viewed it as an experiment unfinished.

Officially, the delisting means that management is now handed over to the states, excluding Wyoming, which has yet to draft a plan acceptable to the federal government guaranteeing that wolves will persist. Politicians there have, in effect, classified wolves as vermin, allowing them to be shot by anyone at any time across 80 percent of the state, which critics believe could lead to their annihilation again.

One reason the wolf recovery took as long as it did in the West was the difficulty of the task: It required transplanting wolves from Canada into areas of the US where they hadn't existed in decades.

But the process was also fraught with politics. From the start, ranchers and other antiwolf interests tried to thwart the reintroduction program and have wolves rounded up and removed, while conservationists fought tenaciously to keep them alive. Both sides filed innumerable lawsuits. Hyperbolic claims of impending disaster for cattle and game animals ricocheted through newspaper columns and congressional hearing rooms. Federal authorities had to pursue criminal prosecutions to keep wolf poachers at bay.

The delisting process has been no less contentious. Normally, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, an arm of the Interior Department, removes animals from the ESL based on scientific criteria. But even before Salazar acted in May, two Western US senators, Jon Tester (D) of Montana and Mike Simpson (R) of Idaho, took the unprecedented step of drafting legislation to force the federal government to give up management of the wolves in their states. They cited frustration with environmentalists' attempts to delay the process. The measure passed in March, embedded in the federal budget agreement signed by President Obama.

Almost immediately, Montana and Idaho started making plans for a sport hunt this fall aimed at harvesting hundreds of wolves. Idaho also started shooting wolves from helicopters to kill animals that biologists say are harming elk herds.

Environmentalists, as a result, have gone back to court again, arguing that the legislative removal of wolves from federal protection is unconstitutional. They worry that it will lead to politicians, instead of wildlife professionals, making decisions on when and how to remove other animals from federal

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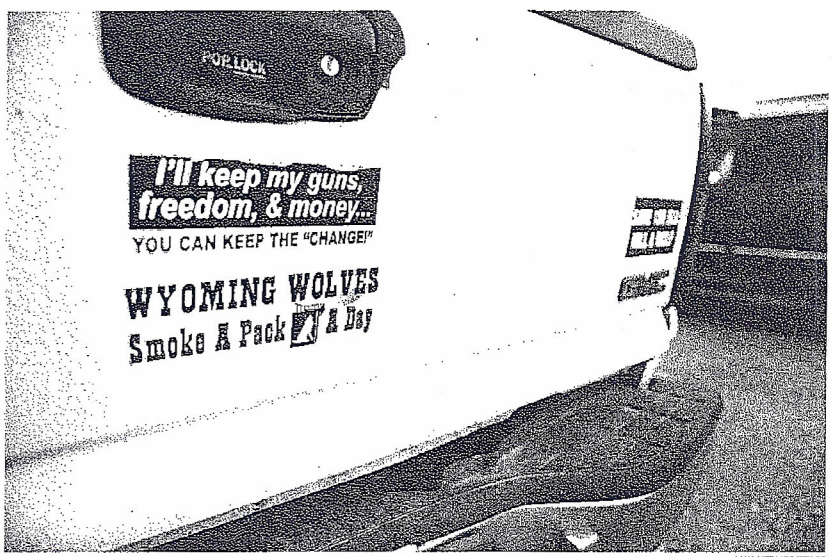

ANN HERMES/STAFF

Few issues have been as contentious in the Rocky Mountain West in the past 20 years as the reintroduction of the wolf, as evidenced by these bumper stickers on a truck outside a hunting club in Dubois, Wyo.

protection.

"There will be future attacks on the protections that the Endangered Species Act provides to species that are vulnerable," says Tom France, regional director of the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula, Mont. "Legislators will look for any vehicle to provide a political solution and will cite the wolf case as an example to buttress their position."

The existence of another lawsuit has muted the euphoria ranchers would normally feel over stripping wolves of federal protection. Jim Peterson, a cattleman in Buffalo, Mont., who also serves as senate president in the state's part-time legislature, says ranchers and sheep producers have become so jaded over the years that they simply don't believe delisting will be carried out.

"It's not that we don't welcome it, but all this talk of ranchers being given increased flexibility to protect their livestock is being received with mixed emotions and, frankly, distrust," says Mr. Peterson. "People out in ranch country are still not really convinced it's going to hold up. Every time we seem to be moving forward, environmentalists file lawsuits and it gets stopped."

Peterson laments that wolf packs are moving out of the mountains and onto the prairie where his own family ranches. But his fears would be lessened, he says, by regulations giving ranchers more latitude to control wolves without having to worry about being charged with a federal crime.

A LITTLE MORE COMPROMISE may be just what's needed to maintain a certain tolerance for any kind of wolf management now. Indeed, L. David Mech, an eminent wolf biologist in St. Paul, Minn., says people who love wolves have to embrace a paradox: In order for wolves to be accepted by people in rural areas, the problem animals are going to have to die. Sometimes it will even mean removing entire packs, but it's better than having none at all.

Mr. Mech says he believes that environmentalists filing lawsuits to block delisting and stop sport hunts of wolves in the West made a serious miscalculation. They lost the support of politicians confronting a backlash from constituents claiming that growing wolf numbers are hurting livestock and big-game animals. It led, he believes, to the Tester-Simpson legislation and could have negative consequences for other species in the future.

Still, even some environmentalists who didn't like Congress making the decision to delist believe that wolves are ready to move out from under federal stewardship. Mr. France, for one, says he's confident that state wildlife agencies can properly set wolf kills and manage populations. Eventually, he believes, wolf hunts will become normalized the same way they are for bighorn sheep, deer, and antelope.

"Wolves are not only resilient, but they'll become more elusive with hunters pursuing them. I think it's going to be difficult for states to take as many as they want to," he says, noting that wolves could become relisted if states decimate populations.

More important than setting any target number for wolf populations will be the impact the predators are having on the ground, which can be both propitious and problematic. Wolves, after all, are part of the natural balance. It's one reason they were reintroduced in 1995 to Yellowstone, besides the philosophical rationale of returning a species that was once systematically erased from the world's first national park.

Franz Camenzind, a conservation biologist in Jackson Hole, Wyo., and wildlife documentary filmmaker, notes that before wolves were reestablished in the park, ranchers outside Yellowstone were complaining about too many elk. Studies confirmed that they were overeating the park's northern grasslands and browsing so heavily on aspen and willow that no young trees were sprouting, destroying the forest.

Wolves brought fundamental changes to the ecosystem, helping to reduce the size of Yellowstone's largest elk herd from a high of 20,000 in the late 1980s to 4,600 today. The rapid decline triggered a backlash from hunting guides, who argue that wolves have eaten too many game animals. They predict economic and environmental calamity. A parallel decline in elk herds has happened in Idaho, where the state is planning an ambitious culling of wolf packs. Montana, too, hopes to kill 220 wolves in autumn sport hunts, or about one-quarter of the state's wolf population.

'The challenges of coexisting with wolves and grizzlies isn't a fairy tale abstraction to the Robinetts. Real wolves cause real problems that demand real solutions.'

– Ed Bangs, US Fish and Wildlife Service's national wolf recovery coordinator

As elk numbers have dropped, so has the number of wolves inside Yellowstone, in part because of the lack of food. Researchers counted some 94 wolves in northern reaches of the park in 1997 and fewer than 40 in 2010.

This may well be what continues to happen – a natural rise and fall in the populations of predator and prey. Mech, the wolf guru in Minnesota, says that is what occurred in Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior, where researchers have studied the coexistence of wolves and moose for 50 years. At one point, some observers predicted doom for the moose. But both species have increased and decreased in a cyclical pattern – and the wolf, Mech says, may be the one that vanishes first.

Yellowstone, of course, is a far more complicated ecosystem. It has both more animals to be eaten and more to do the eating – from mountain lions and coyotes to grizzlies and black bears. Still, Mech says, drive-by biologists try to rewrite natural history when they say wolves will destroy prey until there are none left. It hasn't happened in Alaska and Canada, and it won't occur in the Lower 48, either, he says.

That doesn't mean wolf packs can't have severe local effects on certain wildlife and don't need to be removed. Douglas Smith, the lead wolf biologist in

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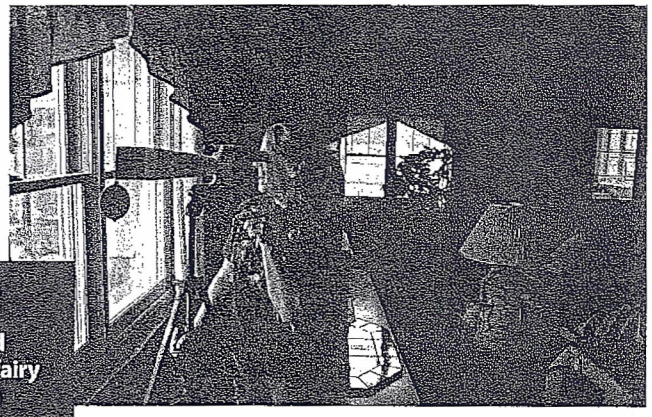

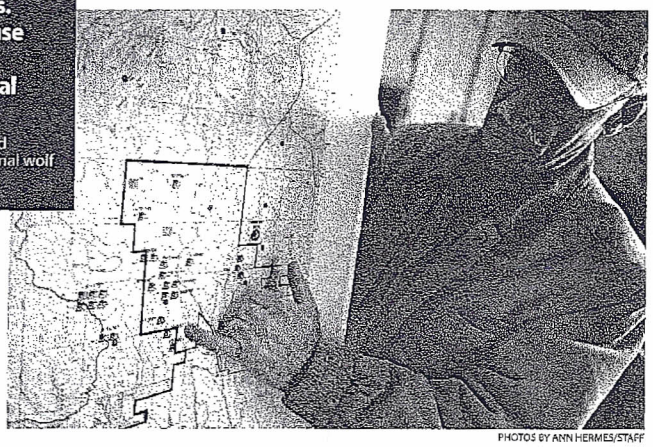

PHOTOS BY ANN HERMES/STAFF

Debbie Robinett (top) watches for predators through a scope the family keeps on a tripod in their ranch home in Wyoming's Dunoir Valley. She also wears a gun on her hip when going out to feed the horses, in case she runs into grizzlies or other predators. Jon Robinett (above), a fourth-generation rancher, displays a map of wolf packs around the Diamond G Ranch, which he and his wife manage for a New York owner. The area is home to at least three wolf packs and as many as 20 grizzlies, one of which Debbie encountered once in a barn.

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Yellowstone, says wolves have cut into the numbers of elk and moose, though a host of factors – including drought, other predators, and big-game hunting outside the park – are all contributors. Yet one positive effect of the loss of elk has been the return of beavers – once a prevalent and important member of the park's wildlife clan.

THE RANCH THE ROBINETTS manage, owned by a New Yorker, lies at the end of an unpaved road that at this time of year – probably anytime of year – is best reached by four-wheel drive vehicle. The grounds consist of two ranch houses (one unoccupied) and two cabins, all made of logs, as well as several barns (the main one tidy enough to be in Architectural Digest magazine), and a split-rail horse pasture. The ranch was once owned by Walt Disney, but the tale that has unfolded here of late is anything but Disneyesque.

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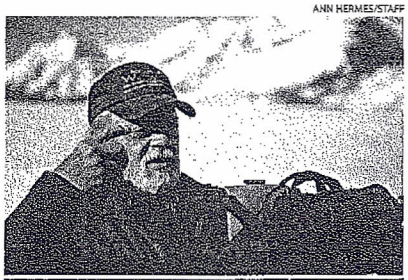

'I think environmentalists dropped the ball and we squandered public support. Now we are in the middle of wild swings of the pendulum, and for the next few years we may be having a lot of dead wolves that didn't need to die.'

– Franz Camenzind, wildlife biologist and cinematographer

Sitting in the main ranch house, where racks of antlers and horse tack hang from walls, the Robinetts spread out photographs in the kitchen that chronicle the life of a modern rancher. Many of the images evoke an enviable tableau: of grandchildren feeding livestock and playing cowboy in the sprawling verdant meadows of a Dunoir Valley free of outside lights. But others are unsettling – shots of cattle and family pets mauled by area wolf packs. The Robinetts didn't take these photos for any kind of ghoulish satisfaction: Wyoming will compensate ranchers who lose cattle or horses to wolves – if they can prove that wolves were the culprits.

Alertness to predators is a constant necessity at the Diamond G. The area is home to at least three wolf packs and roughly 20 grizzlies. The Robinetts often sleep with their windows open so they can hear if anything might be spooking the cattle. They keep a high-powered scope on a tripod in the kitchen to monitor the distant herd. Debbie always wears a pistol on her hip and carries pepper spray when going out to feed the horses, a practice reinforced the day she walked into the barn to find a grizzly. (She and Jon concluded it was a "lazy" one since its claws were long, suggesting it was looking for easy food instead of scavenging, like most of its brethren, for berries and insects.)

Despite the constant surveillance and frequent intrusions, the Robinetts are pragmatists rather than polemicists in a debate over wolves that has few moderates. They don't hate wolves, at least Jon doesn't. Debbie is less charitable when the conversation veers to lost pets. They have helped US Fish and Wildlife authorities tag and count wolves on their property. Jon can identify some of the predators by name.

He believes the ESL is one of the most foresighted wildlife protection measures in the world. The fourth-generation rancher just rues that it has become so fractious.

"Congress came up with what was supposed to be a sure way to negotiate coexistence, but we've turned it into a weapon to beat each other over the head with," he says.

Out West, incivility and raw emotion over the issue continue to abound – much more so than in, say, Minnesota, which has a far larger wolf population than any Western state. One reason, speculates France, a native Minnesotan, is the struggle of trying to make a living in the unforgiving landscape of the

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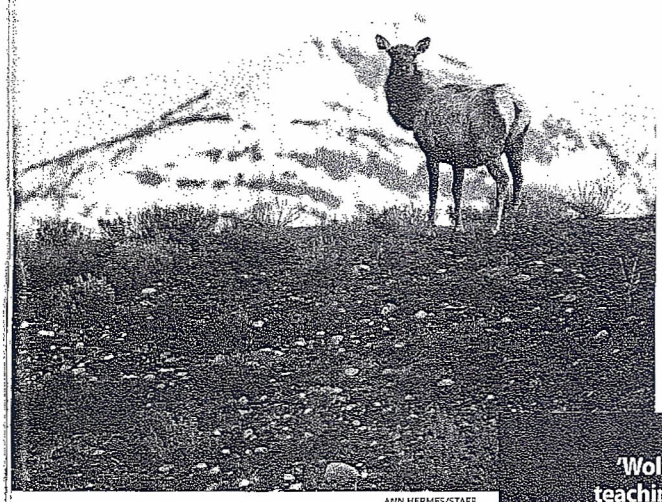
West. "In the upper Midwest, you hear all of the same arguments you do in the Rockies," he says. "But at some level, they [Midwesterners] have been having debates longer and interacting with very robust wolf populations and realizing that the world as they know it did not come to an end."

Demographics may play a part, too. Surveys show that residents in urban areas tend to have more favorable opinions of wolves than those who live in remote and sparsely populated places, which applies to much of the wolf's range in the West.

It's perhaps notable that no major politician in Wyoming, Montana, or Idaho has ever won an election on a pro-wolf platform, though all three state legislatures are filled with candidates who vowed to make them go away.

And the wolves are hardly invisible. While many Americans think the predators inhabit only remote areas, the fact is that of the 1,700 wolves in the West today, only 100 or so take refuge in national parks. The same holds true for the major packs in the upper Midwest. "The vast majority live near people," says Mr. Bangs of the Fish and Wildlife Service.



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Yet part of the dissonance over the issue may have nothing to do with wolves at all. It may just reflect a deeper divide in American culture. Susan Clark, a natural resource instructor at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., recently led students on a road trip across the West using wolves as a way to learn about differing perspectives. They talked to ranchers, big-game outfitters, government biologists, and environmentalists. Ms. Clark says her students were stunned to discover that, as individuals, most were nice, thoughtful people.

"The problem is not about wolves but how people understand and relate to one another in the world," she says. "Citizens continue to shout past each other. Neither side is really willing to listen to the other. It's the same with wolves as it is for talking about the future direction of the country."

No need to convince the Robinetts of that. After they lost dogs to wolves and expressed concerns about the safety of their grandkids, local environmentalists phoned and apologized, which the couple accepted as a generous gesture. Yet later, when they asked the federal government to remove wolves relentlessly preying on their livestock, they received anonymous death threats, presumably from some in the same save-the-wolf community. "People can be more frightening than animals," Jon says.

The rhetoric on the other side has been no less delicate. Some ranchers have promoted the surreptitious poisoning of wolves and resorting to the old Western saw of "shoot, shovel, and shut up" to make the animals go away. The leader of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation said that wolf reintroduction has caused one of the greatest ecological disasters in the history of the continent.

Idaho recently passed a bill declaring wolves "an emergency disaster" in the state to make it easier to eradicate them. The legislation said in part: "The uncontrolled proliferation of imported wolves on private land has produced a clear and present danger to humans, their pets and livestock, and has altered and hindered historical uses of private and public land, dramatically inhibiting previously safe activities such as walking, picnicking, biking, berry picking, hunting and fishing."

MR. CAMENZIND, THE BIOLOGIST, says he believes the public anger and overheated rhetoric – brought on in part by fellow environmentalists who fought the delisting too long – could lead to an overkill of wolves. "We are in the middle of wild swings of the pendulum, and for the next few years we may be having a lot of dead wolves that didn't need to die," he says.

'Wolves are constantly teaching us new things – things that can be predicted and some things that couldn't. But that's how ecosystems work.'

Douglas Smith, lead wolf biologist, Yellowstone National park

The Robinetts chafe at the extreme views on both sides as well. They see wolves as neither the demonic scourge that conservative ranchers purport them to be, nor the benign wonders of the woods that conservationists ennoble them as. To Jon, a genial man with a whisk-broom mustache, wolves have a right to exist in the West, but their numbers need to be controlled: Ranchers should be able to shoot the ones that get into their herds – something that doesn't easily happen if an animal is on the endangered species list.

"The challenges of coexisting with wolves and grizzlies isn't a fairy tale abstraction to the Robinetts," says Bangs. "Real wolves cause real problems that demand real solutions."

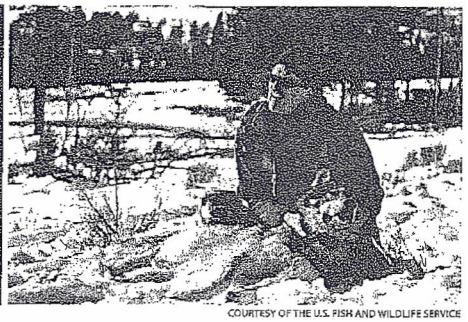
One thing that could ameliorate some of the hostility is for Washington to put more money into managing wolves and other animals *after* they are removed from federal custody. If compensation for livestock lost to wolf attacks were more generous and the process involved in getting it were less onerous, then some ranchers might be more receptive to putting up with the predators.

Similarly, some states might be less resistant to their presence if they had help with the millions of dollars in expenses of managing recovered populations. But the one thing Washington doesn't have these days is money.

Instead, the enduring wolf war, once the lawsuits are done and the hysteria diminishes – if it ever does – may come down to a test of tolerance. The fact is, more wolves now share the forests and prairies with humans than at any time since the close of the frontier in the late 1800s. The National Wildlife Federation's France says it will require both to adapt. In most places, he predicts that wolves will exist without people even realizing they are there, except for the occasional track in the snow and distant howl.

The Robinetts don't have a problem with that – as long as the howl does, in fact, remain distant.

"My great-grandfather would probably be shocked in seeing what Debbie and I have done to share the same space with wolves," says Jon. "When I was a much younger man, I wouldn't have hesitated to say the answer for all wolf problems is a bullet. But if they're not bothering you, they ought to be given some latitude. We can make this thing work. I know we can." ■



COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Wildlife biologist Franz Camenzind leads wolf-viewing trips in Yellowstone National Park (opposite page, top). A lone wolf blends in with the flaxen-colored environment of Yellowstone (opposite page), where the predator was reintroduced, after a nearly 60-year absence, starting in 1995. An elk grazes near Teton National Park (above, left). Dwindling elk herds due to a rising wolf population have inflamed antiwolf sentiment in the West. Douglas Smith (above), the lead wolf biologist in Yellowstone, checks the radio collar on a tranquilized lobo.