San Diego Loves Green – WHAT DOES IT MATTER? (WOLF HUNTING AND TRAPPING)

History has demonstrated clearly that societal values and perceived needs ultimately determine the treatment and often survival of species such as the wolf. Appropriately, public sensitivity to the killing of all large predators has now made any killing of wolves a contentious issue and placed management agencies under intense scrutiny.

With notable exceptions such as parks, the management philosophy and poli-

cies of most government agencies are narrowly directed towards treating wolves as a "resource" to kill. Most government agencies have adopted policies skewed towards preserving opportunities for recreational killing rather than conservation or preservation of ecological integrity. Ignoring biology and the intrinsic value

of species, wildlife agencies have resolutely judged wolves as animals in need of management, adopting policies that treat them as a problem, rather than as respected members of the biological community.

This traditional management ethic favors an anthropocentric view that humans are an exceptional species and, aside from their utility for humans, other species are of little or no consequence in the large scheme of things. In traditional wildlife management, human domination over nature is the natural order. Nature is a commodity that is owned, and used by people, in pursuit of personal interests.

Management strategies regarding wolves in North America range from full protection to hunting and control. The lethal strategies are supported by efficient technologies (e.g., aircraft hunting, poisoning, and snowmobile hunting). The idea that wolves can affect mortality rates and densities of their prey has provided much of the basis for killing wolves. Some government agencies cull wolves to reduce real and perceived conflicts between wolves and livestock.

Wolves are also killed by recreational hunters and commercial trappers. The primary motivation of this recreational trophy hunting is gratuitous killing for pleasure. Likewise, commercial trapping is done for profit but the method of capture and killing causes intense suffering in wolves.

On moral grounds, killing for pleasure or willing infliction of pain is highly questionable behavior, considered aberrant and deviant by most people. Certainly, society has long recognized that taking pleasure in killing an animal or

knowingly inflicting pain are all "red flags" that signal the need for professional intervention. This is especially true when the person has the cognitive maturity to understand that what s/he is doing is wrong – and repeatedly does it anyway.

Many human activities harm wolves, both individuals and populations, in direct and indirect ways. Direct effects include lethal culling, hunting, trapping, poisoning, and the destruction of food supplies. Indirect effects include changes to habitat or movement patterns that result in death or disrupt social relationships.

Importantly, harmful direct actions can have broader indirect effects. For example, in animals like wolves, culling some individuals in a social group can also cause indirect harms by disrupting the transfer of cultural and genetic information between generations, and altering group stability and breeding structures in the population. Although direct harms are more obvious and more likely to attract public attention, both direct and indirect harms need to be recognised as important determinants of animal welfare and conservation.

In making moral judgments, people tend to regard harm as more serious if it is deliberate rather than unintentional. Both recreational and institutional killing of wolves, for example, are viewed as more serious acts than unintentional killing. Similarly, people may regard harm as less significant if done for a seemingly worthwhile purpose. This is a slippery slope, however, because social and moral justifications are often used to sanctify harmful practices by investing them with worthy purposes. Disengagement of moral self-sanctions enables people to pursue detrimental practices freed from the restraint of self-censure.

I think it is undeniable that we are harming wolves by knowingly inflicting physical and psychological pain and suffering, which often results in their

deaths. Sometimes we do this for our own pleasure, sometimes for dubious pragmatic reasons, but usually for reasons that are gratuitous and selfish.

Some of us are well-informed participants, deliberately pursuing harmful activities that serve our own interests. We justify our behavior through moral disengagement by switching off our conscience to exonerate and sanitize our malpractice in the name of worthy causes. Others are uninformed or unmindful bystanders. But all of us are accountable.

From an ethical perspective that considers the intrinsic value and welfare of individual animals and populations, most killing of wolves is morally indefensible and should be stopped.

Further, wildlife conservation aims to ensure that populations and species survive, and that ecological and evolutionary processes continue. For evolution to continue, however, individuals are important because natural selection acts on individuals. Many subspecies of wolves have no evolutionary future because of misguided lethal management practices that ignore the fundamentals of biology and fail to consider individuals. Animal welfare, however, is concerned with the well being of these individuals.

Accordingly, many conservationists and managers are embracing and incorporating ethical considerations of animal welfare. Likewise, animal welfarists who have direct connections to ecology and place are drawing upon information from environmental research. The mutual recognition is that although wildlife science and animal welfare constitute different paths to knowledge, they are rooted in the same reality and affirm one another.

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