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Environmental Science

Case Study Essay

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The Importance of Wolves

Wolves are an essential component of our environment. Wolves are a keystone species, they help regulate the population of species, they help provide food for other species, and affect the characteristics of natural environments. Wolves are important and deserve to be protected.

In order to discuss the importance of wolves, I need to start by discussing their status in Washington state. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife states that “The Gray Wolf is federally listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the western two-thirds of Washington. Within this area, it is fully protected by the ESA, which is administered and enforced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). This means that USFWS has the lead responsibility for wolf management in the western two-thirds of Washington.”(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife). The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife also states that “The Gray Wolf was listed as endangered by the State of Washington in 1980, and receives protection under state law from hunting, possession, malicious harassment, and killing. Penalties for illegally killing a state endangered species range up to $5,000 and/or one year in jail”(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife). In Washington state the Grey Wolf is protected under the Endangered Species Act.

My formal position on this issue is that wolves are an essential component in our environment and deserve to be protected. I agree with Washington State's choice to protect them under the Endangered Species Act.

The first point that I want to discuss is the fact that wolf populations help regulate the populations of other species. The first component is that wolves kill coyotes who prey on small mammals and also affect populations. According to the Denver Post, “Few wildlife species evoke as widespread and passionate disdain by the general public as coyotes. The situation was worse for native wildlife. Coyotes became the top predator and changed the ecosystem. Maryland’s red foxes were pushed to the edge of their territory, and their numbers declined,”(Denver Post). Due to the loss of wolves the population of coyotes grew, the coyotes were feeding on small mammals and led to a negative change in the ecosystem. The rise in coyote population led to coyotes living in places they have never lived before. “Coyotes had pushed all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, establishing a presence in Virginia and the Carolinas. They roamed as far north as New Hampshire and as far south as Florida, places where they didn’t exist 50 years ago. Coyotes have even ventured into Mexico and Central America. They recently became the first new animal species in a thousand years known to cross the isthmus into Panama, where camera traps spotted them heading toward South America”(Denver Post). The coyote crisis is just one consequence of declining grey wolf populations.

Wolf populations also provide food for other species. According to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, “While wolves are highly protective of their kill, many other carnivores and scavengers benefit from the carcasses they leave behind. These carcasses may help to sustain large carnivores, wolverines, foxes, fishers, martens, raccoons, eagles, ravens, and magpies, especially during winter.”(WDFW). Carnivores and scavengers benefit from wolves. This is another reason that wolves help sustain the ecosystem.

Wolf populations do have a positive impact on the ecosystem. The washington department of fish and wildlife stated that,”After wolves were removed from Yellowstone Park in the early part of the last century, the problem of overgrazing became so acute that herds of elk, pronghorn, and bison were culled to protect the remaining vegetation. Since 1995, when wolves were reintroduced to the park, there has been a resurgence of woody browse species in some areas such as willow and aspen. Some scientists have suggested that a similar situation may exist in Olympic National Park, where extensive browsing by elk may have caused substantial changes in riparian plant communities. This, in turn, has been linked to riverbank erosion and channel widening, which reduces rearing habitat for salmon, steelhead, and resident fish”(WDFW). Wolves affected the ecosystem by limiting the populations of grazing animals. By limiting grazing animals, vegetation has returned to the area. Vegetation protects against river erosion. The health of the river in turn protects the species living in the river such as salmon.

While the grey wolf is an important component to the natural environment, wolf populations have a few negative impacts. Wolves can attack livestock, property and pets. They can be a nuisance to people who rely on ranching and livestock for a living. One group, Conservation Northwest works to tackle these issues, rather than killing wolves they work with ranchers to solve the problem. According to Conservation Northwest, “We directly fund, train and implement non-lethal, wolf-livestock conflict avoidance methods. We’re working with ranchers and hunters to help reduce conflict and increase social tolerance for wolves. With conservation partners and through the Wolf Advisory Group, we’re lobbying state and community leaders for wolf recovery and sustainable wolf management policies. And we’re protecting critical habitat and working with law enforcement to fight poaching.”(Conservation Northwest). This proves that there are ways to deal with conflict between wolves and humans without killing or harming them.

Conservation Northwest also discussed the future and recovery of wolves in Washington. “Wolf recovery is progressing well in our state, particularly in northeast Washington. But as welcome as this good news is, Conservation Northwest remains concerned about the absence of confirmed wolf packs in the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast Recovery Zone. There have been reports of wolves and documented tracks in the Cascade Mountains south of I-90 for several years, but packs have yet to be confirmed in this area of high-quality habitat.”(Conservation Northwest). Currently, wolf populations are starting to stabilize, Hopefully the population will be back to its original healthy population before human intervention.

In conclusion, Wolves play an important role in the ecosystem, regulate species, and help shape the characteristics of the natural environment around them. Wolves are an important species and deserve to be protected. Hopefully, we will be able to see the Wolf populations in Washington stabilize. Thank You!

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