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**Final Write-Up**

Throughout the history of what is considered modern American society, native wolf populations have been hunted, trapped, and poisoned to a point of near extinction in the continental USA (not including Alaska). This is due to the very complicated relationship civilization has had with the animal as long as they have interacted. Despite this, it is possible that no other country has as complicated relationship with wolves as the United States. In the time before the continental USA was colonized, the wolf populations that roamed the many different regions of the soon-to-be country could do so unburdened by human activity, and due to their high position on the trophic scale, they also enjoyed little competition with other organisms. However, the wolf populations nowadays are struggling to hang on without the aid of humans in the wild. Why is this, when somewhere similar in size, Europe, does not have these issues with their local wolf populations? In this write-up, I will be discussing the factors that have contributed to the continental USA’s small and unstable wolf population in comparison to Europe’s stable wolf population.

There is no one strict reason as to why wolf populations have struggled in the continental USA, as lots of factors have contributed to their current position on the endangered species list. It is possible that one of the greatest factors that has contributed to our current situation is the relationship Americans have with their agriculture. Specifically in this case, wolves do not hesitate to take an easy meal, and most livestock is pretty much a guaranteed dinner for any large predator when these animals are unprotected. Before there was an interest in preserving the declining wolf populations, most farmers and ranchers would simply kill an predators that interfered with their livestock, and wolves were absolutely no exception. Not only this, but the wolf pelts were quite valuable due to the thickness of their coats, and the difficulties it could take to harvest them; this almost literally painted a target on the animals for hunters and farmers alike. Due to their sheer size of this new country the Europeans discovered; it was believed a lot of resources were expendable; limitless wells of riches just waiting to be tapped. These ideas contributed to a culture of overhunting amongst the early civilizations in America, and this culture would continue well into the 20th century, until laws were passed that prevented the overhunting of animals. One of the greatest of these laws and bills that were passed to protect endangered or at risk species was the Endangered Species Act f 1973, but despite the lofty ideals of the bill to bring these species back from the brink, it brings along its own political issues involving American wolves.

The Endangered Species Act has definitely done the work when it comes to helping species recover from near extinction. There is only one issue: the ESA has its own rules for what is considered a “viable” population for recovery. Specifically, when talking about wolves (which are protected under the ESA), small packs or lone wolves living in close vicinity with other wolves are overlooked as unviable, inconsequential populations under the ESA because these populations will never be able to self-sustain without the help of humans. This means that populations with too few males or females are also overlooked. This aspect of this ESA communicates another one of the issues that wolves face in the USA, that Americans really only value the nature that doesn’t require their help to thrive. It is possible that these smaller wolf populations could be relocated to areas with other wolves to attempt a sort of natural integration between their generation or future wolf generations, or these wolves could be moved into preserves of some sort rather than just being ignored to die off. Additionally, while the ESA does protect the wolves by creating repercussions for harming the animals, it is difficult to track what happens to every wolf when they are not monitored, and when they are not on public land.

Unlike Europe, the USA is known for having a large share of private lands, and when not every wolf is being paid the same amount of attention and care, this allows some room for private landowners to continue to illegally poach the animals. In Europe, there is close to half and half share of privately and publicly owned lands, while in the USA private lands dominate every other kind of land ownership across the nation. Private land ownership has conflicted with animal management as long as the USA has been trying to preserve nature. Perhaps the biggest reason for this is the capitalistic culture around land and ecology; as in, most landowners do not care about nature unless it is bringing in some kind of profit or benefit to the private landowners. In the case of wolves, many hunters and private landowners do not see the wolves as something necessary to preserve because of the perceived negative effects the animals may bring, such as competing with humans for access to livestock, wildlife, and even land to an extent. Competing over land is another large problems the wolves face, because not all land that is viable for the wolves to survive is being used to help their populations. This means that not all land with the proper prey, weather conditions, or access to dens are being used to help these wolves recover. The American land problem in this instance does not only stem from private land ownership, but also because of the regional and governmental differences across the country.

Not only are both the USA and Europe very large and have plenty of uninhabited space, which would usually be ideal for wolves, they also have very different geographical and political conditions that contribute to the struggles of local wolf populations. In the USA, most political decisions are made on a state-by-state basis. This is because each of the states in the USA are so large and are wildly different from the others, and each has the own form of government that makes decisions based on what is best for the specific state. This level of state government in the USA can almost be compare to the national level of government in Europe, as they would have about the same amount of power when it comes to decisions made on conservation and management of species. What’s more, Europe has large mountainous and forested regions that are truly uninhabited. In the USA, there are some of these areas that humans do not live in that could be inhabited by the wolves. However, the problem with this is that there is a good portion of protected, preserved, or private lands that do not want wolves in the area for a multitude of reasons. For instance, parks will be monitored for new species, especially new types of predators that could potentially cause a sort of trophic cascade (essentially meaning the wolves have a significant impact on the populations of lower trophic level organisms, such as deer) in their new environment. In order to conserve an area, most land managers will remove large new predators to the ecosystem in order to prevent this. For a wolf, this would usually include trapping or tranquilizing the wolves and moving them to a new area. While this is probably the most humane thing that can be done to remove them, there is no guarantee the wolves will be moved to a suitable or viable location, forcing the wolves to either move or adapt in some way. This also increase the chances of wolves coming across humans, as the less “wilderness” you have, the density of humans seems to increase exponentially. This can also contribute to separating wolf packs, again leading us back to the problem of unviable wolf populations being ignored, and thus not being able to sustain themselves.

When it comes to Europe, they have also had similar problems of overhunting. Like in the USA, there has been several cullings of large predators due to their generally negative perception. The biggest difference in Europe is that they recognized the consequences of what they were doing a lot sooner, as in there was still enough viable wolf populations to continue the species in many European nations. What’s more is that there isn’t just one bill like the ESA that grants protections to wolves in some way, but they have at least 2 in the Bern Convention and the Habitats Directive. Both of these agreements were signed in the late 20th century, and since then many European nations have signed agreements that prevent any sort of unauthorized hunting or trapping of wolves for any reason. Despite the overall negative perception of the animals in residential areas, most Europeans do actually want the wolves to recover; they also would like for the wolf’s recovery to be outside of private and residential land to avoid a conflict of interest, and since then wolves and Europeans have been mostly able to stable exist. The wolves themselves are also returning natural in many parts of Europe, albeit slowly. In our interview with Ophélie Couriot of the Gurarie Wildlife Ecology Lab, she told us “… wolf populations in Europe had more time to adapt to human presence than in the US… In some areas, wolves became somehow urban (there are some examples in Germany), and wolves are moving into the cities in search of food” (Couriot, 2022). I agree with this statement, and think it gives even more proof to the idea that the culture around the wolves is just better in Europe as that kind of coexistence would take a very long time to achieve in the USA without causing some sort of uprising against the animals.

So, clearly there is a problem with helping the wolves to recover in the USA when compared to Europe. What can be done to fix some of these issues? After all, it is a well-known fact that almost no private landowner in America is going to sacrifice their lands for the wolf’s conservation without some form of compensation, which is not exactly the intent of many conservationist and land managers. Instead, I believe the biggest thing that needs to happen in the USA is a culture shift. During our interview with Joseph Hinton of the New York Wolf Conservation Center, the USA only requires around a minimum of 150 wolves in some states in order to meet the conservation requirements, and any wolves over that number will be hunted for profit. He says that like Europe, if we want more wolves, we need a much higher number of minimum population requirements for conservation. (Hinton, 2022) If we don’t, we are essentially keeping the population low enough that any major ecological disturbance event such as climate change or forest fires could completely destroy our tiny 150 wolf populations. A different approach to take would be educating the populations of the USA, but specifically focusing on younger generations. Why? Because if we intend to make a big culture shift and eventually live in an America where large predators are not feared but are viewed as pivotal organisms in maintain balance and diversity, we need to really share just how important these organisms can be and the cultural impact they have had in the USA. Finally, I think there needs to be more clear protections for at-risk species than just the ESA. While that bill does work, and has been proven to be effective, it is clear that it is not suited to just generally recovery and conserve any species that needs it. Instead, there needs to be some more legislative actions to protect the wolves directly. Having a more direct case approach to the wolves could help them to get the recognition they need in some areas to kickstart their recovery.

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