

OPEN SEASON?

Should Wisconsin allow hunting to control the wolf population?



A gray wolf is seen roaming a wooded area near Wisconsin Dells in this 2006 file photo.

Regulated hunt would ensure wolves stay wild

By TOM HEBERLEIN

According to the best available data, about 60 percent of Wisconsites support hunting as a way to control wolves.

Last April, 86 percent of the more than 6,000 people at public meetings open to and attended by those who opposed wolf hunting voted in favor of a hunt. My research in Sweden shows that Swedes support wolf hunting if the wolves are no longer wild, are not shy of and come close to humans or if they kill livestock.

Sport hunting is likely to be an efficient way to keep wolf populations wild, in check and away from livestock.

The protection and restoration of wolves in North America and elsewhere have been grounded in attitude change that occurred before we began scientific studies in the 1970s. Since 1972, attitudes toward wolves have been stable and generally positive.

Will this level of public support remain as wolf populations continue to grow unchecked? That is the key question.

While the public in general likes wolves, about 30 percent of the people who return surveys are neutral, and we expect that those who don't respond (ranging from 20 percent to over 75 percent) care even less.

Low response rates and high levels of neutrality mean that attitudes are not grounded and have the potential to change quickly, as we so often see in political campaigns.

A program to restore wolves in the Adirondack Mountains of New York dropped from 76 percent to 46 percent in several months after the issue was reframed locally from wolves per se, to "city people telling us what to do." These attitudes remained negative even two years later.

If wolves are not hunted to keep them wild, there is an increasing chance that eventually someone will be threatened, hurt or, in the most extreme case, killed in a wolf attack.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Should Wisconsin allow hunting to control the gray wolf population? Send us your views, 200 words or less, by Wednesday for publication next Sunday and online; wsjopine@madison.com.

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Yes

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Should this happen we are likely to see a strong negative attitude change as the high proportion with neutral attitudes are swayed by new and powerful negative information.

Such conditions can solidify negative attitudes so that they become impervious to arguments about the low probability of such events. If this were to happen, much of the ground gained with wolf restoration will be lost.

Before wolves were restored it seemed "obvious" that hunters would have negative attitudes and oppose restoration. Few thought there would ever be enough wolves to hunt.

Wolves would compete with hunters for such favored game species like white-tailed deer. It was our hunting forebears a couple of generations back who killed off all of the wolves.

Even Aldo Leopold in the early decades of the century was one of their cheerleaders. But what is "obvious" doesn't always hold up to careful science.

Twenty years ago, when there were just a handful of wolves returning to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Steve Kellert, a psychologist from Yale, and I were surprised to find that hunters were more positive than the general public and any other groups we surveyed.

In 1976, long before wolves had reappeared in Sweden, hunters were more supportive of a free-ranging population of wolves than the general public.

Now that wolves are back

and doing wolf-like things such as killing and eating hunting dogs, our data show that Swedish hunters are less favorable than they were in the past and less favorable than the general public.

I expect that is likely to be true in Wisconsin as well.

For most of us, wolves symbolize wildness and beauty. But for many rural people and farmers they symbolize the dominance of the urban society.

As the wolves come back, people living with wolves feel increasingly helpless. Having a legal hunting season would give these people a sense of control over their own destiny and turn the wolf from a problem into a resource.

Research in Norway found that, in some cases, the poaching rate for lynx was lower when hunters could legally hunt lynx, and the authors argue that poaching seems to be a manifestation of negative attitudes rather than economic need.

Legal hunting opportunities for wolves in Wisconsin could possibly reduce the relatively small amount of poaching that now occurs, and that would certainly increase if there is a wolf incident when no hunting is allowed.

Hunting kills individual wolves, but at the same time it keeps wolves wild, generates funds to support wolves, and reduces the sense of powerlessness among farmers, rural people and hunters.

A well-regulated public hunt can keep attitudes toward wolves positive. Those attitudes, more than anything else, are what sustains this great addition to Wisconsin's landscape.