



# Reason for Pause:

the future of wolves in Elk Island National Park.

Photo Credit: Colleen Gara

It is discouraging to learn some, if not all, the wolves of Elk Island National Park are to be killed, due to the claims of livestock losses by stockman using nearby public grazing pastures.

Once livestock predation has become engrained in individual wolves, measures will be taken to protect livestock. However, Albertans should ask what non-lethal methods have been employed before the killing of wolves begins... And how many livestock losses have been “confirmed wolf kills” vs. an unrelated cause of death (illness, birthing, weather, other predators, even poisonous plants are a problem), after which opportunistic wolves may scavenge on a carcass. We have requested this information from Alberta Fish and Wildlife, so far without response. When livestock losses to predators occur, the rancher is compensated 100% of the market value of the animal lost. Such compensation is thought to increase tolerance of wildlife and encourage further development of more humane, non-lethal methods to ward off the wolf.

In the current case of the Elk Island wolves, as reported by the article in the Edmonton Journal Oct 26<sup>th</sup> 2014, there is a further

concern as the grazing lease is public land, near a National Park. In being a National Park it remains one of the few places where wolves may live in the wild protected within its borders.

Alberta public land near Elk Island National Park should be managed as buffer zones with extra care to reduce attractants leading to livestock conflict. All too often, a wolf steps outside the park boundary and into the sights, traps, or poison of its killers.

The fact that these particular wolves live in a national park - should for make public interest in their case, least it erode the very little protection the wolf is given in this province.

Outside the national parks, within the central Rockies, and foothills, and at least eight rural municipal districts, the wolves (and coyotes) are under bounty. They face both trappers and their proliferation of snares, hunters, and poison bait stations. Despite calls from the public to replace archaic bounties with science-based management, hunting and trapping clubs have had private bounties active since 2007, and municipal district bounties in the province have claimed well over 1000 wolves. With the loss of so many wolves, their role in keeping game populations healthy by taking the sick and weak animals is compromised. On early sightings of the wolves of Elk Island National Park, it was hoped they - as a healthy, intact stable pack, would play their part to impede the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) that is currently spreading through deer populations. In his article "Bad News Bambi - Our deer are slowly going crazy." Alberta Views Sept 2014, Kevin Van Tighem speaks of how hunters have been quietly funding bounties, pointing out that in killing wolves they work against a natural solution to CWD:

"Wolves are coursing predators, on the job twelve months a year looking for vulnerable prey. CWD turns deer into just the kind of prey that wolves are quick to find and kill. Dead wolves, however, can't kill sick deer. The earlier a CWD infected animal dies, the fewer prions it spreads. But hunter prejudice virtually guarantees wolves won't be able to help clean up our growing mad deer disaster."

The killing of wolves on public grazing leases - particularly by way of Strychnine poisoning by Fish and Wildlife Agency - has been a concern for many years. The group Wolf Matters names the issue in the petition we are circulating calling for an overhaul to Alberta's wolf management, to a science based more humane approach. Progress could begin in simple ways of actively promoting and allowing time for nonlethal methods to be adopted and

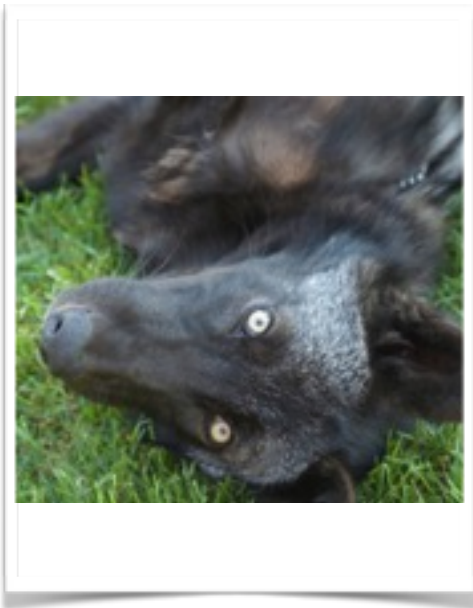


Photo Credit: Tamara Barnes

integrated into the landscape before resorting to killing and fragmenting packs which can exacerbate the problem. Compensating the stockman over and above the market value of losses if they occur after a trial of non-lethal methods, has been suggested as just one way to reward ranchers efforts, and progress toward a future of co-existence. Grazing leases push into heavily forested areas and the ever shrinking home of the wolf. Common sense says wolves might come to see livestock as easy prey - especially with the limited or no human presence to dissuade them.

Alberta Agriculture encourages cattlemen to employ range riders to check regularly on their herds and identify predation early. Given that wolves are shy, human presence is the most effective deterrent along with the basics of good husbandry. In the past Alberta Fish and Wildlife recommended the following husbandry practices in wolf habitat:



- Grazing leases on remote public lands be phased out.
- Herds be checked regularly.
- Only healthy non-pregnant cows be sent to pasture.
- That livestock be removed from the pasture as early as possible in the fall.
- Carrion should be buried or removed as soon as possible, not left in place or just dragged to the edge of the tree line.
- Animals should be kept out of remote pastures after dusk and penned in corrals where they may be watched. (The Wolf Almanac, New and Revised by Robert H. Busch, The Lyons Press).

As a youngster growing up in rural Alberta not far from large grazing leases, my brother and I were thrilled by the rare sighting of a wolf. Though we knew they were there - they kept to themselves. I do not remember ever hearing of any wolf predation ...if there were any problems they were not amongst our neighbours who also thought themselves lucky to see a wolf, and kept it quiet...silence being the wolf's best protection. These farmers - our neighbours - likewise lived along side the wolf in a calm, matter of fact manner. Perhaps the 1980's of my youth was a quieter time....I am sorry to say that wolves in the area, have been (routinely) poisoned over the last few years with strychnine by Fish and Wildlife.

Whether any of the bulleted points listed above were implemented - I do not know. Personally, I doubt it. Fish and Wildlife agencies need vocal public support to bringing about change of policy on public lands, and cultivated good will amongst stockmen. Which groups such as Wolf Matters in Alberta and Wolf Awareness Inc. in B.C. endeavour to do....

Alberta has some much admired wolf friendly ranchers in diverse parts of the province, who have been successful, and generous with their knowledge. I suspect there are many, many more such farmers who quietly go about coexisting with wildlife devising their own creative, resourceful ways. I do hope such efforts and cooperation increase... as they are the people on the front lines with the wolf and can make the most difference in individual lives... Alberta could lead the way in modernizing our way with wolves.

Anna-Marie Ferguson October 30<sup>th</sup> 2014