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Cyberspace Composition 1

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Cry Wolf

Three little pigs dance in a circle singing "Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?"

Little Red Riding Hood barely escapes the cunning advances of the ravenous wolf disguised as her grandmother.

Movie audiences shriek as a gentle young man is transformed before their eyes into a blood-thirsty werewolf, a symbol for centuries of the essence of evil.

Such myths and legends have portrayed the wolf as a threat to human existence. Feared as cold-blooded killers, they were hated and persecuted. Wolves were not merely shot and killed; they were tortured as well. In what was believed to be a battle between good and evil, wolves were poisoned, drawn and quartered, doused with gasoline and set on fire, and, in some cases, left with their mouths wired shut to starve (Begley 53). Convinced that they were a problem to be solved, U.S. citizens gradually eradicated gray wolves from the lower 48 states over a period of 25 years.

Today many people are convinced that the elimination of the gray wolf was not only an error, but also a detriment to the quality of life in this country. There has been a public outcry to rectify the situation created by the ignorance of our ancestors. However, in seeking to address a situation created by the human compulsion to control nature, it is crucial to discern how much human interference is necessary. Human control must be tempered by respect and restraint. Programs designed for the protection

and restoration of wildlife must reflect deference for the natural order rather than dominance over it.

The consequences of human actions involving the elimination of the gray wolf have been especially acute in Yellowstone National Park, where the lack of a natural predator has resulted in the overpopulation of bison, deer, and elk. According to Sharon Begley of Newsweek magazine, "Absent a natural predator, thousands of the ungulates have starved during tough winters, and there has been no selection pressure to keep deer fast and moose powerful" (53).

Another issue is more subtle. As Ms. Begley points out, "The wolf has been the only native animal missing from Yellowstone" (53). In one of the few places where the wildness of the west could be preserved, the wolf's absence leaves a big hole. In a world filled with skyscrapers, subdivisions, and superhighways, human beings yearn for the wolf's untamable majesty.

In 1995, it is obvious that the hatred and fear which fueled the elimination of the gray wolf stemmed from a gross misunderstanding of wolves and their behavior. Cultural myths picturing wolves as scheming, aggressive beasts plotting to pounce on innocent victims do not reflect the truth. In reality, wolves are elusive creatures who keep to themselves. The wolf's social structure is much like ours. They live in family units called packs consisting of a mated pair, young pups, and older offspring. It is through the intricate relationships and interactions within the pack that offspring learn how to live as adult wolves. As the environmentalist Charles Bergman points out, "Wolves are intensely social animals, living in packs that are structured in rigid hierarchies. In the chain of power each wolf has a defined place on a ladder of

dominance and submission" (31). The entire pack works together according to position to raise and nurture the pups, teaching them a highly sophisticated system of communication used "for expressing their status relative to each other" (Bergman 31). Also, from parents and older siblings, young wolves learn not only how to hunt, but what to hunt as well. Wolves are trained early to go after certain prey and leave others alone. Since their prey is usually larger and stronger than they, wolves are taught specifically to hunt the weak and sick in order to avoid injury.

Information given in Friends of the Forest describes the similarity between humans and wolves. This publication states, "Like humans, some wolves stay with their families until they die, others leave the pack during adolescence in search of uninhabited territory and a mate" (1-2). Unlike humans, wolves instinctively control their population. The number in a pack rarely exceeds twelve and is determined by the availability and size of prey in their territory.

Faced with the consequences of hasty actions to eliminate the wolves, as well as increased knowledge about their behavior, the U.S. Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973, giving full protection to the gray wolf. In Section 1531 of the Act, Congressional findings state that since certain species of wildlife have been threatened with extinction, "the United States has pledged itself as a sovereign state in the international community to conserve to the extent practicable the various species of fish or wildlife and plants facing extinction" (United 1, 2).

However, many believe that protection has not been enough. In January 1995, the Department of the Interior flew 29 wolves from Canada to Idaho's River of No Return Wilderness Area and to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Fifteen were released

directly into the Idaho area, and the rest were put in pens in Yellowstone, scheduled to be released after an acclimation period of 6 to 12 weeks. This program to reintroduce the gray wolf into the lower 48 states provides for fifteen more wolves to be relocated each year for the next three to five years (Begley 53).

Critics of the program have raised a number of concerns. First of all is the apprehension of ranchers regarding the possible loss of livestock. Wolves have been absent from Yellowstone for 60 years. Although some statistics claim that "Less than 1% of the sheep and cattle living in wolf range in Canada are killed by wolves annually," others tell a different story. According to the policy director of the National Wildlife Institute, "In Canada, 41 percent of livestock found dead have been killed by wolves" (qtd. in Richardson 30). The difference in these statistics is alarming. Obviously, statistics can be expressed in a variety of ways depending on what point one is trying to prove. However, the fact remains that wolves do, at least occasionally, prey on livestock.

In addition to their concern for livestock, ranchers fear the possibility that, to help ensure the wolf's survival, wildlife managers will fence off thousands of acres now used for grazing. This could lead to the shutdown of ranches, resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs.

Finally, ranchers know that they have very little recourse if the wolves prey on their livestock. They are allowed to shoot a wolf caught in the act of killing a sheep or cow if the animal belongs to them. However, it is very difficult to be in the right place at the right time to catch a wolf in a kill. It is even more unlikely that a rancher would witness the kill of his own animal. Yet the penalty for defending a neighbor's property is

the possibility of up to one year in prison and \$100,000 in fines (Richardson 30).

Another problem critics point out is the exorbitant cost of implementing the reintroduction program. Estimated at \$65,000 per wolf, the federal government will spend up to 13 million dollars to helicopter lift 200 wolves over the next five years (Richardson 28, 30). At a time when budget cuts are affecting food, housing and medical care for the needy, it is difficult to justify the expenditure. Even certain environmentalists have questioned the advisability of capturing and relocating wolves. Recently, a lawsuit was filed by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund stating, "the grey wolves have been migrating steadily south from Canada for years. Some have already reached Montana, and wolf packs are expected to settle in Yellowstone in about thirty years on their own initiative" (Richardson 28). But some wildlife biologists say that 30 years is too long to wait. They want to reduce Yellowstone's overpopulated bison and elk herds now. These biologists also want to study wolves before they settle in naturally. However, as Richardson states, "Taxpayers might argue that, for \$65,000 per animal, the Fish and Wildlife Service could afford to send the biologists on weekly junkets to Alberta for wolf observation" (30).

If assurances could be made that this program would work, perhaps the cost could be more easily justified. However, there are inherent problems in capturing and relocating wolves successfully. Even biologists in favor of the program admit that the number one challenge is to overcome the natural tendency of wolves to try to get home. The only solution to this dilemma is to pen the animals up for a period of time until they get used to their new surroundings. Unfortunately, whenever wolves are penned, there is a danger that they will lose some of their wildness. But such measures have already

been necessary in the case of one of the wolf families in Yellowstone. Following the illegal killing of the dominant male in one of the packs, a recent update reports:

The alpha female from the defunct Rose Creek pack remains in the Rose Creek wolf enclosure with her eight pups. The pups are healthy, and have been vaccinated against about everything a canine can get. It is hoped that by fall (when they will likely be released), they will be big enough to fight off the coyotes. I suspect their winter mortality will be high, since they have had no opportunity to learn to hunt. (Maughan)

In an effort to help the wolves form viable packs, biologists hope to solve the other problem that concerns them, "the tendency of a stressed wolf to go it alone" (Carpenter 15). A consequence of moving wolves from their habitat is that their social structure breaks down. In an interview with Dr. Marcella Cranford, proponent of wolf relocation, veterinarian and expert on wolf behavior, she explained, "Lone wolves don't make it. They survive as a family or they don't survive at all" (n.p.). A result of the breakdown is that "mates separate and some abandon pups in their haste to return to familiar turf" (Carpenter 15). Biologists believe that in order to form viable packs, they must capture wolves of different ages. The assumption is that when they calm down, the captured wolves will establish a new pack. It is evident from biologists' concerns that wolves not only are intelligent creatures, but also have ties to family and fear of change, as humans do.

The process used to capture wolves and relocate them in Idaho and Yellowstone has attempted to address these concerns. In November 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service paid fur trappers \$2,000 each to use their special talent for hunting down wolves

(Begley 53). This talent included using neck snares "equipped with 'stops'" which would prevent the wolves from being killed (Neimeyer 13). Mr. Neimeyer in International Wolf further explains, "Any live wolf restrained by a neck snare was quickly immobilized with drugs injected with a jabstick" (13). Radio collars were then slipped around the animals' necks and these "Judas wolves" (Neimeyer 13), as they have been called, were followed back to the pack where agents selected the wolves of their choice for transport to Yellowstone and central Idaho. The sedated wolves were then locked in traveling cages. Each cage measured no more than 2 feet by 3 feet by 4 feet (Begley 53). Unfortunately, due to unexpected litigation, the wolves were forced to remain in these cages for more than 24 hours. In the case of the wolves bound for Idaho, they endured more than 80 hours in their crates (Johnson 17).

Given the elusive nature of wolves and the strong ties which bind them to their own pack, all these measures seem invasive and extreme. Such techniques are often necessary in attempts to save animals from extinction. However, the gray wolf is in no such peril. Although the number of wolves in the lower 48 states is minuscule, 60,000 roam the ranges of Canada and about 7,000 thrive in Alaska (Richardson 30). Even the proponents of the reintroduction program admit that moving wolves to Idaho and Yellowstone has nothing to do with "saving wolves." In a recent Congressional hearing, Renee Askins, Executive Director of the Wolf Fund, testified in favor of the plan. She explained that the restoration of wolves would not "rescue us from our economic or ecological troubles, but neither will their presence contribute to them" (Askins 16-17). Ms. Askins claimed that the significance of returning the wolf to Yellowstone resided in its power as a "deeply and profoundly symbolic act" (17). She

told the House Committee on Resources:

The story of this conflict is the story of how we view ourselves in relation to animals, whether we can replace the assumption of "dominion" that has been so destructive to us and the natural world with a world view that recognizes that we live in a state of reciprocity with the birds and the beasts--that we are not only the product of nature but also part of it. Our attitudes toward wolves and our treatment of them cut to the very marrow of how we view our relationship to the natural world. (17)

If the driving motivation for the reintroduction of wolves into Idaho and Yellowstone is the symbolic act of restoring a relationship of respect and cooperation with nature, the actions of capture and relocation do not fit the symbol. Capture shows no respect for the highly developed social structure of the pack. Relocation denies the wolf's natural tendency to seek new territory when its own territory is overpopulated. The action appears to be more representative of a different kind of "dominion" rather than reciprocity between humankind and the animal kingdom.

With the best of intentions, it is all too easy for human beings to cross the line between necessary concern and unnecessary control. The environmentalist and author, Charles Bergman, makes this point in his book, Wild Echoes:

For all the pure motives of most of our wildlife managers--and I honor and respect their good intentions--wolf control nevertheless derives from the same world view that has enabled Americans to dominate nature wherever we have gone. Humans are superior to nature. If we no longer try to conquer or eliminate wolves, we at least try to control them. (29)

The majestic gray wolf--skillful predator, nurturing family member--has been misunderstood to the point of endangerment. Fear, hatred and the need to control the wolf's untamable wildness created an environment in which slaughter was not only acceptable, but advocated. There is no doubt that human beings bear responsibility for the protection of these magnificent creatures. However, the awe and admiration which have replaced the fear and hatred have not removed the human need to control. When this need to control results in tactics which are invasive and which disregard the very nature of the wolf itself, the danger is that human interference will unintentionally diminish the very wildness environmentalists seek to preserve.

Appendix

The following interview with Dr. Marcella Cranford, veterinarian and expert in wolf behavior, was conducted by telephone on November 30, 1995:

Berven: What is your opinion of the reintroduction of the gray wolf into Yellowstone National Park?

Cranford: Well, it's one of the missing links. The overpopulation of the elk is a problem. Right now, we're feeding them. Not having wolves in Yellowstone is like a tear in the fabric of nature. Someone said that.

Berven: What do you think are the repercussions for packs in Canada from which the wolves are taken?

Cranford: I'm hoping they're going to do it right. If you kill the best ones, the hunters, the pack won't make it. Lone wolves don't make it. They survive as a family or they don't survive at all.

Berven: What about the ranchers? They're very upset from what I have read.

Cranford: The ranchers should shape up! I mean, after all, we're paying money to subsidize their cattle.

Berven: What about their concern that the wolves will kill their sheep and cattle?

Cranford: They have more of a problem with feral dogs. Wolves prefer ungulates. They don't want to come near us. They're not like the coyote.

Berven: I know you are short on time. Is there anything else you can tell me?

Cranford: I have a magazine, International Wolf. It has all the information concerning the Environmental Impact Statement and how this whole thing got started. I know it started in 1991, so there have been years of debate and controversy about it. There were 160,000 responses to it [the reintroduction]. It was one of the largest responses on a proposed government action.

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