

# Wolf issue brings pity on wildlife ecologists

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**P**ity poor wildlife ecologists. Rather than being free to pursue truth where they find it, most are merely minions of one partisan organization or another.

Like attorneys, these nest watchers and scat catchers are the hired guns in conservation fights. Those serving environmental groups are under strict orders to reveal only the bad news, while those employed by industry are told to report only the good. Even worse, a



**ON THE ENVIRONMENT**  
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plurality works for federal agencies dedicated to transforming often spurious claims of declining biodiversity into expanded budgets.

Outspoken wildlife scientists, in short, are endangered

species, more rare than manatees or Komodo dragons. So when a truly independent scholar challenges the conventional wisdom, outraged authorities usually treat the perpetrator as a freak to be isolated before its mutant genes have an opportunity to replicate.

Such is the experience of biologist Charles Kay. A self-employed researcher and an expert on Yellowstone who earned a doctorate from Utah State University, he would seem above politics. But when he disputed the official version of wolf recovery in the northern Rockies, officials went after him with fangs bared.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service seeks to restore grey wolves to Yellowstone, northern Montana and central Idaho. In 1987, it completed a Recovery Plan for these creatures, which are listed as endangered; and last summer, it published a draft Environmental Impact Statement, recommending "experimental" wolf populations be reintroduced to the three areas.

The statement is provoking activists and stockmen to gnash their teeth and slobber at the mouth. The former don't like the plan's provisions to permit shooting troublesome wolves, and the latter don't like wolves, period. But unheard above this cacophony are scientists who harbor serious doubts about the proposal.

Kay gives voice to these concerns. In the August issue of "Peterson's Hunting Journal," he raised the question: If wolves are brought back, how many are enough? The Recovery Plan announced that when 10 breeding pair of wolves remain three successive years in each area, wolves would be declared recovered and be removed from the Endangered Species list.

This startled Kay. Since packs contain, on average, 10 wolves of which only two — the alpha male and female — breed, this would imply that the animal would be deemed recovered after 100 wolves are established in each area. But to prevent harmful inbreeding and to protect against

random environmental changes, most scientists believe that a minimum viable population is 1,500 individuals. So why, Kay wondered, did the Service cite such a low number?

To find out, he sought the government's research on the subject, but was told there was none. The recovery goals, he surmised, were political numbers without scientific basis fabricated to minimize opposition to wolf reintroduction. Yet when populations reach recovery goals and the government moves to de-list, Kay observed, activists, rightly claiming 100 is not enough, will sue to keep them protected, and win. Wolf numbers will grow and grow and grow.

Kay's charges infuriated Ed Bangs, Service Project Leader for the Impact Statement, who launched a counter-attack at Kay. He wrote the president of Utah State University, where he mistakenly supposed Kay was employed, charging "misrepresentation — that was 'highly unprofessional.'" And he wrote members of the Recovery Team, urging them to contact the university's president as well.

This response outraged Kay's colleagues. Robert J. Taylor, Kay's former professor, condemned Bang's action as "a thinly veiled attempt to assassinate (Kay's) scientific reputation." Randy Simmons, head of the Political Science Department at Utah State, also sprang to Kay's defense, claiming Bang acted beyond his authority in an attempt to suppress legitimate scientific opinion.

Indeed, Kay is on target. While Appendix 9 of the Draft Statement offers a brief justification for the 100 number, this addendum, appearing after Kay's article was already in press and six years after the government's recovery figures were first proposed, seems a hastily conceived afterthought. Although dubbed a literature survey, it was published without a bibliography.

Moreover, "talk about 100 wolves is nonsense," Taylor told me. "You cannot maintain genetic diversity with those numbers. And many biologists, including Taylor, do not believe Yellowstone is large enough to contain 10 packs. As University of Wyoming wolf researcher Mark Boyce said, wolves will disperse over a very wide area. "It is almost guaranteed they will get into trouble."

Kay therefore introduces a disturbing variable into the equation of wolf recovery. These animals belong in parks like Yellowstone, but they should not take over the West. Yet many scholars believe that wolf populations will eventually explode. Not biologically endangered — 50,000 reside in North America alone — they are already re-establishing themselves across the Northwest.

And once back, wolves may be hard to control. Kay, therefore, one of the rare biologists who hasn't sold his soul to government, is saying what few want to hear.

See how much political discomfort a free mind can cause?

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