

SILVER CITY SUN-NEWS

Rational about wolves

Wolves! Yes, wolves, an animal and subject that sparks an array of emotions and reactions ranging across the spectrum from uninformed ridiculous crackpot to scientifically sound reality.

Reading letters to the editor about the subject of wolves and their reintroduction sometimes causes one to think "would that the blind could see," and how prone some are to unwittingly shooting themselves in the foot. All this reminds how too often in the complexity of problems it is man himself who is the

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THINK ABOUT IT

biggest one confronting us, and his destructive capabilities can be deadly, even to survival.

A refreshing interlude was the utterly rational and documented recent letter to the editor of the Silver City Daily Press written by noted photographer Michael Berman that made a strong case for sanity in successful wolf reintroduction.

This column makes no attempt to resolve the wolf controversy, or even to restate the case shorn of emotion. It merely is an unprofound effort to cite some related experiences encountered, and offer some basics that may provide a new or different perspective to your thinking about reintroducing wolves to their historic range.

Perhaps a ground-floor basic is the reminder that the Endangered Species Act, a federal law enacted in 1973 during the Nixon administration, mandated government to protect and nurture plants and animals facing extinction. It's a tribute to the American people's commitment to wildlife conservation that a strong majority have consistently supporting this sorely needed legislation that has benefited all Americans, regardless of their awareness.

This, in turn, underlines the fundamental truth that in Nature all things are connected, with everything having a purpose and connection to something else that it

affects. It's similar to links in a chain. How many links can be eliminated without the entire chain being weakened to where greater unintended harms are being done ... to the point of even destruction?

It can be said that in the vanguard of these "accomplishments" and "progress" are unrestrained development and encroachments were such are not meant to be. Bluntly stated, the gut problem apparently is man's insatiable greed regardless of consequences.

Helping the route to failure are government policies doctored by kowtowing to Big Money special interests, as Bush foxes watching the chicken coop even stack "recovery" teams with anti-wolf zealots. No wonder the wolf's historic range is even being gerrymandered so results can be rigged.

Thinking about this column tapped the memory bank of a ranch tour to Alberta. (That Canadian province is about a hundred thousand square miles larger than California.) First ranch visited was on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, in wolf country from where Yellowstone's recovery effort was partially restocked.

The 3rd generation operator told us that "wolves don't bother us", and cited this frequent experience: A small herd of elk are in a vale observed by a small pack of wolves on a nearby knoll. One of the wolves is obviously designated to charge the elk herd, not intending to attack any. This shows the wolves which are the old, lame, or sick elk they then target. Isn't this Nature doing its job?

So a wolf-country rancher said that wolves are improving the quality of the elk herd, he's making much fewer fence repairs, and there's more grass now for his cattle. Perhaps unwittingly, this rancher documented that restoring predators is the easiest solution to many problems and is the best ways of achieving ecological integrity.

Another proof of the beneficial impact wolves play in healthy ecosystems is the vital aspen groves they're bringing back to Yellowstone. Elk population boomed after wolves were wiped out about 80 years ago, and that caused destruction by elk of new

growth aspen and willow, which in turn eventually ruined habitat for numerous birds, beavers in nearby streams, and moose that are browsers.

The beneficial links between species with return of the wolf are shown by their habit of traveling along streams, which controls elk browsing patterns allowing aspen to grow and beavers to flood land that creates a better habitat for many plants and animals in an inter-connected linkage. Reports by National Park service experts and National Academy of Science document the cascade of benefits resulting from return of the wolf that is proving the best thing happening to Yellowstone in the past century.

Another revealing exposure was hearing what a Montana rancher said to a sheep and cattle rancher in Colorado when he was complaining about coyotes getting so many of his sheep. The Montanan said: "You know what your problem is? You've got those sheep in the wrong place."

And that's the basis for many of the ills of wolf recovery with cattle being in remote areas causing conflicts making no sense. Wolves should be where they are meant to be and cattle shouldn't be there. I operated an 808-cow permit ranch in the Gila Primitive Area for seven years and that country was never meant to be economically productive cattle country.

Incidentally, we never had coyote problems there, nor in the Lone Mountain range country, or here along the Mimbres River. Coyotes do a great job of keeping the rodent population down, enough to cause a growing number of ranchers to ban coyote hunting and trapping. Besides, "success" in trying to wipe out coyotes increases your problem as more move into the vacuum created. And hunting and trapping pressure increases litter size. Take the pressure off and litters are smaller. Why be stupid? There are enough stupid cowards sneaking around shooting wolves to the detriment of our country and most of us.

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