Wildlife Tracks®

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Return of the Native:

Finding Common Ground in the Conservation and Control of Wolves and Other Predators

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When I moved back to Montana two years ago, I found a place both foreign and familiar. During my twelve-year absence, parts of the state had sprouted million-dollar homes, replacing cows with condos and growing at unprecedented rates. By comparison, my hometown on the Rocky Mountain Front had stayed virtually stagnant. One family had built a new house on the edge of town, and a few stores had changed hands, but it looked nearly identical to the place I left years ago. The primary difference was in the faces of the farmers and ranchers, worn from fighting drought, low commodity prices, and a stale economy. Profit margins are thinner than they were ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, and so is the belief that the small family rancher will be able to weather hard times.

Economic pressures are one reason why negative attitudes about wildlife and the conservationists who advocate for wildlife have intensified among agricultural producers. When wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995, ranchers feared that wolves would prey on their livestock and that they would have little ability to protect their livestock from these predators. Because of the narrow profit margins in ranching, ranchers worried that wolves could be the tipping point to put them out of business. Ten years after the reintroduction, you would be hard pressed to find a rancher who has gone out of business solely because of wolves, but there is still widespread animosity toward wolves within the agricultural community, and that animosity often translates into the unnecessary killing of more wolves.

Although ranchers realize they can't control the weather or commodity prices, they have been schooled in the belief that controlling predators is as simple as picking up the rifle hanging next to the doorway. Lethal control of anything that threatens livestock has been the dominant paradigm since the West was settled. But now that predators such as wolves and grizzly bears are protected by federal regulations, ranchers have had to accept the idea that they can't follow this tradition without facing serious legal penalties.

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But federal regulations are not what will ultimately protect wolves and bears. Though currently protected by the federal Endangered Species Act, once federally delisted, wolves will be managed by state wildlife agencies, which are most easily influenced by state residents—state hunters and anglers in particular. When wolf management is more strongly influenced by the desires of hunters—some of whom believe wolves take too many deer and elk and for this reason would like to hunt wolves—and ranchers, conservation goals could easily lose ground. This is one reason why Predator Conservation Alliance decided to initiate its Coexistence Program in 2003. We recognized that, to protect these animals fully, we need state regulations and policies; state-level protections will, in turn, require public tolerance of wolves, grizzlies, and other predators on the landscape.

As the director of the Coexistence Program, I was charged with trying to find ways to get past the battle mentality that has permeated predator issues in the past and create models that demonstrate that livestock and wildlife can coexist. Given traditional attitudes about predators within the agricultural community and the amount of media attention dedicated to these attitudes, I was surprised

to quickly discover a number of ranchers who are ready to take on the coexistence challenge; some of these ranchers have already come up with ingenious ways to live with wolves, bears, coyotes, and mountain lions. I have also discovered some encouraging trends. For one thing, I've found that a lot of ranchers have stopped asking the question, "How do we get rid of predators?" and instead are now asking, "How do we live with them?" I've spent the last two years helping ranchers answer the second question, and it has been both rewarding and intensely challenging. I hope that by sharing the stories of our projects I will encourage others to coexist with these animals.

The wolf seen in this 2003 photo was eventually killed for preying on cattle in the Madison Valley.
Photo: Todd Graham

The Range Riders Project

In many livestock operations, the cattle or sheep are kept in fenced pastures. Under such conditions, the use of non-lethal tools for protecting livestock from predators requires work—and financial resources—but there are many options for safeguarding livestock. Pastures can be protected with predator-resistant (if not predator-proof) electric fencing, livestock-guarding animals such as llamas or special dog breeds can patrol the pastures, and motion-activated devices can be used either to scare off an intruding predator or to alert the rancher to the predator's presence.

On the other hand, cattle and sheep grazed on the open range, as they still are in many western states, present a special problem. For example, some have argued that it is practically impossible to effectively fence out predators on the open range. Guarding animals may be effective in some range-grazing situations, but in other cases they may not be able to cover enough ground to protect all livestock. When guard animals are not a workable option, a human presence may be one of the few solutions that is both feasible and effective.

The notion of protecting cattle and other livestock by adding a mobile human presence is not new. Herders are a traditional means of protecting livestock that has fallen out of favor in recent years because of high labor costs. It isn't within the financial means of most small family ranchers to hire someone to watch their livestock. Most ranchers who graze on public lands check their livestock on a weekly basis and have learned to live with a certain amount of loss. But when wolves were reintroduced, many ranchers were not financially able to change their animal husbandry quickly enough to address the new risk of predation.

In summer 2005, PCA entered its second season of employing riders on horseback to renew what may be the oldest non-lethal predator control technique on the open range. These riders were hired to answer what seems, on the face of it, to be a simple question: Could humans—riders on horseback—keep wolves away from cattle? And would their presence be enough to break a cycle that usually starts with wolves killing livestock, and ends with people killing wolves? Our five riders committed to spending five months camped on the Beaverhead Deerlodge and Gallatin National Forests in southwest Montana, trying to answer these questions in the hope of breaking this cycle.

The First Ride

The Madison Valley sits northwest of Yellowstone National Park and was one of the first places to which wolves migrated after they were reintroduced to Yellowstone in 1995. But the Madison Valley is also a place where livestock graze on both public and private lands. Thus, it is a place that is ripe for conflict with wolves, and in March 2004, these conflicts came to a head when two wolf packs were killed for preying on livestock in the valley. These wolves were considered an "experimental nonessential" population, which is a designation under the ESA that allows the federal government more options in management; in this case, the experimental nonessential designation allows the government to kill wolves that repeatedly prey on livestock. These wolves had repeatedly killed livestock, but the amount of hysteria over wolves killing livestock was not commensurate with the real threat. Local headlines spouted fears that wolves would next kill children in the area, even though wolves pose little risk to humans. Conservationists could do little to defend these wolves from a tide of local resentment and the responsive pressure from Montana's Congressional delegation on federal wildlife officials to respond.

I knew—as did the ranchers involved—that it would not be long before wolves would resettle the valley from nearby Yellowstone. At that point, both ranchers and conservationists admitted that there had to be a better way than killing wolves for killing cattle—and then starting the whole process over again when

Ebbie and Bob Kunesh—range riders from Summer 2004—check for wolf tracks along the road into Antelope Basin, with Janelle Holden, director of the Coexistence Program.
Photo: Diane Hargreaves, www.hargreavesphoto.com

wolves came back. In an attempt to stop the cycle of death and conflict, PCA and a local ranching association in Montana's Madison Valley initiated the first season of the Range Riders Project in the spring of 2004. PCA found the funding to hire two riders, train them, and wade through the logistics of a project that didn't come with pre-written directions for success.

With a little luck and a lot of hard work, we ended the project in October 2004 without any livestock or native predators harmed. And it wasn't just wolves that benefited from the project. The project area was also home to several grizzly bears that summer, and the riders also spotted black bears, mountain lions, and coyotes, none of whom touched the nearly 2,000 head of livestock that grazed there during the summer. The work that the riders did—riding at night, camping next to livestock, and chasing predators away from livestock when they saw them—was all effective in meeting our goal of preventing conflicts between wolves and livestock.

It's not possible to prove from just one summer that this approach could solve conflicts everywhere between predators and livestock in the future. And, in fact, it's difficult in general to demonstrate the success of a non-lethal strategy like this, especially in a short period of time, simply because success means that nothing happens: no cattle are lost. That is part of the reason why the partners involved with the project unanimously agreed to go forward with a second field season in 2005 *(Editor's note: When available, results of the 2005 Range Riders Project will be posted at www.predatorconservation.org.)*. We realized that we still have much to learn about non-lethal techniques in preventing conflicts and how and when they work best. What we can say, unequivocally, is that this project is proof that collaborative efforts between conservationists and ranchers can help solve conservation problems.

What was most valuable about the first field season of the Range Riders Project is that it brought traditional "enemies" to the table to talk about a reasonable, pragmatic approach to a specific problem. We learned to empathize with each other, listen to each other, and build strong relationships that could weather the inevitable storms. It also taught us that conflicts may be best solved as a community rather than by the efforts of a few individuals.

Looking Ahead

We're not sure what challenges our next field season will bring, but we have identified a few things to work on before the project starts. One of our goals is to begin building a project that can be financially sustained over time. We are thankful to have had generous support from private foundations that have been willing to make the first two field seasons possible, but we realize that we must find more diverse sources of funding if the project is to continue.

One approach by which we may reach this goal is to integrate an eco-tourism component into the Range Riders Project, providing additional support for the project by offering trips with the Range Riders during some part of the field season. We are currently collaborating with eco-tourism providers to make this possible in the Madison Valley.

The success of our project has already inspired a welcome spin-off. In January 2005, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, a government agency under the U.S. Department of Agriculture, announced the availability of funding for ranchers to implement three predator deterrent measures: carcass disposal, predator-deterring fencing, and the hiring and use of a herder on private lands. As a result of that funding, we were able to start a second project in Montana's Boulder River Valley in 2005 as well.

In addition, we are working with state wildlife agencies and biologists to design a study to examine how well human presence works to deter wolves and how it can be applied to other areas of conflict. Our ultimate goal is to create a project that not only prevents conflicts between predators and livestock but is also self-sustaining and a model for coexistence in the region. With the success of the first season, we have certainly made great progress toward reaching that goal.

Changing Attitudes

In fact, the ranchers who participated admit that this project has already changed their attitudes about wolves. For example, in the surveys we conducted after the first field season of the Range Riders Project, one rancher said that prior to the Range Riders Project he was "not friendly towards wolves," but the project has "made me more proactive to try and coexist." Another rancher stated that he "hated the reintroduction and how it was crammed down their throats with no

Range rider Ebbie Kunesh learns how to use telemetry equipment to track radio-collared wolves.
Photo: Diane Hargreaves, www.hargreavesphoto.com

recourse." But he answered "yes" when asked whether the Range Rider Project has influenced his attitude toward wolves and noted that it "helped the situation with more presence and [he] feels harassment has helped reduce losses."

Most recently, one rancher involved in the Boulder River project told me, "You know, before this project started, I said I would shoot a wolf if I saw one. But now, I wouldn't do it because I wouldn't want to wreck what we've got started here." Clearly, he valued the collaborative spirit of the Range Riders Project so much that he would set aside his differing opinions to make it work. It's comments like these that motivate me to continue with this work.

Predator Friendly

A problem as old and thorny as predator-livestock conflicts requires a multi-pronged solution. The Range Riders Project offers a specific non-lethal approach that, in some cases, may offer the best hope for coexistence. But we are looking at other ways to help both the agricultural community and wildlife.

In one approach, we work from the firm conviction that farmers and ranchers who are doing the right things to protect wildlife should receive a benefit for being good stewards. This is why, in 2003, Predator Conservation Alliance began certifying "Predator Friendly" agricultural producers who agree to use only non-lethal methods in protecting their livestock from predators. The Predator Friendly certification mark is an "eco-label," like an organic label, that can help Predator Friendly producers profit from their good stewardship. It's difficult to convince farmers and ranchers to make the switch to non-lethal techniques without some financial incentive because of the cost and time involved in implementing these techniques, as well as the firm belief on the part of many that only lethal control will solve problems.

The Predator Friendly label and certification process was developed ten years ago by a diverse group of woolgrowers, conservationists, biologists, and clothing designers who wanted to create an incentive for ranchers to tolerate coyotes and other native predators. This group recently agreed to transfer the certification to PCA, and our new Coexistence Program promises to dedicate new energy toward reviving the concept among ranchers and promoting products with the Predator Friendly label to the public.

The Predator Friendly label was started because no other eco-label adequately addressed this issue. Although the federal requirements for organic certification take into account many conservation concerns, they still allow organic producers to use lethal control on native wildlife. Everything we eat—from vegetables, fruit, and honey, to meat and dairy—has a direct impact on wildlife owing to efforts to curb wildlife damage to agriculture; and this is in addition to the indirect effects of habitat loss. My hope is that the Predator Friendly label will remind consumers of this impact and provide them with a choice that will ultimately help reduce the negative effects of agriculture on predators.

Catching On

The Predator Friendly label immediately gained media attention when it was initiated in 1993. Since taking on the certification of Predator Friendly in 2003, the Predator Conservation Alliance has found that the public remains very interested in the Predator Friendly concept. Even without major media marketing, Predator Friendly was featured in magazines and newspapers as diverse as the *Christian Science Monitor, Associated Press,* and *Meat and Seafood Merchandising Magazine* in the last year. Predator Friendly was also featured on National Public Radio's *90-Second Naturalist.*

We received many comments following these media features and were excited to spur public interest regionally by co-sponsoring a Predator Friendly ranch open house last summer at Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool Company, a sheep ranch outside of Belgrade, Montana. Besides getting a glimpse at Predator Friendly practices, the more than 30 attendees also got a look at Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool Company's new wool mill, which produces wool roving, batts, felt, clothing, and blankets (which are all sold directly from the property). Many of the attendees indicated that they were interested in buying products from Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool Company and supported the Predator Friendly concept

The concept is also catching on internationally. The Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia, Africa, launched a "Cheetah Friendly" eco-label this year for farmers in Namibia who practice cheetah friendly livestock management. This is an effort to encourage farmers in Namibia not to kill endangered cheetahs by pro-

A view of the Gravelly Mountains and the range riders' main camp in Antelope Basin.
Photo: Diane Hargreaves, www.hargreavesphoto.com

viding a market and an economic incentive for non-lethal livestock management practices.

It's clear that the concept of Predator Friendly intrigues people. We hope that translates into a premium price for Predator Friendly products, which would provide a real incentive for producers to become certified. Now that we've succeeded in drawing interest from consumers, we are working on ways to certify more agricultural producers nationwide. In addition, we hope to find stores that will agree to carry these products, so that consumers can make a choice.

Catching Up

In January, the Predator Friendly certification mark was updated to include a wider variety of goods. The list includes some surprising products. For instance, honey is included, because apiaries are a major attractant to bears and are often left unprotected; when bears take advantage of unprotected apiaries, they are often killed. By certifying honey producers as Predator Friendly, we hope to encourage more producers to install electric fencing around apiaries to reduce their losses and ultimately to protect the bears themselves. In addition, we have added goods made from the hair and wool from guard animals such as dogs, llamas, and donkeys in the hope that these producers will see an added benefit from using these animals.

Step two in our plan to certify more producers is the development of www.predatorfriendly.com, a website that will allow consumers to buy Predator Friendly goods directly from producers. In December, PCA partnered with Ben Willman, project manager for Xtomic Enterprises in Colorado Springs, to develop predatorfriendly.com. We expect to launch the website soon.

The Predator Friendly certification offers exciting opportunities for promoting coexistence between agricultural producers and predators. Keep an eye out for the Predator Friendly label in local stores and on the Internet!

In Conclusion

I have been surprised to find that coexistence is almost entirely about people and not predators. Coexistence is a test of human tolerance for the wild, and whether we pass or not will determine the future of declining species, keystone predators, and the balance and integrity of ecosystems. At Predator Conservation Alliance, we are committed to a vision of native predators widely dispersed across the landscape. Because it will require people to change their beliefs and attitudes, it won't be an easy vision to achieve, but it is one that is desperately needed, and there is now reason to believe that it is within reach.

For more information:

Predator Conservation Alliance: *http://www.predatorconservation.org*

To learn more about Cheetah Friendly ranching in Namibia go to: *http://www.cheetah.org*

See also *www.landstewardshipproject.org*

Wildlife Tracks

Wildlife Tracks Mission and Goals:
Over 5,000 wildlife and habitat protection organizations nationwide are working to stop the rapid disappearance of wildlife and the destruction of their habitat. *Wildlife Tracks* combines the power of information, the power of networking and the power of people to strengthen local, state and national grassroots movements to preserve and restore wildlife and the ecosystems they need for their survival.

Goals:
- To expedite the exchange of experience and information between wildlife and habitat organizations, while increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of their efforts.
- To empower the grassroots by sharing the successful efforts to preserve wildlife and ecosystems and to inspire them to expand their vision and strategy to achieve long-term solutions.
- To assist in building responsible and credible organizations by providing information and guidance.

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