

LIONS, WOLVES, AND BEARS; OH MY!

Predator Compensation Programs in the West

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“SAVE THE WOLVES” is one bumper sticker you may have seen. There is another one, however, that you might not have come across: “To hell with the wolves, SAVE THE RANCHERS.” The conflicts between human needs and those of wildlife are real, they are intense, and they are not easily resolved. If ever there was a “snarly” issue, it’s that of predator reintroduction and conservation in the West.

Divided We Stand

During much of United States’ history, populations of mountain lions, bears, and wolves were targeted for reduction or elimination by hunters, trappers, ranchers, farmers, and even park rangers. This practice was questioned as early as 1940 by Aldo Leopold, the “father of wildlife management,” who suggested that predators were a necessary part of a healthy landscape. Leopold even pushed for the recolonization of wolves onto lands from which they had been extirpated.

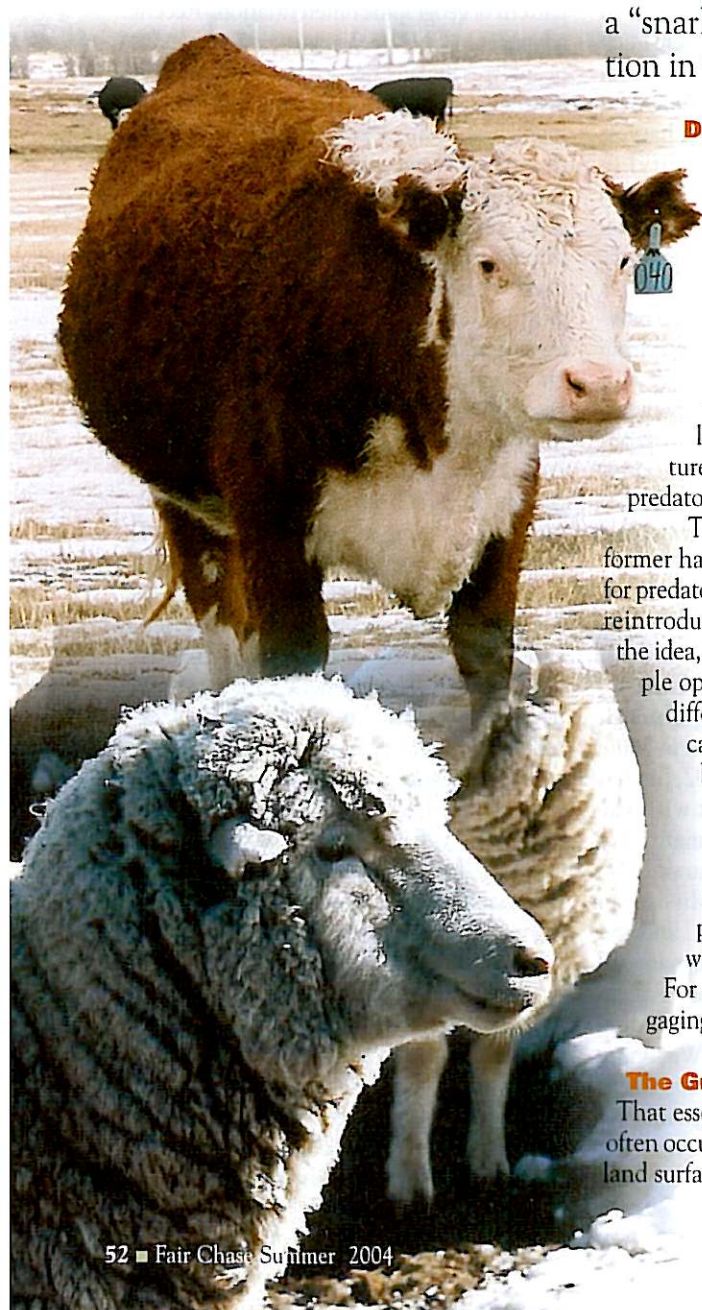
The 1960s and 1970s saw growth in public support for wildlife conservation. Policy milestones, such as the Endangered Species Act of 1973, established wildlife preservation as an important issue in contemporary American culture. The social and political momentum grew into the 1990s, paving the way for predator reintroduction to lands where they had been eliminated.

The American people are divided on the notion of restoring predators to their former haunts. Several national studies report greater support than opposition, overall, for predator reintroductions. An earlier study found a broader base of support for grizzly bear reintroductions compared to wolf reintroductions, but many people remain opposed to the idea, as reported by two studies in western states that found a greater percentage of people opposed to wolf reintroductions compared to those supporting such efforts. The differences might be explained, in part, by the “urban-rural divide.” Studies indicate that support for predator reintroduction and conservation is stronger in urban areas, whereas rural residents are less likely to be supportive. This comes as no surprise; unlike rural residents, urban dwellers do not have to co-exist with predators or suffer the costs of livestock depredation.

What are wildlife managers and policy-makers to do in this environment of divided public opinion? While overall there is more public support than opposition for predator reintroductions and conservation, we also must listen to those with divergent views, and try to understand the reasons for their opposition. Why? For one thing, there are basic issues of fairness and equity at stake. For another, engaging both sides will be essential for managing current and future conflicts.

The Guts of the Problem: Critters eating critters

That essential ingredient for predator reintroduction and conservation, suitable habitat, often occurs as mixtures of private and public lands. Given that 45 percent of the total U.S. land surface (900+ million acres) supports agricultural uses of one kind or another, con-



flict in predator reintroduction programs is inevitable. Past studies found that depredation on livestock is the primary reason given by those opposing wolf reintroductions, and it is often listed as a reason for opposing grizzly bear reintroductions as well. Although most research indicates that livestock depredation does not seriously impact the livestock industry as a whole, such losses can be devastating to individual ranchers and farmers.

Programs that compensate operators for these losses are one method of addressing livestock depredation and increasing landowners' tolerance for predators in livestock producing areas. Predator compensation programs are found throughout the United States and Canada. How do livestock owners view these programs? Are the programs effective? Are they widely supported by the public? These questions were behind our choice of predator compensation programs as a topic for our research. We set out to explore how livestock owners and the public frame the underlying issues and conflicts related to predator compensation, and to examine concepts such as fairness and "the public interest" in relation to compensation programs. We also wanted to gauge opinions on how such programs are funded and administered.

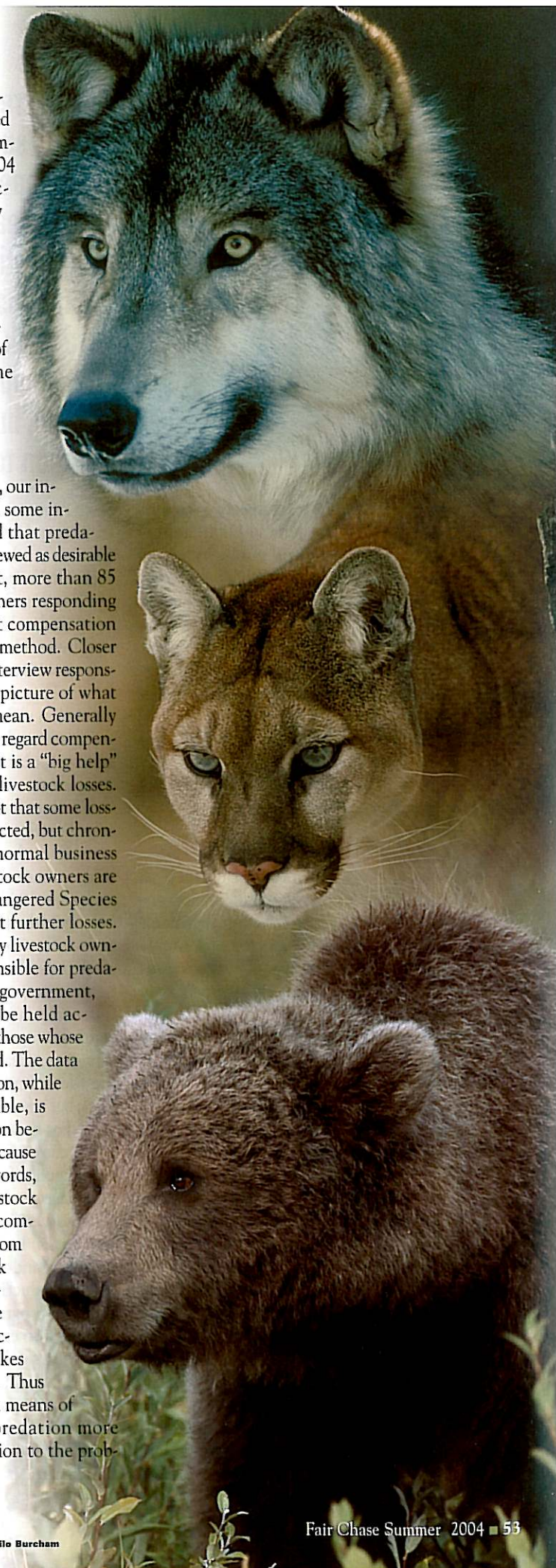
We conducted our research in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming where wolves, grizzly bears, black bears, and mountain lions continue to roam. Four predator compensation programs operate in this area. The Wolf Compensation Trust, sponsored by Defenders of Wildlife, operates in all three states. Another Defenders of Wildlife program, the Grizzly Bear Compensation Trust, operates in Montana and Idaho. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department operates a program that compensates for depredation by grizzly bears, black bears, and mountain lions. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game program compensates for black bear and mountain lion depredation. Each of these programs includes a verification process whereby a state or federal wildlife official examines the carcass to confirm whether depredation occurred by a species covered by the program. Payment is made to the livestock owner following verification.

We used three methods to address our research questions. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with livestock owners in four selected communities: Augusta, Montana; Dubois, Wyoming; Kaycee, Wyoming; and Salmon, Idaho. We broadly defined 'livestock owners' as individuals who have livestock or whose livelihood could potentially be impacted by predators. This included owners of any number of cattle, sheep, horses, goats, poultry, etc., as well as beekeepers

and outfitters who own horses and dogs that could be killed by predators. In all, we completed 79 interviews with 104 livestock owners. Our second approach was a survey mailed to randomly-selected livestock owners in 12 communities across the three states. Our final approach was a survey mailed to randomly selected individuals of the general public across the three states.

Is it really about the money?

Once the data were analyzed, our interviews and surveys yielded some interesting results. We found that predator compensation is widely viewed as desirable by livestock owners. In fact, more than 85 percent of the livestock owners responding to our survey indicated that compensation was a desirable management method. Closer examination of individual interview responses gave us a more complete picture of what these "desirable" responses mean. Generally speaking, many interviewees regard compensation as desirable because it is a "big help" that takes the "hurt" out of livestock losses. Many livestock owners accept that some losses to predators are to be expected, but chronic losses are not viewed as normal business costs, especially when livestock owners are restricted (e.g., by the Endangered Species Act) from acting to prevent further losses. Given such restrictions, many livestock owners believe that those responsible for predator reintroductions (e.g. the government, or society at large) should be held accountable for compensating those whose livelihood has been impacted. The data also indicate that compensation, while generally regarded as desirable, is not a wholly adequate solution because it does not address "the cause of the problem." In other words, those predators that kill livestock will continue to do so, and compensation will not stop that from happening. From the livestock owners' perspective, compensation is "desirable" because it makes their losses more acceptable, not because it makes predators acceptable to them. Thus compensation is valued as a means of distributing the costs of predation more fairly, rather than as a solution to the problem of predation.





Interestingly, this perspective was generally shared by the general public. Over 74 percent of the general public indicated that a compensation program would be desirable as part of a government policy for managing grizzly bears, mountain lions, and wolves. And, as with the livestock owners, support for compensation appeared to stem from notions of social responsibility and fairness in relation to the costs of predation; the program was seen as justifiable in terms of fairness/equity and as a societal means of sharing costs for the benefits ranching provides (open space, wildlife habitat).

A helping hand, but not a cure

Actions to control predation, such as allowing livestock owners to kill problem animals and public hunting to control predator numbers, were widely reported as desirable in our surveys and interviews of livestock owners. In our livestock owner mail survey, over 94 percent indicated that allowing livestock owners to kill problem animals is desirable. Similarly, 90 percent supported public hunting to reduce predator numbers. Regardless of whether they think compensation is desirable or not, many interviewees prefer predator control to compensation because it actually solves the problem by removing the offending animals. Several noted that they would not need to be compensated if they were allowed to take care of the specific animals responsible for depredations. These observations were further supported by the general public survey. Allowing livestock owners to kill offending predators, and hunting of predators by the public, received more widespread endorsement as a management alternative than did compensation.

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best a cautious endorsement. Livestock owners suggest that compensation is a helpful, but insufficient solution to the problem. Yes, compensation “helps, but they’re not doing enough.” “At least somebody is trying to do something, but they should do more of it.” It is also clear that livestock owners believe that predator control measures are needed as well.

This qualified endorsement of compensation reflects, in part, livestock owners’ thinking that as times change, and predator populations change, the role of compensation will also change. Compensation is not viewed as “the solution” but more as a “political tool” that may evolve through time. Even those who support compensation believe that other management techniques, such as individual control or hunting, also belong in the tool kit.

The issues of compensation and livestock depredation are complex, and there is no one easy answer. While the majority find compensation desirable, about 15 percent of our survey respondents and several interviewees disagreed. As some expressed it, they do not raise livestock to feed the predators, but instead they “raise cattle to feed people.” For these individuals, the whole concept of compensation is hopelessly contradictory to the goal of their work. Compensation was not seen as addressing the actual problem, which is specific predatory animals eating their livestock. In this view, compensation is simply a band-aid that doesn’t cure such ills as lost production, interruption of selective breeding programs, and so on. Some interviewees also expressed that accepting compensation sends a message that it is okay for the predators to kill livestock. They don’t want to appear to be siding with those groups who pushed for the predators to be there in the first place. Others oppose compensation because it is not worth the time to deal

with or because it infringes upon their private property rights. The issue of private property rights came up frequently in the interviews. In the minds of livestock owners, the issue has clear linkages to predator management and compensation programs. Interestingly, many of the same practical issues, political concerns, and objections were shared by those livestock owners who favored compensation and those who did not. The difference is the weight that each group assigns to these concerns.

The Human Face of Conflict

Livestock owners are not some anonymous, faceless mass that agrees in every detail. They are, in fact, a diverse lot. The livestock owners we interviewed opened up their homes to us, shared their views and values with us. They fed us. They talked to us about more than compensation. They described to us what it is like to be a livestock owner in these parts, about what they saw as the challenges of ranching — trying to make money in a declining market, worries about a drought that seems to never end. They talked, too, about what they saw as the rewards of ranching — being your own boss, getting outside to interact with the natural landscape. In sharing their views, values, and experiences, they revealed what it means to live in an area that includes these large predators.

For us, the issue of wildlife predation on livestock took on a human face. Understanding the issues from the livestock owner’s perspective is essential in any discussion of wildlife conflicts, including predator reintroductions. We recognize that the involvement of these folks is essential to successful resolution. Yes, their views reflect one side of the issue, and other people have different views and values that are equally important to understand. And herein lies a strength of compensation programs: their potential to help build relationships among groups with differing views, while resolving some of the conflicts associated with predator reintroduction and livestock loss.

Perhaps someday the bumper stickers will read: “SAVE THE RANCHERS AND THE WOLVES.”

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