

Summary Report

2004/2005 Public Opinion Survey: Wolf Management in Wisconsin

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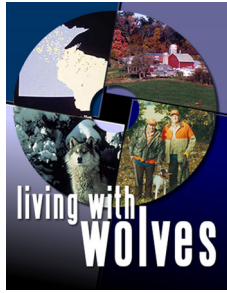
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I. Introduction

In the wake of the Endangered Species Act and other legal protections, wolves (*Canis lupus*) and other large carnivores are recovering in many areas of North America and Europe. As their populations expand, carnivores more frequently encounter and prey on domestic animals. Such encounters are costly and can undermine carnivore recovery programs. Our research project examines public attitudes toward wolf recovery and the management of 'problem' wolves in Wisconsin. We are particularly interested in studying attitudes toward two dominant strategies for managing human-wolf conflict: 1) compensation payments for individuals who have lost domestic animals to wolves, and 2) lethal control of wolves around depredation sites. Understanding these attitudes and the factors shaping public opinion can help government agents, non-governmental organizations and citizens' associations formulate ecologically sound and socially acceptable rules for managing wolves in wild and semi-rural landscapes.

II. Research Design

We sent surveys out to 2400 households randomly selected from 6 zip codes (400 surveys per zip code). We selected these 6 zip codes so as to sample across a broad cross-section of Wisconsin's populace, including rural and urban citizens, and residents of areas inhabited by wolves and residents of areas outside of wolf country. We included a \$2 incentive with the survey and a cover letter guaranteeing respondents' anonymity. Of the 2400, 191 surveys did not reach the targeted respondent because the recipient was deceased, infirm, or had moved without forwarding mail. Of the remainder, we received 1364 surveys (61.7%), with the highest level of response in the Butternut zip code (n=272) and lowest in the Fond du Lac zip code (n=202).



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In this survey, we were particularly interested in understanding the opinions of three key interest groups:

1. Contributors: People who made voluntary contributions to the WI Department of Natural Resource's Endangered Resources Fund by state income tax check-offs and/or by buying special 'wolf logo' license plates.
2. Commercial livestock producers: People who raised livestock for commercial purposes during the last 5 years and/or people for whom livestock raising was a major source of income at some point in their life.
3. Hunters: People who had hunted in the past two years or people who had regularly hunted in the past.

III. Key Findings (see www.geography.wisc.edu/livingwithwolves/public_reports.htm for full report including Tables and Figures)

How do the different stakeholder groups feel about wolves and wolf recovery?

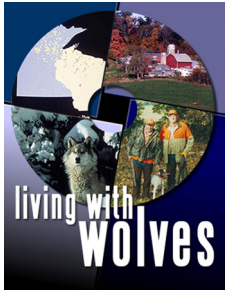
Contributors to the Endangered Resources Fund (hereafter "contributors") valued wolves mainly for their ecological and aesthetic qualities, while non-contributors were more likely to value wolves as a resource or to hold negative opinions of wolves. For example, significantly more non-contributors (12%) than contributors (3%) asserted that they would shoot a wolf if they encountered one while hunting. Similarly, more hunters (13%) than non-hunters (7%) and more livestock producers (15%) than non-livestock producers (8%) stated that they would shoot a wolf if they encountered one while hunting.

When asked about preferred wolf population size in Wisconsin, about 50% of contributors felt that the population should be kept below 500 animals, and the rest felt the population should be up to 1000 or higher. Non-contributors, on the other hand, preferred a smaller wolf population in the state, with 50% stating that the wolf population should be kept below 350 animals.

How should we deal with 'problem' wolves?

If a wolf were to kill livestock or a family pet, contributors and non-contributors both felt that the most appropriate management response would be to "capture and relocate the wolf to a wilderness area." However, the two groups differed as to their second choice management response: contributors' second choice response was "take no immediate action but monitor the situation," whereas non-contributors' second choice was "kill the wolf."

The top choice management response favored by livestock producers, on the other hand, was to "kill the wolf" that had killed livestock or a family pet.



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If a wolf were to kill a hunting dog on public land, contributors and non-contributors both felt that the two most appropriate management responses would be 1) "capture and relocate the wolf to a wilderness area" and 2) "take no immediate action but monitor the situation."

Hunters felt that the preferred management response to a wolf killing a hunting dog on public land would be to "take no immediate action but monitor the situation" followed (distantly) by "kill the wolf."

We asked respondents whether they thought that non-lethal methods – such as guard dogs, electric fences and rubber bullets – were desirable strategies to deter wolves. Commercial livestock producers considered these methods undesirable, whereas other respondents felt that they were desirable methods.

How and when should lethal control of wolves be used?

If lethal control had to be used, all groups surveyed preferred that lethal control be implemented either by government agents or by landowners who had evidence of wolf attacks on their land. Among livestock producers and hunters, many also felt that private citizens with hunting/trapping licenses should be allowed to kill wolves.

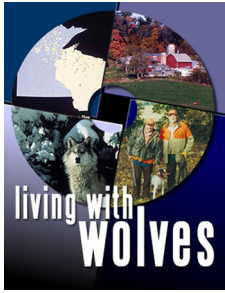
All respondent groups felt that private landowners should have the right to kill wolves on their own land.

When asked if there should be a public hunting/trapping season on wolves, 27% of contributors, 13% of non-contributors, and 11% of hunters said "no, never." Non-contributors and hunters were most likely to favor the initiation of a hunting season "when biologists deem it sustainable," whereas contributors tended to prefer waiting until "depredations become unmanageable."

We asked respondents how tolerant they would be of errors in lethal control (killing non-target wolves rather than those involved in depredations). Among livestock producers, more than a third said they would tolerate any errors as long as problem wolves were removed, and nearly a third were on the other extreme, tolerating no errors at all. Among contributors, more than half favored less than a 10% error rate.

How do Wisconsin residents feel about compensation and incentive programs that pay people for wolf damage?

Overwhelmingly, contributors and non-contributors agreed that compensation for livestock losses to wolves should be paid only if the farmer was following best management practices. Contributors and non-contributors also agreed that compensation for livestock losses to wolves should be paid only if evidence of wolf involvement was found. Livestock producers concurred with both of the above opinions.



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When asked about compensation for hunting dogs killed by wolves on public land, respondents were equally split between not wanting compensation paid at all, and wanting compensation paid only if government agents found evidence of wolf involvement. Fewer than 10% of all respondents said they would like compensation paid regardless of evidence. The same patterns held among hunters.

All key interest groups agreed that the preferred source of funds for compensation payments was the existing Wisconsin Endangered Resources fund. The second and third most popular sources for compensation payments were hunting fees and wildlife conservation organizations. The least popular funding option (out of seven options presented) was a tax on tourists.

We also asked respondents how they felt about a few hypothetical incentive and reimbursement programs. A majority of all respondent groups thought it desirable to reimburse livestock and game producers for installing preventive measures such as electric fences and guard dogs. A majority also approved tax credits for livestock and game producers who sustained losses to wolves. By similar margins, a majority of respondents in all groups did not find desirable to pay landowners an incentive if wolves den on their land. Contributors were more likely than non-contributors or livestock producers to participate in such an incentive program if it existed.

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