Endangered Species: Wolves

 “The caribou feeds the wolf, but it is the wolf who keeps the caribou strong,” the Eskimo adage goes (qtd. Mowat). Although the first impression people have of wolves is being big and bad, they play a crucial role in the ecosystem, as the quote above describes. The common stereotypes, and attacks on livestock, have led to wolf hunting. When wolves neared extinction, people agreed that wolves and other endangered species must be protected, which lead to the Endangered Species Act.

 Since the 1500s, wolves were being hunted to the point of extinction worldwide. Considered a sport in Asia and Europe, people bred dogs specifically meant to hunt wolves. Called ‘Wolf Hounds’, evidence shows that the breed has been used for hunting since 600 AD. Asia has also used a large golden eagle subspecies to hunt with starting in the late 1100s. Wolf hunting soon came to the Americas when settlers took the tradition with them (Busch). By the 1750s, wolves were almost all gone from Europe and Asia (Wimmer).

Wolf hunting activities were encouraged from several things. One reason was because wolves hunted the game people wanted to hunt. This resulted on more wolf attacks on livestock, which made people want them gone even more. Another by product that sprouted from wolf hunting was stereotypes. People told folk tales such as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘The Three Little Pigs’, and ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’ (Wimmer). In Ancient Greece, Aesop’s Fables often had wolves in it, provoking many to imagine the wolf as a trickster. Other tales told of wolves being fostering and kind. One is ‘Romulus and Remus’, where twin boys were adopted by a mother wolf, with Romulus living on to found Rome. In 300 BC, Celtic Saints would worship wolves. Other stories also mentioned wolves, for example, in one story it was said that Charon, a ferryman taking people across the river Styx, had wolf ears. It was also said that Hecate wore three wolf heads (Busch). Throughout history, wolves have become symbolic as bad, terrifying, or something of awe.

 Nowadays people are studying and learning about wolf behaviors. The life of a wolf begins with a nine-week gestation period. Mother wolves usually have three to seven pups each litter, although this largely depends on the food supply. If food is scarce, she will birth less pups, and vice versa. Pups mature at the age of two, though few make it that old (Harris). Only 20-40% of wolf pups live to the age of ten months (Wimmer). When they are young, parents regurgitate food for pups, but there is a time when they must learn how to hunt for themselves (Mowat). Wolves hunt in small packs or sometimes alone during summer. Wolves have been recorded eating big game, like moose, to small rodents like mice. Other foods such as fruits, nuts, and grass also play a large roll in their diet (Busch).

Whenever wolves hunt ungulates, mammals with hooves, they hunt and feed on the sick. They find out which one is weaker by ‘testing’ it: running at the prey. If the prey is quick and healthy, the wolf gives up the chase and goes on to test more prey. Wolves keep the gene pool and prey strong. With one tenth of the actual hunts successful, wolves hunt up to ten hours a day (Wimmer). Contrary to the popular myth, wolves don’t hamstring prey when attacking. Most of their prey dies because of blood loss, shock, or their back being snapped because of a bite (Busch). When wolves eat, they eat in order of hierarchy. That means the top wolf, called the alpha, eats first, all the way down to the lowest ranking wolf (Wimmer). Wolves can eat up to 20 pounds of food in one sitting, hence the phrase, ‘hungry as a wolf’ (2).

When a wild animal is scared, they often bite back in defense. The same is true for humans. Because of the fear wolves caused, people fought back against them. Bounties had been put up for wolves. Greece has had bounties since 600 BC. Oregon began having wolf bounties in 1843. In 1914, the US paid $1 million for the rewards. Since then, they have been trapped, poisoned, and tortured. Sometimes people tied wolves down, only to watch their agonizing death, as they were slowly ripped apart by dogs. People purposely wired their mouths shut, to have them die of starvation. Humans have even dragged defenseless pups out of their den, just to beat them to death in front of their mother’s eyes (Busch). These injustices caused the wolf population to drastically decrease, in ways that were pure agony.

Human influence on wolves is not the only concern about their welfare. Disease, parasites, and injuries have caused many wolf deaths. They are susceptible to ailments such as “protozoa, round worms, tape worms, flat worms, mites, ticks, fleas, distemper, cataracts, mange, oral papillomatosis, tularemia, trichinosis, cancer, arthritis, ricket, lyme disease, pneumonia, encephalitis”, and many more (qtd. Busch). One of the more common illnesses is mange. Mange is when mites live on the wolf’s coat, with either the females laying eggs in the wolf’s skin, or mites living in their skin pores. Symptoms of mange include crusting, loss of fur, or skin lesions. Mange causes wolves to itch and scratch at their pelt, which may seem harmless at first. However, there have been cases where they’ve lost so much fur they freeze to death in winter. Distemper is a virus that harms a wolf’s skin, eye, brain, and intestines. Wolves get distemper from dogs. Symptoms include fevers, loss of appetite, diarrhea, dehydration, seizures, and finally death. Mother Nature also takes a toll on wolves, with some dyeing from avalanches, drowning, or falling off cliffs. It is also common for wolves to injure each other in packs, and if they get infected, it can lead to death. Big game such as elk have also hurt wolves when being hunted, but most of the time, they heal. Many problems with wolf populations have arisen from people, but there is also nature playing its part, too (Busch).

The wolf is an astonishing creature though blame for livestock loss has led to killing. When wolves have a shortage of prey, they attack livestock or scavenge through dumps. It also doesn’t help the wolves win a very good name. However, scavenging through dumpsters is overlooked. When wolves go through garbage, they can come into human contact, eat harmful objects, or cross breed with dogs. Cross breeding is a problem because it limits the real wolf population, and the cross breed may be vicious to humans (Harris). Sometimes the government pays for killed livestock due to wolves, with societies usually complaining less about wolves (Busch).

 Some people think that they are helping wolves by taking them as pets, and even if the intention is good, people criticize it. One reason is that the owner can’t give the wolf everything it needs. Wolves require lots of space, and sometimes people can’t provide the nutritional requirements. If the owner has only one wolf, it would be lonely as they are social animals. Scenario two is many wolves, but it would be harder to take proper care of them. Sometimes, wolf pets will try to ‘discipline’ other dogs, like in a wolf pack. This often results in injury to the dog. It is also very hard to train wolves or hybrids. Wolves and hybrids tend to ‘bite when scared’, which leads to injury.

 Wolves are wild animals, “you may feed a wolf as much as you like. He will always glance toward the forest,” and this Russian saying shows wolves it (qtd. Busch). This can lead to wolf attacks. In 1988, Florida, a woman had a hybrid pet in her back yard. It had seen a 4 year old boy playing in the neighbor’s yard. Thinking the child was prey; it jumped over the fence and killed him. Similar stories like this happen all over the US, and it still happens today. Currently, there are 200,000wolves or wolf hybrids in the US. What makes pet wolves worse is that when owners don’t want the pet anymore, they either release it to the wild, or sell them to a third rate zoo. Another thing is that people will specifically breed wolf and wolf hybrids as an ‘exotic’ pet. These animals are usually poorly treated, and unhappy from improper care and confinement. We should also look at how many millions of dogs are euthanized each year, compared to people paying lots of money for these wolf hybrids. In most states, governments regulate who owns wolves and hybrids. In Oregon, you must have a permit to own wolves. Owning hybrids is not as regulated as wolves, and the definition of hybrid is loosely defined (Busch).

On December 18, 1973, a law was passed that was to protect endangered species (Stanford). Because of animal populations decreasing, Congress decided to make The Endangered Species Act of 1973. This law would make agencies conserve endangered species, making it illegal to harm the creature in any way. Wolves were put on the endangered list, but since population seemed to increase very fast, they removed them from the list in certain areas of the US.

To get on the endangered list, a species must decline from habitat loss, ‘overutilization’, disease, “existing regulatory mechanisms”, or if individuals and nature is damaging them (Busch 39). People need to preserve species because of many reasons. Each species stabilizes the ecosystem in which they live, and it’s the ethical thing to do. They deserve to have a chance at life, and people shouldn’t chose whether or not the species should live. Humans have affected wild animals whether it was conscious or not. A direct example would be poaching animals for their ivory, pelts, or feathers. A more indirect way would be introducing a non-native species to the habitat. Due to the alarming decrease of the animal populace, humans must realize that it is our responsibility to be liable for creatures on this planet.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists guidelines about endangered animal welfare. They say wolves are important for being a big game predator and that wolves aren’t present in their historical range. When people hunt wolves, it is to be controlled with no damage to the environment. The IUCN has made it so you cannot put a building in areas with high wolf populations unless it is regulated and won’t hurt the animal. IUCN encourages scientists to study wolves in new areas, as it is essential that humans come to understand these beasts.

Individuals are raising wolf awareness by education, wolf watching trips, and wolf parks. Reintroducing wolves to the wild has been successful in raising wild populations, especially with the red wolf, which is extinct in the wild. Countries such as Italy, the United States, and Spain have also started paying compensation to livestock owners who lost animals from wolves. This helps since it makes humans more lenient to wolves (Harris). Wolf parks are places that educate people about wolves, have breeding programs, and conserve them. People come and see wolves in their habitat, which puts a new perspective to these social and caring creatures.

Wolves have been through tough times, and in doing so; people have taken action to protect them in many ways from many things. The ESA of 1973 has focused our attention to the problem, now it is up to future generations. Educating people about the situation of wolves, including their past, makes wolves more accepted. Breeding programs, reintroduction and legal protection has made the wolf comeback easier. The wolf has not fully recuperated, but their path is clear for recovery. Appearing in and out of our history, the majestic wolf has woven a tale none of us can forget.

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