

Of wolves, George Floyd, and the limits of human empathy

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Like many people throughout the world, I am deeply saddened by the murder of George Floyd and by the ignorance and callousness that led to his death. One upshot, however, is that Mr Floyd's death has resulted in a groundswell of collective outrage and empathy, which in turn has led to a commitment to be more humane and just in our treatment of others. This is the good news. We can rejoice that we are now on the verge of much needed and potentially seismic change. The bad news is that the benefits of this movement do not extend to other underserved, under-represented and voiceless communities that are no less deserving of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Many Americans are familiar with the predator extermination campaigns of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, but what people may not know is that those campaigns, and the fear and ignorance that inspired them, are very much alive and well in state legislatures and the agencies that do their bidding. The greatest offender is the US Department of Agriculture, whose Wildlife Services agents kill tens of thousands of carnivores each year – including coyotes, lions, bobcats, black bears and wolves – under the pretext that they pose a significant threat to livestock, deer, and elk (Predator Defense, 2020).

As a rule, predators rarely prey on livestock. Weather, respiratory disease, and plant poisoning are by far the greatest cause of livestock mortality. In fact, more cows are stolen by rustlers and killed by domestic dogs than are killed by either wolves or bears (WildEarth Guardians, 2020). And yet state legislators and the agricultural and hunting communities they represent continue to peddle a

grossly uninformed anti-predator narrative. Although their complaints may differ in their particulars, they all share the goal of sterilizing public lands by eliminating these vitally important animals, often using methods – guns, traps, snares, poison, snowmobiles – whose brutality rivals the recent and horrifying treatment of Mr Floyd.

If the comparison offends, I would ask readers to reflect on the limits of their own empathy and to consider why it ends with humans rather than beginning with them. The connection between our mistreatment of other humans and the natural world is well-established and probably derives from our tribal-animal nature. Fortunately, and as many of us demonstrate each day through our care of each other and of the non-human world, we can choose which aspects of our nature to live by. Unfortunately, when it comes to predators, too many of us choose the path of least resistance: Having decided that our satieties and desires are more important than other animals' lives, we destroy rather than coexist.

A prime example of this failure (what I call 'low road' human-wildlife interaction) is Utah's recent, reactionary and needless plan to trap and kill a lone wolf – one of only a handful that has wandered into Utah over the last 80 years – blamed for the death of a calf in the north-eastern part of the state. As design would have it, wolves entering that part of the state do not enjoy the protections of the Endangered Species Act. Recognizing that the area is a natural corridor for wolves travelling out of Idaho or Wyoming, the Utah legislature, in a moment of surprising clarity but misguided insight, got the jump on wolves and wildlife advocates by turning the area it into a kill zone for any wolf unlucky enough to wander into it.

But this geographical damning of the wolf is just the most obvious way that Utah and other western states are failing in their responsibility to honour the values of its people, not just the values of ranchers and hunters. When the citizens of Colorado were polled last year, 84% indicated their support for the reintroduction of wolves (Blevins, 2020). Similarly, the majority of both rural and urban Utahans polled a few years ago welcome the canid's return (Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Utah Wolf Working Group, 2005). Despite the public's support, state officials show no sign of slowing their brazen and shameful assault on wolves and other carnivores.

Although we know very little about the circumstances surrounding the calf's death, articles that have been published on the subject include enough information to show the state's wanton bias against wolves. A *KSL.com* article quoted Leann Hunting, Utah director of animal industry for the Department of Agriculture and Food, as saying that "the trapper estimated the attack had happened about four days before the animal was discovered" (Williams, 2020). Assuming the trapper's estimate is correct, all kinds of animals could have fed on the calf carcass over the course of four days, which makes predator confirmation difficult at best and guesswork at worst. In light of this uncertainty and numerous other factors, including that ranchers will be compensated for losses, state trappers should stand down and let wolves continue their already imperilled journey.

Instead of showing some restraint, Utah seems determined to pursue this wolf with an almost religious sense of mission. A couple of sentences later, Ms Hunting stated:

It is our job then to track the wolf or trap it and take care of the problem so it doesn't continue to deplete livestock and our wildlife populations [...] It's also important to have it done in a timely manner because these predators move so quickly.

In addition to making the absurd claim that a single wolf poses a significant threat

to livestock or wildlife, Ms Hunting's comments reveal a highly regrettable double standard as well as ignorance of basic investigative protocols: When determining what role, if any, a wolf might have played in the demise of the calf, Ms Hunting implies that time does not matter. But when it comes to trapping and killing the wolf, by God, time assumes great urgency. Compare this shoddy detective work with the high level of care that the Utah Department of Wildlife Resources gives to elk poaching and the state's bias becomes even clearer.

What should alarm us more than anything, however, is the open contempt that state and federal agencies throughout the American West have for these amazing, complex and important animals, as well as for the ecosystems they help to create. Another quotation from Ms Hunting, in an article in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, is illustrative (Podmore, 2020):

If we didn't eradicate the predators [...] if we didn't do what we can to level out the playing field, it would completely dissolve our wildlife and livestock population.

First, if all it takes is one wolf to perturb an industry with several hundred thousand livestock animals on its ledger, maybe livestock producers should consider another line of work. No, the playing field isn't level... for the wolf, and it hasn't been for centuries. Ms Hunting's use of the word "eradicate" should also give us pause. The US has a long and brutal history of eradication, and not just of wolves, but of other people who got in the way of our so-called destiny. And we are still dealing with the consequences of that history.

Perhaps one day not too long from now our concept of justice will include other animals that also deserve to live their lives free from persecution. But given everything it has taken just to get people to value the lives of other *people*, without another groundswell of empathy, I have little hope that wolves and other imperilled carnivores will survive the century. ■

For references, see right-hand column

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