

ALBERTANS' CRY SAVES WOLVES

By Chris Wearmouth, AWA Conservation Specialist

People of Alberta, the wolves of Clearwater County must be howling their gratitude to you! In October, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) halted plans to sterilize and slaughter the county's wolves in an experiment that was to have been carried out with the University of Alberta.

While researchers will continue to study the wolves using radio collars, the project's experimental phase, which was to begin this winter, stirred up such a cry from Albertans across the province that the government called together an advisory panel of seven wolf experts to review the project. Upon the panel's recommendation, the government denied the University of Alberta a research permit to kill or sterilize the wolves.

The research summary provided by the university and SRD states that low numbers of ungulates (especially elk) in the area prompted the researchers to develop the project. During the experimental phase, all members of the packs other than the alpha pair were to be killed. The alpha pair was to be sterilized and released in hopes that they would maintain their territory without repopulating it, thus keeping predation on ungulates low. But Albertans responded to the plan in spring 2008 through editorials, letters to editors, and even Internet discussions. "The plan is an abuse of wildlife," wrote Rick Zemanek, editor for the *Red Deer Advocate*. "Alberta government officials should condemn it, not endorse it."

Paul Paquet, an internationally recognized wolf expert who sat on the government's advisory panel, told reporter Cathy Ellis in March that the project was "destructive and morally reprehensible.... This type of research does not belong in a university ecology and biology department. This is 1950s wolf management that has been updated to include sterilization."

The outcry from citizens was prompted in part by the suggestion that the wolf project was being carried out in order to increase elk populations for those who hunt in the area. "I cannot



"Timberwolves at Deer Kill, Wapiti River" 8x10 inches, alkyd ©R. GUEST

imagine the mentality of allowing the natural predator population to be culled in order to leave more prey for human so-called 'hunters' to kill," wrote David Mathias in his letter to the *Red Deer Advocate*.

Government officials have since said the experiment was not about increasing elk numbers for hunters, although there still seems to be some confusion around the project's exact purpose. One SRD spokesperson told media that they still want to boost elk numbers in the Clearwater area, while another said the project was not aimed specifically at increasing elk numbers but at limiting the need for "wolf control," presumably a euphemism for "wolf killing."

To confound the issue further, it is possible that the objective elk numbers sought by managers are not historically accurate but a reflection of opening up the landscape by industry. Jim Pissot, Canada field representative for Defenders of Wildlife, told the *Rocky Mountain Outlook* that due to increased clearcutting during the 1970s, which produced exceptional habitat, elk numbers swelled. "The area probably supports all the elk it can right now if you look at the long-term

trends," Pissot said.

Another question remains: if elk numbers are lower than previous levels, could it not be a response to human disturbances and loss of habitat rather than "over" predation by wolves? That idea is one that will be explored in the absence of the wolf-eradication experiment. SRD's Darcy Whiteside told the *Rocky Mountain Outlook* that SRD will be considering access management, habitat enhancement, and decreases in elk harvest limits to boost ungulate numbers.

But wolves may not be out of the metaphorical woods yet. Whiteside's comments to the media had some ominous overtones. He spoke of promoting wolf hunting and of a past compensation program to hunters for killing the large canines: "We aren't shooting wolves now, but there's always that option available."

The need for vigilance remains, but for now, the wolves of Clearwater County have you, the people of Alberta, to thank for the reprieve. Let us hope that instead of shooting one species to increase another, we can manage our own impact so that wolves, elk, and humans can share Alberta's wild landscapes. 🐾