Senseless slaughter of wolves

Alberta has a policy of killing wolves to protect caribou. It's not working

By Ed Struzik, edmontonjournal.com June 11, 2011

A Gray wolf is shown in an undated photo provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Photograph by: Supplied, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — In the fall of 2008, University of Alberta scientist Evelyn Merrill came up with a plan to reduce the number of wolves in the Rocky Mountain House area by sterilizing selected members of four packs.

Part of the goal was to find a more humane way of protecting elk, woodland caribou, and other animals that are being hard hit by predators in the heavily industrialized regions of the boreal forest. Biologists currently use strychnine to control wolves and/or shoot them from helicopters.

Merrill's plan didn't stand a chance when it was made public.

Animal rights activists and some conservation groups depicted the sterilization of alpha males and females as cruel and inhumane. Parks Canada wanted nothing to do with an experiment next door to Jasper that might jeopardize its efforts to balance caribou, elk and wolf numbers that continue to be out of sync.

When scientists like Paul Paquet added their names to the growing chorus of critics, it was over.

“This type of research does not belong in a university ecology and biology department,” said Paquet, who has a distinguished career studying wolves, grizzly bears and other predators in North America.

“This is 1950s wolf management that has been updated with sterilization.”

Ted Morton, then minister of Alberta Sustainable Resources, pulled the plug on the plan, and no more was said about it in public.

Critics may have won that battle to save wolves, but they lost the war.

Over the past five years, the government of Alberta has spent more than $1 million poisoning wolves with strychnine and shooting them from the air.

In all, more than 500 wolves in the Little Smoky River region have been killed.

The killing is not going to end soon. If some wildlife managers get their way, the predator-control program could be expanded to include several other areas of the province where caribou are in trouble.

“It’s a story that’s not likely going to go away so long as there are caribou on the landscape that we want to conserve,” says Stan Boutin, a University of Alberta scientist who has spent more than 20 years trying to prevent the species from going extinct in this province. “Wolf control can be an effective way of reducing kills. But the province is kidding itself if it thinks that wolf control alone is the answer. It’s not.”

Wolves have long been used as scapegoats for wildlife management problems such as the one that the Alberta government is facing with caribou.

Parks Canada systematically targeted wolves for nearly five decades in the Rocky Mountain parks. So did the Canadian Wildlife Service when it was responsible for managing caribou in the Canadian North.

Initially, bounties were used to encourage people to kill wolves. Then it was poison and leghold traps. In extreme cases, some jurisdictions sent men out to dig out dens and strangle the pups that were in them.

Sometimes, these predator-control programs worked too well, as in Banff, where wolves were extirpated from the national park 35 years ago. (They have since come back). Most times, though, it failed because biologists and the trappers who helped shoot and poison the animals underestimated just how quickly a wolf population can rebound so long as there is prey for them to exploit.

The only difference between now and then is that scientists today think they have a better handle on how to make wolf control programs work. Kill at least 60 per cent — 80 per cent is preferable — of the animals in an area, according to the formula that most predator-control experts operate

on, and you begin to see some results after several years, so long as there is suitable habitat in which the prey species can recover.

The problem now, however, is that people care a lot more about wolves than they did 30 years ago. In movies such Never Cry Wolf, in books like Ian McAllister's, The Last Wild Wolves and in artistic depictions such as Robert Bateman's sympathetic Silent Witness, the myth of the big bad wolf that devours everything whether it's hungry or not has been exposed for the fraud that it is.

Or so the story goes.

Many biologists who watched the controversy over Merrill's experiment unfold were left wondering how a plan to sterilize wolves would result in a bigger backlash from the public than a program that poisons wolves and shoots them from the air.

Veteran wolf biologist Lu Carbyn has written and edited several books on wolves. He suspects that this sympathy for wolves, which reached its peak in the 1980s when public outrage shut down wolf-control programs in British Columbia and the Yukon, may be waning.

"More and more, it seems, people are drifting away from the natural world," he says. "Part of it is due to urbanization. Part of it may be due to the fact that the new generation has found other ways of entertaining themselves. But I think that the connection we have to the natural world is weakening."

One thing that is certain is there is nothing simple in the world of wildlife management, especially when it comes to wolves.

Although more research has been done on wolves than on any other predator in North America, the animal is still not an easy study.

Proponents of the species, for example, like to say that wolves have never attacked humans. They rarely do.

But every once in a while, it happens. In 2005, a 22-year-old man went out for a walk at a mining camp in northern Saskatchewan and didn't come back. A coroner's jury concluded that a pack of wolves was responsible.

Last year, the mutilated body of 32-year-old teacher in Alaska was found in the snow with wolf tracks all around it.

As much as was made of these attacks in newspapers, television and radio, it is does not reflect a scary trend, as some people have suggested. Only nine people have been killed by wolves in North America in the past 110 years. Wolves that were kept as pets were responsible for three of those deaths. Another occurred in a fenced game sanctuary.

Contrary to what most people think, wolves do not necessarily favour wilderness that is devoid of human activity.

In Jasper National Park, for example, where it is illegal to kill a wolf or drive too fast along areas where the predators are known to cross the highway, the population is relatively small. No more than eight packs move in and out of the park.

Next door in the Little Smoky region, where wolves are systematically trapped, poisoned and shot from the air in heavily exploited oil and gas and forestry regions, wolf numbers are exploding.

Strange as that might seem, there is a logical explanation.

In the unprotected areas of Alberta, the old-growth forest that used to support moderate numbers of wolves and caribou are increasingly being carved up by roads, well sites, clear-cuts and seismic lines that favour moose, elk and especially deer.

As the number of these prey species grow, so do the number of wolves. More often than not, caribou are nothing more than collateral damage in the packs' hunt for food.

Stan Boutin believes that the uproar over Merrill's plan to sterilize wolves was misguided, if the goal of conservationists and animal rights activists is to prevent caribou from going extinct in Alberta, as they did in Banff National Park just two years ago.

"Unappetizing as it is killing wolves in this way, people have to accept the fact that we're going to have to continue with some form of predator control for the next five, seven, even 10 years or more, if we want to have caribou in the future," he says.

Necessary as that may be, Boutin is adamant that wolf control alone is not going to be the salvation of caribou. Like the boreal forest ecologists who contributed to the West Central Alberta Caribou Landscape Plan, he believes that cutlines, well sites and roads that favour wolves need to be reforested. Habitat also has to be set aside and protected from development.

"This approach is the only way we're going to save caribou," he says. "The people who are controlling wolves in the Little Smoky have already discovered that, no matter how many wolves they kill, they keep coming back. The population in and around that area is very robust. They're spending an awful lot of money killing a lot of wolves in order to keep a handful of caribou calves alive. Sooner than later, this strategy is going to fail them."

The problem in doing what Boutin recommends is money. At last count there were 34,773 wells, 66,489 kilometres of seismic lines, 11,591 km of pipelines and 12,283 km of roads associated with resource development in caribou country. That doesn't include the forests that have been cut down.

In crunching the numbers to see how much it would cost to restore and protect all caribou ranges, Boutin, along with biologist Richard Schneider, natural resources economists Vic Adamowicz and Grant Hauer estimated it to be in the range of $100 billion in lost oilsands revenues.

But these numbers are highly skewed by the four herds in the oilsands region, where resource values are extremely high. The researchers found that by triaging or selecting ranges in lower-cost regions of the province, it would be possible to protect 50 per cent of caribou habitat while giving up less than one per cent of potential resource revenues.

Boutin doesn't think this is too high a price to pay, considering all the revenue that industry and the Alberta government will be collecting from oil, gas and forestry activities over the next 50 years.

But he also considers himself a realist. As much as the province has been pushed and prodded to do something about caribou over the past 20 years, it has done very little other than killing wolves.

"The problem is a big one," says Boutin. "And so far, we've got no indication that the province is going to act on any of the recommendations that have been made. For now, it seems they are content with the idea of using wolf control as a means of protecting what few caribou we have left."

Hopeless as the situation seems to be, there is some acknowledgment within energy and forestry industry circles that this cannot go on forever. Alberta has already suffered several black eyes over its management of oil and gas and forestry activities in wilderness areas. No one relishes dealing with the fallout that will come if caribou are allowed to go extinct.

But that's going to happen if University of Alberta scientist David Schindler is right in his assessment of the province's land-use plans, especially for the Lower Athabasca River. Earlier this month, he noted there was nothing in that plan that looks at conserving endangered species, such as caribou.

One idea being discussed involves launching an intensive recovery program in those areas where there is not a great deal of economic activity.

There is also talk — and it is just talk at this point — about doing something big, bold and experimental, such as building a fence around an area where it would be extremely expensive to do all that is necessary to protect caribou.

This would be a big fence. It would be large enough, according to those who have talked about it, to contain an area the size of 30 townships.

Building it wouldn't mean that efforts to protect caribou in other parts of the province would be abandoned. Those efforts would continue.

“It’s an idea that may be worth looking at,” says Carbyn. “There would, of course, be issues such as what to do with all the moose, deer and elk populations that will increase dramatically in such an enclosure without wolves and bears to get them. But it may be a more humane way of keeping wolves from preying on what few caribou there are now.”

The idea of creating a huge refuge for a single species is nothing new for Alberta.

In 1906, five men from the Fort Saskatchewan area proposed to preserve one of the last elk populations in Western Canada by building a fence around a wilderness area east of Edmonton near Beaverhill Lake. With the support of Frank Oliver, the powerful Liberal cabinet minister, Elk Island was established as a game preserve before it officially became a national park in 1930. Since then, the fenced-in area has been used to reintroduce elk and wood bison to areas where they were either extirpated or overharvested.

In 1907, the federal government set aside 415 square kilometres of land in the Wainwright area of Alberta and stocked it with several hundred bison it had shipped from Montana. Those animals were eventually sent to Wood Buffalo National Park on the Alberta/Northwest Territories border.

Eight years later, Canada became the first country in the world to create a fenced-in preserve for antelope in southern Alberta. The 11-square-kilometre enclosure, which became Nemiskam Antelope National Park, was seen as such a bold conservation measure that noted American scientist William T. Hornaday sent J.B. Harkin, the future head of what is now Parks Canada, a letter of congratulations.

Stan Boutin is intrigued by the possibility of a fenced-in preserve for caribou so long as it isn’t used as an excuse to abandon other conservation strategies.

“Even if it didn’t work and we discovered that other factors such as climate change were responsible for the decline of caribou, we could learn a lot,” he says. “If it did work, we could in time release some of those animals back in the wild to restock other populations.”

Biologist Richard Schneider thinks the fence is a red herring.

“Just do the math,” he says. “Thirty townships. Given a typical area per township of 100 square kilometres, this amounts to about 3,000 square kilometres. Now, the total area of caribou range is 147,400 square kilometres, so this amounts to only two per cent of caribou range inside the fence. I just can’t get excited about that.

“What I can get excited about is protecting 50 per cent of caribou range at a cost of less than one per cent of future resource revenues. This is what we found in our latest study. This is the direction I believe we need to go if we are serious about maintaining caribou in Alberta for the long term.”

University of Alberta scientist Mark Boyce has been involved in a number of studies on the role wolves play in ungulate and livestock predation. Being a hunter and someone who accepts the need for predator control in some cases, he sees the issues from many different points of view.

But like Boutin, Schneider and others, Boyce thinks the time has come for the province to stop focusing on killing wolves in order to save caribou.

“I’ve often said that the danger of entering a wolf-cull program is that the minute you stop, the wolf population will rebound. This is the sort of thing that you have to keep up year after year.

“I’m not in favour of what they’re doing in the Little Smoky because I don’t believe it is a long-term solution. I think we have to stop focusing on killing wolves as the solution to a bigger wildlife conservation problem.”

estruzik@edmontonjournal.com