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“The Wolf Wars”: Embodiment and Symbolism in North American Wildlife Conservation

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Abstract:

Wolves (*Canis lupus*) have long been held as a symbol of the North American wilderness and figure prominently in United States frontier mythology. Currently the legal status of wolves is being hotly contested following their near extermination and then successful reintroduction in the North Rocky Mountain region. The opposing positions on the status of wolves very neatly conform to political party lines, with Democratic Party members supporting the protection of wolves and Republican Party members opposing it. Wolves are recognized on both sides as symbols: for Democrats, the wolf is a positive symbol representing not only environmental wholeness but also the power of positive social programs legislatively; for Republicans, the wolf is negative, representing the destructive influence of outside forces, especially that of the federal government. Because the protection of wolves does in fact require the implementation of legislature, these associations are not without merit. This paper will review existing literature on this subject, extending back to the enactment of the Endangered Species Act in the 1970s', and will contribute new research on the recent developments, including the "delisting" of wolves from the Endangered Species List in August of this year, in order to elucidate the idea that a truly viable plan for animal conservation must be socially sustainable.

Keywords: wolf, canis lupus, conservation, conflict, symbolism, republican, democrat

“Wolf Wars”¹: Embodiment and Symbolism in North American Wildlife Conservation

Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) have always occupied an important role in the lives of Americans. In 1630 the first wildlife legislation in the American colonies concerned a bounty placed on wolves (Kellert et. al, 1978). Since the colonization of North America, wolves have been and continue to be instrumental to the economic, political and social development of the United States.

While much of the previous Euro-American² interaction with wolves has involved hunting, recently wolves have become the subject of wildlife conservation efforts. Currently the legal status of gray wolves³ is being hotly contested following the near extermination and then successful reintroduction of wolves in several key areas of the western United States. While previous scholarship has most often positioned the debate over wolves as between agriculturalists/hunters and environmentalists (Clarke; Kellert et. al; Musiani et al; Nie;) opposing positions on the status of wolves very neatly conform to political party lines, with Democratic Party members supporting the protection of wolves and Republican Party members opposing it.

Wolves figure prominently in United States frontier mythology and have long been a symbol of the North American wilderness. Their symbolic value continues to be important in the current conservation debates; wolves are recognized on both sides as symbols. For Democrats, the wolf is a positive symbol representing not only environmental wholeness but also the power of positive social programs legislatively; for Republicans, the wolf is negative, representing the destructive influence of invasive domestic forces, especially that of the federal government. The symbolic nature of wolves has been extensively investigated, especially as it relates to negative perceptions of wolves and the resistance to their conservation (for example: Clarke; Hampton; Kellert et al; Zmyj). Conservation models that reflect this include attempts to educate the public on wolves in order to counteract negative perceptions (Kellert et al; Musiani et al). This fails to recognize the tangible realities wolves play on the lives of those opposed to their reintroduction and conforms problematically to the Western paradigm of treating “nature” and “culture” as separate entities.

¹ The title of this paper is taken from the 2010 National Geographic cover story “Wolf Wars”(Chadwick)

² Wolves have undoubtedly also played an important role in the lives of First Nations people but this paper will be focusing primarily on Euro-American perspectives, which have in recent years merged with First Nations as part of the larger American identity.

³ For the purposes of this paper, sources will primarily relate to the Northern Rocky Mountain Grey wolf reintroduction, but the overall ideas of this paper are relevant to issues surrounding all wolf conservation

This paper proposes to look at the important existing scholarship on wolf conservation in the United States and to build on it both chronologically and conceptually. The legal status of wolves in the United States is constantly changing, with legislation being enacted as recently as August 31st 2012. In addition, applications of political and economic theory to the cultural and biological scholarship on wolves can perhaps present new methods for approaching wolf conservation that reflect a larger need to integrate these ideas. Wolves are a part of the social, economic, and political systems in the United States, not just as symbols but as the embodiment of value and power. By recognizing wolves as such, conservationists can create more sustainable models of wolf conservation. In addition, addressing nature and culture as inextricably linked may provide an ontological shift that benefits wildlife conservation as a whole.

Before discussing the current state of wolf conservation, it is important to understand how wolves have become a part of social, economic and political landscapes of the United States.

One question several writers pose in relation to wolf conservation is why the conservation of wolves is so vehemently opposed, especially when compared to the less controversial conservation of other large predators like bears and mountain lions (Kellert et al; Nie; Zmyj). Some conclude that the prominent and villainous role wolves have occupied in Western folklore (such as Grimm's fairytales and Aesop's fables) has led to their continued marginalization (Fogelman; Hampton; Zmyj). While this has certainly contributed to negative perception of wolves, there is more to this lineage than the folk-belief that 'wolves are bad.'

Without going into an overly detailed analysis, wolves have consistently been used as a metaphor for *internal* threats. While other predators may have also had antagonistic roles in folklore, the wolf often uses trickery or deceit in order to impersonate a member of the group and attack from within (ie. in "Little Red Riding Hood" or "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing"). Similarly, the archetype of the werewolf represents an internal corruption where the human body is literally infected with inhumanity. The fact that the animal chosen most often for this amalgamation is a wolf (as opposed to a were-bear) enforces the association of wolves with internal threats. Furthermore, some of the negative qualities attributed to wolves in Western folklore include moral depravity and gluttony⁴, which are then applied metaphorically through folklore to members of society whose actions directly damage the society as a whole.

The representation of wolves as an internal threat positions the wolf as a combatant or opponent, distinguishing the wolf as especially virulent. This is reflected in much of the early American frontier writing on wolves, which historically described them as "enemies of civilization" (as cited in Hampton 2).

These folkloric associations predisposed wolves to be appropriated from folklore into other human systems like economics and politics. As previously mentioned, wolf bounties were a part of early

⁴ Consider the fact the Oxford English Dictionary entry on wolves states that wolves are known for "fierceness and rapacity" and metaphorically used to represent as "a destructive or devouring agency, esp. [sic] hunger or famine."

colonial culture in the United States (Kellert et al 1978). The eradication of wolves corresponds strongly with expansion, and occurred most intensely during the westward expansion (Zmyj 16-18). As many writers on wolf conservation point out, the wolf became a “scapegoat” for the larger problems faced by frontiersmen (Nie 2). Stephen Kellert, an influential author on wolf conservation, too mentions “historic wolf killing in both Canada and the United States often seemed to extend beyond any reasonable rationale suggesting wolf elimination may not have served pragmatic ends alone” (Kellert et al 1979). Kellert and other conservationists have used this to advocate for education as an important tool for conservation, but the pragmatic issues of early wolf eradication must also be considered if one hopes to change these practices.

The wholesale destruction of any species will drastically alter an ecosystem. In Yellowstone National Park, the elimination of wolves has created a cascading effect, allowing ungulate populations to grow (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service “Northern Rock Mountain Recovery Plan”). Unregulated ungulates have been able to decimate tree saplings, causing widespread deforestation (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service “Gray Wolf Biology Questions and Answers”). For early frontier settlers, killing wolves (and the associated ecosystem destruction) would have proven beneficial, as many had a vested interest in using land for agriculture. Wolves (as opposed to any other species) were chosen because of their symbolic meaning, but their elimination also served pragmatic purposes. Wolves gained a commodity value in their attachment (or as the case may be, detachment) to the land, a resource early settlers and frontiersmen not only wanted, but needed to modify in order to exploit its economic value.

Settlers also eradicated wolves because they believed that wolves killed livestock. While current figures demonstrate wolves do not represent a significant number of livestock losses (Musiani et al 56-7), they do pose some. Agriculture is an industry with a high amount of instability because it is contingent on uncontrollable factors like disease and weather. Any advantage early agriculturalists could obtain, including the wholesale destruction of wolves, improved their chances of success, however marginally.

As Peter Zmyj has also very insightfully pointed out, the creation of the bounty system, which existed from 1630 until the early 20th century in various states, indicates wolves alone did not represent enough of a threat for people to hunt independently (Zmyj 15-6). Government incentives allowed for the widespread destruction of wolves, which created a slightly more advantageous environment for agriculture and encouraged expansion and settlement, in which the government has a vested interest. Therefore the destruction of wolves came with a tangible benefit of cash incentives. Both macro and micro-economically, the destruction of wolves generated economic gains.

While the negative economic value of wolves demonstrates how their destruction may have been pragmatic in a very tangible way, wolves also played an important role in forming social groups. Often during the establishment of colonial American communities, wolves became a common hunted enemy for the group to collaborate against (Fogelamn 67). Hunting, in Western culture, has often had a significant role in the formation of communities and in the communication of social roles.⁵

4 For a more in depth discussion of this in Imperial England, see John M. MacKenzie’s *Empire of Nature* among numerous others.

Historically, in Europe, hunting was an activity confined to the aristocracy (Herman 3-4). Under the feudal system, the exchange of labor for access to land also included the belief that the landholder was obligated to protect those workers and their products from threats both militaristically and through the elimination of destructive “vermin” (Mackenzie 15). Wolf hunting in particular was very important in England and France for establishing successful and productive fiefs (Mackenzie 15-6). Hunting became abstracted overtime due to its decreased importance agriculturally and the ability to hunt instead became a signifier of economic and political power (Herman 24-6). In this sense, hunting gained cultural capital that superseded the immediate ramifications of hunting itself.

In the United States, hunting was considered significantly more democratic. During the colonial period, hunting was restricted not to aristocrats, but to land owners (Herman 24). Post-American Revolution, hunting laws became increasingly more lax, culminating during the western expansion (Herman 24). Daniel Justin Herman has pointed out that hunting was integral to the formation of an American identity rooted in egalitarianism (Herman 24). However, despite the legal democratization of hunting in the United States, the values of “sportsmanship” often represented an ethical superiority and “sportsmen” were typically members of the upper class (Herman 27-30).

Despite this, the government-initiated bounties represent the way in which wolf hunting further formed group identity. Theoretically, in a Republican Democracy, the actions of government represent the interests of the people, or at least the majority of people. The economic benefits of expansion, including the appropriation of lands for agricultural use, had direct benefits for those landholders and for a government who received tax benefits from those landholders. By initiating bounties, the government made problems of agriculturalists the problems of everyone. In order to do this, the vilification of wolves was necessary. Because wolves became counter-group or counter-civilization (something that was possible because of their earlier symbolic lineages as a domestic threat), their presence was also integral into the forming of identity along the paradigm of self-other. This is furthermore enforced by the association of wolves with Native Americans in early frontier writing (Hampton 11). In fact as one member of the Nez Perce tribe has pointed out, “to get access to the land you tame the land by, one, removing the inhabitants that have access to the land, you tame the land, and, two, by getting rid of the predators” (as cited in Clarke 117). In addition, these kinds of dualities position frontiersmen and other settlers as members of civilization, defined as oppositional to wilderness.

The bounty system was widely abandoned at the beginning of the 20th century and replaced by government-employed hunters (Zmyj 20-3). During the late 19th and early 20th century new policies of game management were enacted which represented a shift in attitudes towards wildlife in general, which included intervention from both federal and state agencies (Zmyj 21). Similarly, the “humane movement” gained more widespread interest following the Civil War, including the founding the American Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Pacelle 44-5). In 1973, the Endangered Species Act was passed and included several subspecies of the gray wolf (U.S. Fish and Wildlife “Timeline”). In 1978, the gray wolf and all subspecies were listed on the Endangered Species List (U.S. Fish and Wildlife “Timeline”). In several regions, most notable the Northern Rocky Mountain

Region plans for wolf reintroduction were created and implemented. By the 1990s', a significant number of pro-wildlife legislation had been passed (Pacelle 47). In addition, sociological studies have revealed that American attitudes towards wolves are positive, with 64% of eastern residents and 57% of western residents support wolf reintroduction (Williams et al 6).

While the changes in policies and opinions towards wolves seem to be a reversal, they are in fact a shift that contains many of the important elements of earlier American-wolf interactions. Wolf conservation most often represents the legal obligation to not shoot wolves, an example of Isaiah Berlin's concept of negative liberty. Borrowing Elsie Cloete's model of applying Berlin's two concepts of liberty⁶ to wildlife conservation (in Cloete's case, this was applied to the conservation of African Elephants) (Cloete), wolf conservation seeks to legally oblige Americans not to kill wolves. Conversely, hunting is an example of positive liberty – Americans have the right *to* shoot wolves. In the formation of an early American identity, this was very important in establishing Americanism as distinct from European culture where hunting was a negative liberty – you may not kill game (unless you are an aristocrat). Furthermore, in the creation of a unique American hunting tradition, rugged independence and self-reliance were highly valued (Herman 27-30).

This directly feeds into contemporary American politics. When I assert that pro- and anti- wolf conservation sentiments conform to Republican and Democratic party ideologies, it is not a simplification that Republicans are “Wise Use”⁷ advocates and Democrats are environmentalists. In fact, varying permutations of conservationist mentalities (especially “stewardship” and models of wildlife management) as well as wise use mentalities exist on both and there are many different variations of what it means to be an environmentalist. The overlap I see is between political and economic mentalities, which then relate to social mentalities. Democrat and Republican are more helpful distinctions (than environmentalists and wise use advocates) because they uniquely encompass correlating sets of political, economic and social beliefs⁸, which also make up the varying elements of the wolf conservation controversy. This does not mean that positions on wolves (or any other issue) are uniform across both parties but that the “official” (as communicated through their party platforms) stances of both parties conform to the most outspoken and prevalent positions on wolf conservation.

“Wise use” can be conflated with the views of the Republican Party because both strongly advocate for reduced federal intervention and the privatization of federally owned land (Nie 4; GOP “America's Natural Resources”). In their official stances on conservation and the environment, the Republican

⁶ Berlin's two concepts of liberty are positive liberty, “the freedom to” act, and negative liberty, “the freedom from interference” [cite]

⁷ Wise Use is a loosely organized social movement, named for a conference, which is “a diverse assemblage of developers, miners, loggers, ranchers, and farmers” who believe “nature was meant to be consumed” and are often positioned as anti-environmentalist (cited in Clarke 123). While Wise Use does not explicitly include hunters, I believe there is a shared view of nature as an economic resource for human use, and will use the term for simplification to refer to the diverse ideologies opposed to wolf conservation.

⁸ Social beliefs being liberalism and conservatism, respectively.

Party states “public access to public lands for recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, and recreational shooting should be permitted on all appropriate federal lands” and “Congress should reconsider whether parts of the federal government’s enormous landholdings and control of water in the West could be better used for ranching, mining, or forestry through private ownership” (GOP “America’s Natural Resources”).

Wolf conservation and most other forms of wildlife conservation usually address two main concerns: to protect the at-risk species habitat and to make it illegal to kill, intentionally or unintentionally, the at-risk species. In the preface of the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, published in 1987 by the Department of Fish and Wildlife, it states:

As enacted by Congress, the purposes of the Endangered Species Act are to provide a program for the conservation of such endangered and threatened species as well as means whereby the ecosystems upon which such species depend may be conserved. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife “Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan” 3)

In addition the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife website states the Endangered Species Act (1973)⁹ :

authorizes the determination and listing of species as endangered and threatened;

prohibits unauthorized taking, possession, sale, and transport of endangered species;

provides authority to acquire land for the conservation of listed species, using land and water conservation funds

(U.S. Fish and Wildlife “Digest of Federal Resource Laws”)

One of the main obstacles to the conservation of wolves has been previously identified as the fact the wolves are seen in the wise use movement as “a ruse and political ploy for more regulatory federal lands management, therefore posing a serious threat to rural communities, extractive industries and the sanctity of private property and individual freedom” (Nie 4). Wolf conservation requires implementation of legislation that creates negative liberty and in fact does threaten the “sanctity of private property and individual freedom.” In this sense, those opposed to wolf reintroduction (represented generally by wise use) conform to Republican political ideologies, which state that government should not interfere with the right of the individual. Republican ideology states “for without property rights, individual rights are diminished” and staunchly opposes “the taking of

⁸ It is important to note President Richard Nixon, a Republican, signed this act into law.

property by environmental regulations that destroy its value” (GOP “Our Party”). The wolf then does not merely symbolize a threat to these rights and values - it embodies them.

The Republican Party’s website includes this statement: “We oppose interventionist policies that put the federal government in control of industry and allow it to pick winners and losers in the marketplace” in reference to Republican views of the economy (GOP “Our Party”). Wolf conservation does just that; by restricting land use for wildlife sanctuaries and promoting green industries (such as eco-tourism) [cite] over industries that have a negative impact on the viability of wolves (such as logging or ranching) the federal government, through the Endangered Species Act, is intervening in the market and picking “winners and losers.”

Republican economic ideologies (as stated in their 2012 Party Platform) that promote individualism also extend to their stances on a variety of subjects, many of which are oriented around ideas of “self-determination,” “self-governance,” “self-defense,” and “self-sufficiency” (GOP “2012 Republican Platform”) This can logically be extended to their stance on conservation, which promotes the rights of individuals (both citizens and industry) to determine their role in conservation without implementing policies that are intended to benefit the group at the expense of individual liberties. Once again, Berlin’s notion of negative and positive liberty is important. Conservation policies, as they are currently constructed under the Endangered Species Act, represent negative freedom, in which “B is obliged *not* to act so that A may realize his or her rights”[emphasis from original] (Cloete 269). In this case, B is Wise Use advocates/interests and hunters who are being obliged not to exercise their rights to wise use so that conservationists may realize the right to preserve species, or possibly (in a term I do not think they would oppose) their right to survival.

Conservationist views can be seen as equally prevalent in the Democratic Party Platform as Wise Use views are in the Republican Party Platform. Just like Republican notions of individualism are communicated through their continual use of “self,” Democratic devotion to group interests are communicated through their repeated use of words like “together,” and “everyone” as well as employing “us” and “we” in reference to “the American Public” (Democrats.org “2012 Democratic National Platform”).¹⁰ Conservation under the Endangered Species Act is a group value, which dedicates land and resources to wellbeing of an ecosystem and includes human members, orienting around the notion of the ‘greater good’. Democrats advocate “protecting our natural resources while creating jobs, preserving habitats, and ensuring that future generations can enjoy our nation’s outdoor heritage” and “working with local communities to conserve our publicly-owned lands and dramatically expand investments in conserving and restoring forests, grasslands, and wetlands across America for generations to come”, and furthermore ties environmental issues to the economy stating “[opponents]

9 In the Republican Party Platform, the term “we” is most often employed to refer to “the Republican Party” and one of the rare uses of the term “together” refers to “the President and Congress” (GOP “We The People: The Restoration of Constitutional Government”).

ignore the jobs that are created by promoting outdoor recreation, cleaning up our air, and promoting a healthy environment” (Democrats.org “2012 Democratic National Platform”).¹¹

The oppositional nature of the current two-party system is moreover mirrored in the oppositional nature of wolf conservation. Several authors have noted wolf conversation is a “conflict,” “battle”, and most dramatically, a “war” (Clarke; Zmyj; Chadwick). Despite the multiplicity of perspectives (hunters, agriculturalists, constitutional conservatives etc. on one side; environmentalist, animal rights advocates, social liberals on the other) there seems to be a strong duality to wolf conservation that is *mutually exclusive*. Wise choice values and conservationist values are complimentary; where the positive liberty of wise choice ends, the negative liberty of conservation begins and both are defined by their relationship to the other. Negative liberty especially relies on a relational status between two parties where the interest of one interferes with the interest of other (in the previous example A and B). Republicans and Democrats function often in a similar way: ‘issues’ for both parties are created by their oppositional position to the other party; where opposition does not exist, issues do not exist.

For wolf conservation, the question viability has seemingly relied on a majority opinion in favor of wolves. However, “majority” cannot be construed simply as a statistical majority but as hegemon, where possession of various forms of capital relates directly to the ability to assert power and affect change. As stated before, a majority of Americans are pro-wolf. This statistical majority is concentrated primarily in urban areas, among younger demographics, and those with higher levels of education (Williams et al 6). Looking at CNN exit polls for the 2008 election, 53% of college graduates (58% of post-graduates), 66% of people between ages of 18-29, and 89% of democrats all voted for Barack Obama (CNN Election Center 2008)¹², showing a clear correlation for these values. In addition, a Washington Post info-graphic shows a clear preference for Barack Obama (and by extension Democratic values) in urban areas, despite some of those areas being in predominantly “red” states (Washington Post Election 2008). These unsurprisingly show demographic correlations between pro-wolf sentiments and pro-Democratic sentiments. The urban/rural distinction is especially significant as humans only come into contact with wolves in wilderness and semi-wilderness areas that most often overlap with rural communities (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service “Gray Wolf Biology Questions and Answers”).

Opposition to wolf reintroduction and respective conservation is strongest in “red” states. Wolves today “are found in the mostly forested lands of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Montana, Idaho and Wyoming” as well as Alaska (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service “Gray Wolf Biology Questions and Answers”). Wolf conservation in Minnesota and Michigan has been met with weaker opposition than in other states, with “Minnesota trappers and Michigan deer hunters expressing considerable affection

10 It important to note that “opponents” implicitly refers to Republicans: the same party platform states “in stark contrast to our opponents” and then immediately follows it with “the Republicans in Congress” (Democrats.org “2012 Democratic National Platform”)

11 As opposed to 45% college graduates, 40% post-graduate, and 32% of ages 18-29 for McCain [cite].

and protectionist concern for wolf populations, recognizing this animal's ecological importance and supporting its restoration to the northern forest” (Kellert et al 980). Michigan and Minnesota are also “blue” states, with stronger affiliation to Democratic ideologies (Washington Post 2012 Election Map). The Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery plan, which included parts of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, has been met with some of the strongest opposition and resistance, which is most clearly manifested in the “de-listing” (removal from the Endangered Species List)¹³ of wolves as a protected species in these states since 2009 [cite]. Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming are all also “red” states [cite]. Wolves have been able to be hunted in these states since [month] 2012 [cite]. Since the delisting of wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountain states, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin have also began had wolf-hunting bills drafted, which successfully passed in Wisconsin (a swing state) and Minnesota¹⁴, whose wolf hunting season begins November 3rd, 2012 [cite]. In Alaska, a “red” state, wolves were not the subject of the Endangered Species Act but have been the subject of extensive “control” efforts, which involve the systematic culling of wolves [cite].

Because of the wide majority in favor of wolves nationally, as well as the marginal majority of Democrats nationally [cite], it is important to ask why wolf conservation is so controversial and continuously contested. This stems from the fact that anti-wolf conservation faction, including wise use and Republican groups, posses significantly more capital, which allows them to contest more evenly with statistically larger pro-wolf groups. Several authors on wolf conservation have pointed out that a disproportionate number of members of groups directly responsible for drafting and enacting wildlife legislation (ie. state run Fish and Wildlife boards, local politicians etc.) are pro-hunting and pro-wise use [cite], representing an increase in political capital for these groups. In addition despite the current general negative opinion of hunting nationally [cite], hunting still represents cultural capital. Big game especially is still seen as the purview of the wealthy and powerful [cite]. Consider the fact that both Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan (the current Republican nominees for president) are outspoken hunters (although Mitt Romney admits to being “only a varmint hunter” as opposed to a big game hunter) [cite]. Similarly, Sarah Palin, former governor of Alaska and Republican Vice Presidential candidate in 2008, represented herself as a hunter¹⁵ and endorsed aerial hunting in Alaska, a very controversial practice that is directly related to wolf control [cite]. In years past, Presidents including Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were all known hunters [cite]. Hunting’s association with power in the U.S is therefore not misplaced. Interestingly, current President Barack Obama is not a hunter, but takes a centralist viewpoint, stating through the White House website he “did not grow up

12 Removal from the Endangered Species List revokes most of the protection represented by the Endangered Species Act.

13 Several notable efforts have been made to block this in Minnesota, indicating opposing to hunting is still strong. In Michigan, wolf-hunting bills have been unable to be enacted [cite].

14 Something that was debunked following the election [cite].

hunting and fishing, but he recognizes the great conservation legacy of America's hunters and anglers and has great respect for the passion that hunters and anglers have for their sports” [cite].

In the 2008 Presidential election, hunting may have come to represent a negative cultural capital, as demonstrated by the McCain/Palin loss. Conversely, Al Gore's staunch and well-documented commitment to environmentalism and conservation [cite] did not prove to be sufficiently beneficial during the 2004 Presidential election. This is not to say Presidential contenders' view on the environment is the most important, or even a significant, factor in their getting elected, but represents part of an accumulation of political capital, which amounts to a victory.

While no strong correlation has been documented between wealth and hunting, a study from the National Shooting Sports Foundation states “a majority of states' hunters have higher-than-average incomes. Stereotypes portraying the average hunter as low-income may be off the mark” [cite]. This may indicate (but does not conclusively demonstrate) that hunters may also possess more economic capital. Along this notion, the aforementioned Presidents and Presidential Candidates all possessed significant economic means, logically construed from the fact that they were able to run for President. Romney and Ryan have been portrayed as both gratuitously wealthy and as hunters and this may also indicate some correlation between economic status and hunting. Interesting to also note, Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump, sons of famed billionaire Donald Trump (arguably an icon of American wealth), came under media criticism last year for hunting big game in Africa [cite]. In reference to the Trumps' hunting, one commenter stated hunting is “a rich white man's sport” [cite].

Conservation and hunting are still being negotiated and are constantly in flux as the dominant sentiment on wildlife (again, dominant being construed not as a demographic majority but as relating to possession of capital). So too is the dominant ideological position of Democrats or Republicans constantly in flux. The two-party system dictates a balance between these two opposing positions that often results in centralist politics.

The constant vacillation between a Republican or Democratic hegemon means that the legal status of wolves and other wildlife will also constantly vacillate. Conservationists interested in protecting wolves must find a way to work within the system as opposed to moving outside it. Attempts to strip wolves of their symbolic meaning (through education), while admirable, do not counteract the political and economic reality that wolves pose to those living in proximity to them.

One conservation strategy which has had mixed success is compensation [cite]. Where it has been shown the wolves have killed livestock, hunters are given monetary compensation equivalent to the loss [cite]. In Michigan and Minnesota, where conservation was better received, compensation was used [cite] and may have contributed to the relative ease of wolf reintroduction. I would argue that the pairing of compensation with a political and social environment that favors wolves (as ascertained from Michigan and Minnesota being “blue” states as far back as 2004)[cite] is what allowed for wolf conservation to be successful in these areas. Similarly, in Wyoming despite the introduction of compensation, wolf conservation was met with strong resistance and hostile attitudes towards wolves were still reported [cite]. Wyoming has been a “red” state [cite] and compensation by itself did nothing to address political and social views of wolves.

Once again, education speciously seems a successful route in changing opinions wolves. In order to truly combat the issues posed by wolves, conservation education would need to indoctrinate individuals with different political ideations. Education that seeks to change someone's fundamental political, economic, and social views (like the Republican ideology of individualism) is doomed to fail. Without more covert, hegemonic forces enacting change on how wolves function politically, economically and socially, it is unlikely opinions will change dramatically enough to represent a consensus on wolves. In addition, consensus may not be needed to protect wolves.

The limited success of compensation may reveal a conservation model that is more sustainable and enacts lasting change for wolves: that of exchange. Under compensation, economic capital is exchanged for cultural capital; wolf conservationists and ranchers both receive something they value from protecting wolves. A system in which all forms of capital can be directly and indirectly exchanged is necessary. In developing that idealistic system consider the quote from one small rancher:

We have to realize that the general U.S. population wants wolves. That population is also our customers for beef. It's not a good idea to tell your customers they don't know what they're doing. So instead of taking a hard line and fighting to get everything back to where it was 50 years ago, we're trying things [cite]

This rancher has perhaps identified one possible solution: the transformation of conservationists from opponents to customers. Pro-wolf organization may consider creating identifiers that label products coming from areas in direct conflict with wolves as "wolf-friendly," depending the various steps different producers take. This also creates a system where industries and interests other than ranching (such as lumber and mining) can also receive monetary exchange. Furthermore, it drives individuals to want to adopt opposing values because they directly benefit them, even if their adoption of these values is only superficial and do not represent a consensus on wolves.

The labeling of products as animal friendly (an idea that is not novel, consider "dolphin-safe" tuna) may represent a more gradual change than immediate legislative action. It may also be harder to enforce, as has been seen in the questionable use of the "dolphin-safe" label [cite]. However, where wolf conservationists may also gain an advantage is in implicating the distributors.

Using beef as an example, conservation organizations could create public standards by which "wolf-friendly" beef is determined. They could then appropriately label different beef "wolf-friendly" in tandem with publicity that seeks to educate the public about the role ranching plays in ecosystems where wolves exist. Finally, conservationists could contact grocery store chains about carrying wolf-friendly beef and then label those who do as sympathetic to wolves. The same model could be applied to lumber and hardware chains. In addition, there may be a willingness by the public to pay more for products that have ethical value, as seen in the current organic trend [cite].

By creating a system where wolves gain positive capital, there is no need to ask ranchers, loggers, and other industries adversely affected by wolves to change their opinions on economic and political

individualism (should they of course have these beliefs) because they are not obligated by negative liberty but are instead motivated by economic incentives. This does not directly address the interests of all wise use advocates, or the interests of hunters or Republicans nationally, but it can be hoped that by incentivizing wolf-conservation for some, a cohort effect will be experienced, by which hunters may be less interested in hunting wolves or allow for a legislative majority to impose negative liberty on those who do not. Considering the Republican ideologies surrounding conservation and wise use, incentivism, and by extension conservation, may come to represent the best use of land where it gains commodity value in its conservation that does not contradict or exclude the current commodity value it holds in agricultural and extractive industries.

There may be more sophisticated and immediate ways to incentivize conservation than has been explored to date. In order to be sustainable however, they need to include plans that work with all groups involved. Asking current industries captured under wise use to radically change by, for example, trading ranching land for eco-tourist preserves or eco-friendly real estate, is not viable. Asking them to do anything without long-term incentives is not viable. It is possible to include wolves in sustainable political, economic, and social landscapes that include benefits based in exchange to all parties.

Current wolf conservation efforts also reveal a larger issue in conservation as a whole. In discussing wolf education programs, conservationists seem to feel that educating the public about the “biological reality” of wolves is important to counteract prevailing symbolic beliefs and misconceptions, such as that wolves would decimate local undulate populations, denying them from hunters [cite]. While these are important tools, they show that within conservation there are two wolves: biological wolves and human-constructed wolves, or put differently, natural wolves and cultural wolves. Despite the paradoxical elements entailed in their fusion, natural and cultural wolves must be merged in order for them to be conserved; one kind of wolf cannot be privileged as more true or valuable than the other. Addressing wolves as both will lead to more nuanced and sustainable forms of conservation and may in fact ameliorate the problematic duality of nature and culture across all of Western culture, conservationist and hunter, Republican and Democrat alike. Wolves not only embody their canine, corporeal manifestations, they also fully and no less legitimately embody human politics, economy, and society.

By addressing wolves as elements within our own human systems, we also implicitly involve ourselves in theirs, demonstrating “culture” (the manifestation of human action) is a product of “nature” (biology and ecosystems) and “nature,” as a distinct notion separate from culture, is entirely a product of “culture.”

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Conflict of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest

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