

Wolves and Cows: The Mindset of Coexistence and Sentience

From [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)

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The well-being of both wolves and cows deserves careful consideration.

[The post was co-written by Marc Bekoff, Ph.D., and Marlon H. Reis, First Gentleman of Colorado.]



Wolf 2306-OR shortly after release in Colorado on December 19, 2023. Source: Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Public Domain.

Moving animals from one place to another, called “reintroductions” or “repatriation” projects, raises numerous questions about the true meaning of human-animal relationships and the words “coexistence” and “sentience.” Recently, Colorado was blessed with 10 wolves who were moved from Oregon to remote areas of our state, with very [mixed opinions](#) voiced by Colorado residents and media. Reactions ranged from excellent to downright shoddy and highly sensationalist and misleading, mainly from people who might be directly affected by the wolves. In fact, an article in *The Denver Gazette* reports, “According to voter data from Proposition 114, 127,719 Colorado residents on the Western slope voted ‘yes’ to reintroduce wolves. More than twice the winning margin came from Western Colorado.”

What does “coexistence” mean?

There are many shades of meaning for the word “coexistence” and, surely, the wolves themselves along with grizzly bears and cougars would offer different definitions than would many humans. The simplest definition of “coexistence” would be living in the same place at the same time or most of the time. The key factor would be that different *living* individuals are sharing the same place and able to work things out so that it’s done harmoniously. This would be what we call “pure” or “true” coexistence.

Organizations that claim to work for coexistence offer a [very different picture](#). For example, Wildlife Services, a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, claims to work for the coexistence of people

and wildlife, but, to achieve their distinctly distorted notion of coexistence, they kill more than 2 million animals every year, mostly on public lands at a cost to taxpayers of more than \$100 million per year. Their victims included 384,300 native animals in 2022 along with individuals of some endangered species and occasionally companion dogs.

Project Coyote, on the other hand, a national nonprofit organization based in Northern California, notes that their “mission is to promote compassionate conservation and coexistence between people and wildlife through [education](#), science and advocacy ... advocating coexistence instead of killing.” Their focus on individuals stresses that they’re not merely important because of their instrumental value or utility—what they can do for us. Rather, because they are alive, they must be valued.

Similarly, Predator Defense “Promotes non-lethal predator control that helps people and preserves wildlife ... The commonly held belief that we need to kill predators to control their population is a myth ... Individual animals matter. No animal should suffer.”

The psychology of, and mindsets behind, coexistence and granting sentience to nonhuman animals

While we were discussing how moving animals from one place to another could inform discussions of coexistence and sentience, we discovered two publications, one in *The Denver Post* called “The burden of wolf control lands on our ranchers” and an opinion piece published in *The Oregonian* titled “To some Oregonians, moving wolves to Colorado just shifts the problem and the pain” that spoke to these issues. In the first, Roy Legg, a self-described “bleeding-heart liberal environmentalist,” writes, “The loss of one young purebred cow can result in six or eight less calves during her productive years. That is many thousands of dollars.” It’s true that when and if a wolf attacks “food animals” such as cows, for example, there will be monetary losses. But there is a program in Colorado that will compensate ranchers for these losses.

In the opinion piece in *The Oregonian* by April Ehrlich, we also read about economic losses and what it might feel like to be killed by a wolf, and this brings up animal sentience, which simply means the [ability of animals to have feelings](#). Ehrlich writes, “When wolves attack, they don’t usually wait for their prey to die before they start eating. They just eat while the other animal fights to survive. The result can be gruesome. It’s especially hard on mother cows when they have to watch their dead calves being hauled away.”

She’s right. Baby cows belong with their moms. [Cows are highly sentient beings](#) and care about what happens to themselves, their families, and their friends. For those people who choose to separate mothers and their children to ship them off for food, they need to keep in mind that they do this as well—bovine families are broken up when cows are sent off to be killed for food. The reality is that the cows are by and large being raised to be separated. One would be hard-pressed to find any other way to describe their brief experience in life as anything less than less than horrific.

What are the wolves and cows thinking and feeling?

Wolves and cows are fully sentient beings. They have [deep and rich emotional lives](#) and care about what happens to themselves and to their family and friends. So, too, do family-living grizzly bears who also get a bad rap. It’s difficult to know exactly what the wolves are thinking and feeling, but solid research supports the claim that they’re very [stressed](#) when they’re among the chosen ones who will be shipped elsewhere. There also are [personality differences](#) that could play into how individual wolves respond to being wolf-napped and moved here and there.^{1,2} There also is clear evidence that individual personalities can affect ecosystems in different ways.³

So, taking the wolves' point of view, it's no good-time party for wolves to be captured and shipped to a new home, and there are [many biological and ethical reasons](#) not to perform these sorts of experiments. What it comes down to is that removing and relocating animals is sort of like robbing Peter to pay Paul—taking wolves from an area where they might have had good lives and moving them to where their lives may not be so good.

Likewise, the well-being of individual cows and their families could be compromised, and it's important for those who raise cows for food to factor bovine sentience into their practices.

Where to from here?

Coexistence means two or more *living* animals working to live together, and we are responsible for allowing this to happen. [Killing in the name of coexistence](#) is an oxymoron that is used too freely to justify the actions of people who really just want to kill wolves and other predators, animals who *have* to eat other animals.

The hidden factors behind moving wolves here and there and the effect on their possible meals require us to think about what it means to the wolves, cows, and other animals. People often blame wolves for the very acts of which they themselves are guilty, including killing sentient individuals and breaking up their families. Surely we can do better.

References

1. When I began studying nonhuman animals (animals) years ago, mainly wolves, coyotes, and domestic dogs, talking about their individual personalities and their emotions was generally taboo, mainly because some people thought it was "anthropomorphic" to talk about bold, shy, or risk-averse or risk-taking individuals and the emotional states that were associated with these traits. In the mid-1960s, Dr. Jane Goodall famously made talking about individual personalities and emotions in the chimpanzees she and her research teams studied an acceptable practice, but not without some battles with her mentors. So, too, did Michael Fox, [focusing more on canids](#). Also see "[Mammalian Dispersal and the Ontogeny of Individual Behavioral Phenotypes](#)."
2. For more information on the social behavior and ecology of wolves, see these interviews with wolf expert Rick McIntyre about his excellent books on the wolves of Yellowstone: [The Power and Legacy of Yellowstone's Alpha Female Wolf 06](#); [The Story of Yellowstone Wolf 8: From Underdog to Alpha Male](#); [The Reign of Wolf 21, Yellowstone's Benevolent Alpha Male](#); and [The Redemption of Yellowstone's Renegade Alpha Wolf 302](#).
3. [How Wildlife Personalities Affect Conservation Efforts](#); [Colorado Wolves Receive Mixed Hellos and Muddy Media](#); [Conservation Science Must Value Individuals and Anthropomorphism](#); Bump, Joseph et al. [Predator personalities alter ecosystem services](#). *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. June 1, 2022.