

Colorado Wolves: Hyped Media Derails Neighborly Coexistence

From Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions

August 2024

Posted on All-Creatures.org: August 27, 2024

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Colorado Parks and Wildlife/Public Domain

"In Colorado, it's not just lobos, wildlife officials, conservationists, and ranchers being placed in the spotlight...Right now, the best way to tamp down 'sheer anger' is for newspapers of record to stop publishing assertions that validate mythology and encourage anti-wolf vigilantism." —Todd Wilkinson, ["When Scriveners Cry Wolf"](#).

On December 18, 2023, [five wolves were released](#) into the mountains of Colorado, and five more were released the next day. Because the people of Colorado voted for this project, some people pejoratively call it "ballot box biology" but in reality it's "ballot box [morality](#)."¹

I was pleased to be at the initial release because of my longtime interests in [rewilding nature](#) and because of my research on the social behavior of wolves, coyotes, and domestic dogs and my interest in observing [personality differences](#) among the first group of wolves who were released. These are incredibly [difficult projects to organize](#) and implement, and many people are unaware of the various hidden factors—slippery slopes—that come into play. Many important questions need to be considered that center on our relationships with nature, especially those focusing on [who lives, who dies, and why](#).

Suffice it to say, when these projects are put into action, the lives of *individuals* are put on the line, and many people and I feel that the life of every single individual wolf matters and should *not* be traded off for the good of others. I've learned that a number of wolf advocates are willing to allow some wolves to be killed to save the lives of others, and many people have no idea this remains a possibility. Some

ranchers also want wolves to be killed and of course this could doom the project before it gets off the ground.

Much of written and televised news about this repatriation program has been extremely negative.² My estimate from doing daily web searches is that around 95 percent of media about Colorado's new wolves is negative and misleading and, as some people have written to me, plainly anti-wolf. They have owned the narrative. Sometimes people ask for "the science," ignore it, and continue to ask for it.

Along these lines, award-winning journalist [Todd Wilkinson](#) aptly asks:

"What happens, though, when the news media, be it your local newspaper or national TV network or cable station, spews pure ecological nonsense that, under the normal tenets of journalistic fact-finding, cannot stand up to serious, rigorous scrutiny?"

Good news for Colorado's new wolves

Let's switch gears, stick to the facts, and be positive. A few days ago, we learned that a video had been taken of three wolf pups, members of the Copper Creek Pack, doing what young wolves do: [playing just like dogs](#) and other animals play. Another video shows [an adult wolf interacting with the youngsters](#). These videos are incredibly important because they are the roots of a successful repatriation program, and having the mated pair and their children living wild lives is a gift and very positive news.

Let's follow the science.

Research clearly shows that [killing the leader of a pack](#) can lead to the group becoming less stable, and this might cause them to disband and cease to exist as a cohesive group.

Concerning the video of the three pups playing in a puddle, we read, "You can see the wolf pups deeply focused on playing with each other. Playing not only allows a wolf pup to practice hunting behaviors but also teaches them to communicate effectively with other wolves, which is a skill they will use throughout their lives as social creatures living in packs."

I've been studying play behavior in various animals for decades. While it is true that play is important for socializing the wolves (and many other animals) so they learn what they have to do to be wild wolves—to become card-carrying wolves, if you will—there is no evidence that play by youngsters has any influence on the proficiency of later hunting. I mention this because a number of people have suggested that this misinformation could be used to fuel yet another false myth about these magnificent carnivores—if they play, they'll be more efficient predators. It isn't that simple.

Other prevailing myths are that wolves wantonly attack and kill humans—[they don't](#)—and that around 50 cows were killed by wolves in northwest Colorado—[they weren't](#) (also [see](#)). Wolves and other large carnivores are often [misjudged and misrepresented by sensationalist media](#) that wrongly labels them as unpredictable, dangerous, aggressive, and untrustworthy.

We need to develop a positive mindset, do all we can to coexist with wolves, and keep them alive and wild.

We are the ones who took the wolves from their original homes. That makes us responsible for their well-being. These sentient, highly social, and highly intelligent and emotional beings have become pawns in an

anthropocentric (human-centered) program. We need to consider their point of view—what they are feeling about what's happening to them—and who they truly are. As one of my colleagues aptly puts it, *they've done what we wanted them to do—form a pack and make more of themselves*—and some people want to punish them—kill them— for pushing the repatriation program forward. This is thoroughly unreasonable arrogant anthropocentrism, an egregious double-cross.

Some people seem to be surprised that they killed sheep and other so-called “food animals.” Wolves and sheep can coexist. [There's no question they can.](#)

While I fully am aware of and sensitive to counter-arguments, the pros and the cons about the presence of wolves in our beautiful state, science clearly shows that the best course of action is to leave them be and allow this tightly knit family of wolves to be kept together in the wild. Breaking them up would be unscientific based on what we know about these animals, and it also would be ethically indefensible. Each individual's life matters.

It's important to allow wild wolves to be able to live wild-wolf-appropriate lives. That's the least we can do for them. If we don't do this, why bring them here?

Sentient, highly social, and extremely intelligent and emotional wolves have become objectified pawns in pretty much a human-centered program, and it's about time we consider what they want and need from us when we choose to interfere in their lives, move them here and there, and then allow them to be harmed and killed.

Why should wolves be relocated and then abandoned as if their lives don't matter? It's time to celebrate the return of these highly intelligent, deeply emotional, social animals and rejoice in the birth of their children. Science clearly demonstrates the value of a healthy population of wolves to the ecosystems they inhabit as well as to the economies of communities that choose to coexist with them.

Coda

Let's use this good news about this developing wolf pack, a closely knit family group, for their future well-being and success as the wild animals they are meant to be. The well-being of every single wolf in this and future packs matters; no individual is disposable. Science shows that killing one or more wolves could damage the repatriation efforts.

We must learn to coexist peacefully with wolves as our new [neighbors](#) and with one another. We must do all we can to keep wild wolves alive and wild, despite what biased media say. Their presence generates many questions and offers many valuable lessons about nature and the broad spectrum of human-nonhuman relationships with wolves and with numerous other animals.

References

- 1) In conversation with Bill Masure. I'm also told that some people call uninformed views "bar stool biology."
- 2) For further discussions of messy media see: [Dogs Are Not Smarter Than Cats, and More: A Media Muddle](#); [Seeing Species: A New Book Looks at Animals in Media](#); [Animals in the Media: Guidelines for Accurate Representation](#); [Animals in media: Righting the wrongs](#).
WATCH: [3 wolf pups from Colorado's Copper Creek Pack captured on camera playing along dirt road. "My two favourite animals are sheep and wolves". In Portugal's Montesinho, shepherds peacefully coexist alongside wolves.](#) BBC.

Kobobel, Darlene. [Wolves belong in Colorado; turn down the volume](#). The Gazette, August 22, 2024.

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Wilkinson, Todd, [When Scriveners Cry Wolf](#). *Yellowstonian*, August 19, 2024.

[Why We Misjudge Wolves, Bears, and Other Large Carnivores; The Hidden Slippery Slopes of Animal Reintroduction Programs; Do Individual Wolves Care if Their Species Is on the Brink?; LET'S KEEP COLORADO'S WOLVES OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT; Colorado Wolves Receive Mixed Hellos and Muddy Media; Wolf Packs Suffer When Humans Kill Their Leaders; The Perks of Appreciating Wild Neighbors as Sentient Beings; The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy—and Why They Matter.](#)