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Beyond wolves: the politics of wolf recovery and management

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BOOK REVIEW

Beyond wolves: the politics of wolf recovery and management

By: Martin A. Nie
Publisher: University of Minnesota Press, USA, 2003, 253 pp.
ISBN: 0-8166-3978-7

For the last decade social scientists have been trying to explain to us ecologists that a large part of the conflict between large carnivores and humans is in fact a social conflict. This implies that the conflict is actually one between different groups of people (those for, and those against, large carnivore conservation) as much as between carnivores and people. In other words, even if we solve all the material conflicts associated for example with depredated livestock and compensate for other economic losses, we will still not have addressed the social conflict, which may in fact be the most serious of all. I must admit that I have never really understood this, at least until reading this book by Martin Nie. Now I am a convert!

Nie walks us through the developments in North American wolf conservation that have occurred in the last 2-3 decades. He draws on a comparison between the reintroduction in Yellowstone and Idaho as well as the natural expansion of wolves in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

His opening chapter manages to explain the basic premise that I had never understood before; that wolf conservation is motivated by a value-based desire from a segment of the human population. Science is therefore viewed not as the motivator or the justification, but simply as the tool.

The second chapter introduces the idea that wolf conflicts often have very little to do with wolves! Instead the wolves often become symbols or surrogates for wider and more fundamental conflicts between different human interest groups, for example tensions between urban and rural areas.

The third chapter expands on these themes by exploring how the historical, social and geographic contexts of place influence the manner in which conflicts develop.

The fourth and last chapter introduces a range of tools for addressing these social conflicts. The proposed solutions involve increased use of stakeholders and wider public participation in an attempt to broaden the base of support for conservation and increase the legitimacy of any decisions that are made.

Unfortunately, he is unable to offer any magic formula; each approach has its own set of pros and cons, and success is likely to be highly situation specific.

His final set of conclusions quickly summarise the main points and then point us further, placing the wolf discussion into an even wider context of how we want our democracy to function in practice.

This book is highly readable and will be a real eye opener for many ecologists who are often becoming increasingly frustrated with the need to constantly address the 'human dimension' in the application of their work to real world conservation situations. It provides a solid introduction into political

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science and policy processes (foreign topics) through the vehicle of wolf recovery (familiar to most). The book should be required reading for any ecologist, and should help us all broaden our understanding of how we relate to our fellow humans.

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