“They Need to be Managed:” Hunters’ and Ranchers’ Narratives of Increased Tolerance of Wolves After a Decade of Wolf Hunting
By Jill Eileen Richardson

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Abstract

How do hunters and livestock producers who report increased tolerance for wolves account for the changes in their attitudes, and how can their perspectives inform researchers’ understanding of human conflicts about wolves? I explore this by analyzing interviews with people who live, work, and recreate in the Blackfoot watershed, Montana. All interviewees who reported increased tolerance over time were hunters and ranchers with good relationships with government wildlife officials and close ties to a collaborative non-profit, Blackfoot Challenge. All who reported increased tolerance attributed their tolerance to the legalization of wolf hunting (sometimes in addition to other factors). Several expressed anger at environmental and animal rights groups who used lawsuits to keep hunting illegal for longer in the state. My data suggests that intolerance for wolves may stem from an injustice frame, a belief that humans bear some blame for causing harm.

Introduction

Decades after wolves recolonized the Montana, they remain controversial. Scholars have sought to understand why wolf conflicts – conflicts among people about wolves – persist in the U.S. and Europe, and how to resolve them. Conflicts are fought over meaning, knowledge, and morality (Nie 2003). Research on wolf conflicts among non-Indigenous people describes a conflict between those for whom wolf recovery symbolizes a threat to the rural white Western way of life and those for whom it symbolizes the righting of a historic environmental wrong

(Farrell 2015). This study is about a third group: people who live, work, and recreate in a rural area with wolves who initially disliked wolves but now report tolerance of them.

Studies show that some people in demographics correlated with negative attitudes toward wolves report tolerance of wolves, or grow more tolerant following a hunting season, but few focus on this group (Browne-Núñez et al. 2015; Hogberg et al. 2016). Literature assumes that values are formed in childhood through socialization and that negative attitudes correlated with age are due to a cohort effect because elderly people adopted values and formed attitudes in childhood when more of the population held negative attitudes toward wolves (Manfredo et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2002). If wolf conflicts with no resolution are conflicts between groups with incommensurable moral visions (Farrell 2015), how do some ranchers and hunters account for growing increasingly tolerant toward wolves?

Drawing on interviews of people who live, work, and recreate in Montana's Blackfoot watershed, I explore the perspectives of interviewees who reported increased tolerance of wolves with time.¹ Although several factors could have contributed to increased tolerance of wolves, like a local collaborative effort to decrease depredation and good relationships with government wildlife officials, all interviewees who reported increased tolerance attributed the change to legal wolf hunting. The vast majority did not hunt wolves themselves but saw hunting and culling (legally killing wolves for management purposes) as important "management tools" humans should have available to use as needed. Several interviewees also spoke of anger at environmentalists they believed were uninformed, emotional people from elsewhere who had kept Montanans from legally hunting wolves for several extra years using lawsuits.

¹ By tolerance, I mean allowing the existence of something without necessarily liking or agreeing with it.

Interviewees emphasized exercising agency, individually and collectively, to manage wolves in accordance with their values. Although some interviewees who reported increased tolerance spoke of overcoming emotions as part of their process, all stated that the conditions in which they live with wolves became more tolerable over time. For this group, the legalization of wolf hunting represented the end of environmental groups' ability to prevent the state of Montana from legalizing hunting through the courts and the beginning of interviewees' ability to enact their values on the land with the support of their state. Interviewees who reported increased tolerance also described good relationships with government employees and close ties to Blackfoot Challenge, a local nonprofit. Once hunting was legal, they interpreted the challenges of living with wolves as natural rather than unjustly caused by humans (Gamson 2013, 1).

Literature Review

People with negative attitudes towards wolves are disproportionately rural, older, men, high school educated, livestock producers, living in areas with wolves, people who hold utilitarian values, and, in some studies, hunters (Bath 1989; Kellert 1985; Williams et al. 2002). Americans have grown increasingly favorable to wolves (George et al. 2016), marginalizing those with negative opinions of wolves (Manfredo et al. 2020).

Literature on wolf conflicts centers on three regions: the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes regions of the U.S. and Scandinavia. Wolf conflicts in all three regions are similar, but not identical. Native Americans are more supportive of wolves than the Sámi people (Nilsson Dahlström 2009; Ohlson et al. 2008; Wilson 1999), and Ojibwe people in Wisconsin have treaty rights entitling them to a share of the state's wolf hunting permits, which they do not use, decreasing the number of wolves hunted in the state (Shelley et al. 2011). In the U.S., states govern wildlife, but the federal government has jurisdiction over species federally listed as endangered. In Wisconsin, control bounced back and forth between the state and federal

government several times as environmentalists successfully challenged federal decisions to remove wolves from the federal list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act more than once (Olson et al. 2015). In Montana, wolves met federal recovery goals in 2002, they were first delisted in 2008, and environmentalists' lawsuits returned them to the endangered species list twice (Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks). Wolves have been delisted in Montana since 2011. Wolf hunting was illegal while wolves were listed but it has been legal in Montana every year since 2009, excluding 2010.

Several theories explaining wolf conflicts hinge on societal changes that began in the second half of the 20th century. The U.S. government once supported extirpating wolves from most of the Lower 48. But, in the last half-century, the government has both protected wolves and reintroduced them (Dunlap 1988). Those who oppose wolf recovery responded with resistance.²

Some researchers examined social movements opposed to wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains. There, opponents of wolf recovery are responding to a power devaluation (Farrell 2015). A power devaluation occurs when one group loses economic power, social status, and political power vis-à-vis other groups (McVeigh 2009). People opposed to wolf recovery faced a loss in political power compared to those in favor, as government policy shifted from wolf eradication to wolf reintroduction and protection. For the Euro-American "Old West" population, particularly those engaged in traditional land uses like ranching and hunting, increasing "New West" amenity migration was culturally and economically disruptive (Farrell 2015; Yung and Belsky 2007).

² Wolves were reintroduced to the Greater Yellow Ecosystem and Central Idaho, but they migrated naturally from Canada into the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, where the Blackfoot watershed is located.

Opponents of wolf recovery also experienced a moral devaluation: their utilitarian “moral vision” was deemed immoral by those who believe humans’ proper relationship with nature is one of spiritual connection or preserving intact ecosystems (Farrell 2015). Mutualist values³ (values promoting human coexistence with nature instead of domination of nature) correlate with higher income, urban residence, and formal education, all of which became more common in the U.S. during the 20th century (Manfredo et al. 2003). In states where more of the population hold mutualist values, fewer people support lethal control of wolves (Manfredo et al. 2020). The Wise Use movement framed the wolf reintroduction in 1995 and 1996 as a symbol of the federal government and environmentalists threatening the Western way of life. For many white Northern Rocky Mountain residents, the frame resonated (Wilson 1997).

Another approach is based on the social construction of community. Communities are socially constructed around symbolic boundaries and “within limits, the same symbol may express different meanings for different people, while still emphasizing internal unity. Diverging interpretations of the same symbols (symbolic expressions of the community) do not hinder an effective construction of community” (Skogen, Krange, and Figari 2017, 39). When members of a community feel under threat, they strengthen their symbolic boundaries, often through attribution of blame to those outside the community seen as threatening the community’s central values. Rural Norwegians opposed to wolf recovery are heterogeneous, but they share enough common ground to form an “anti-carnivore alliance” (Skogen and Krange 2003).

Instead of social movements, Scandinavian researchers focus on other forms of resistance: counter-hegemonic discourses (including pseudoscience and conspiracy theories), and poaching (Skogen, Mauz, and Krange 2008; von Essen 2017; von Essen and Allen 2015; von

³ Because literature refers to both morals and values without defining either term (and sometimes use both interchangeably), I preserve the usages of cited authors and use both terms interchangeably myself.

Essen et al. 2018). By defying hegemonic discourse, they may assert autonomy in their own lives, reflect their understanding of reality, let off steam, enact a political strategy, or radicalize peers (Skogen and Krange 2020; von Essen et al. 2018). Poaching is a crime of dissent, a form of everyday resistance (Scott 1985), undertaken by rural people who perceive themselves as marginalized (von Essen and Allen 2017a; von Essen and Allen 2017b; von Essen et al. 2015). Evidence suggests some Americans opposed to wolf recovery feel marginalized as well (Browne-Nuñez et al. 2015).

When people believe environmental institutions lack legitimacy, then people view crimes of dissent as legitimate (Krange et al. 2017; Skogen and Krange 2020). Legitimacy is the belief in the moral authority of the power of the state, “a necessary precondition for long-term, voluntary compliance” (Lundmark and Matti 2015: 147; Skogen and Krange 2020). Research suggests addressing rural people’s feelings of political alienation could increase legitimacy, thereby increasing wolf policy acceptance (Eriksson 2017). Collaborative, participatory approaches may prevent problems with legitimacy (Hansson-Forman et al. 2018), but efforts at decentralization are sometimes overruled by both centralized governments and court cases by the environmental movement (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. 2020). Participatory regional co-management can produce increased legitimacy when participants exchange reasonable and informed arguments with open minds (Lundmark and Matti 2015).

Even though past research is clear that rural people in areas with wolves are diverse (Skogen, Krange, and Figari 2017), most literature focuses on the most mobilized people who oppose wolf recovery, sometimes framing wolf conflicts as between two distinct sides, pro-wolf vs. anti-wolf (Farrell 2015; Wilson 1997). Although one’s values and social group memberships (e.g. ranchers, hunters) correlate with one’s attitude toward wolves (Kellert 1985; Naughton-

Treves, Grossberg, and Treves 2003), groups that are highly correlated with disliking wolves usually contain some people who like wolves.⁴ Research seldom asks why some individuals in groups that are most negative about wolves hold positive attitudes toward wolves. If wolf conflicts stem from a clash of incommensurable moral visions (Farrell 2015) and values are assumed to remain stable (Manfredo et al. 2003), then how is attitude change or conflict resolution possible? Yet, even in short term panel studies, some livestock producers and hunters who initially held negative attitudes toward wolves grew more tolerant of wolves (Browne-Núñez et al. 2015; Hogberg et al. 2016). In Sweden, participatory collaborative governance produced modest belief changes trending toward belief convergence of opposing groups over a three-year period (Lundmark et al. 2018). How do ranchers and hunters who report increased tolerance for wolves account for their increased tolerance, and how does understanding their perspectives contribute to understanding wolf conflicts?

Methods

Drawing on 29 interviews with 27 people who live, work, and recreate in Montana's Blackfoot watershed, between Helena and Missoula, I explore how people who report increased tolerance of wolves account for how and why their attitudes changed. The watershed, is home to Blackfoot Challenge (BC), a non-profit collaboration between community and government with a documented history of improving relationships between government and members of the community and developing and offering non-lethal depredation prevention programs (Belsky & Barton 2018; Weber 2009; Weber 2012; Wilson, Bradley, and Neudecker 2017). Conducting research in the Blackfoot watershed also offers the ability to triangulate findings with decades of past research and media coverage. BC was founded in 1993, formed its wildlife committee in

⁴ An exception is bear hunters in Wisconsin with confirmed or probable losses to wolves: 100 percent disliked wolves (Browne-Núñez et al. 2015).

2001, and began organizing to prevent wolf depredation in 2007 (Wilson, Bradley, and Neudecker 2017).

This paper is part of a larger project studying wolf, grizzly bear, and elk politics, collaborative governance, and social movements within the state of Montana. The larger study asks: how is wildlife conservation socially possible? I conducted participant observation attending BC board and staff meetings and public events and 29 interviews in Missoula and the Blackfoot watershed between June and December 2019, living in Missoula for three months and returning for an 11-day fall visit to Ovando. All in-person fieldwork, including interviews, was completed in 2019, prior to Montana's 2021 passage of laws expanding wolf hunting and trapping within the state. I also analyzed public meetings available online, government documents, public comments, social media, podcasts, and media coverage from 2019 to 2021. I used this data to contextualize my findings from the interviews of small number of people, consistent with the extended case method, in which generalization comes from interpreting small-N qualitative data by "tracing the source of small difference to external forces... each case work[s] in its connection to other cases" (Burawoy 1998, 19).

Interviewees included landowners and land managers (12), many of whom ranched (9); BC board and staff members (10); current and former employees of three government agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) (9); hunters (15); trappers (2); and people who lived in the watershed. Many interviewees held more than one of these identities, and most who do not hunt used to hunt or come from hunting families. Unless otherwise specified, "hunters" refers to interviewees who did not also ranch or work in government. Four of the ranchers were BC board or committee members and five were not, although three who were not had family members

serving on the board. All ranchers employed at least one form of non-lethal depredation prevention, often through participation in BC programs, and many used more than one. Three ranchers had confirmed losses to wolves. Interviewees included 19 men and 8 women. One interviewee was Native American, and the remainder were white. The watershed was originally home to Native Americans, but in 2019, more than 90% of the population of the watershed was white (U.S. Census).

I began interviews by asking if the interviewee was originally from Montana, and then asking how they or their family came to Montana. This prompted many to tell me about themselves as a story. If they did not, I continued to prompt them, e.g. “Have you always lived Ovando?” Then I asked about their connection to wildlife, asking about the beginning of their story, and letting them tell it. I wanted to hear what they felt was most important to tell me, rather than leading them to topics I assumed were important. I asked follow-up questions often. If they did not share it without prompting, I asked how they originally felt about wolves when wolves returned to the area, how they feel now, and how they account for any change or lack of change during that time. Attributing tolerance of wolves to legalized wolf hunting emerged as a strong theme. I also asked about interviewees’ participation in BC.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and analyzed in MAXQDA software. I first coded every passage pertaining to wolves, bears, and management. I began with wolves, but I included the other two terms because people often spoke about wolves and bears together, almost interchangeably, and they frequently talk about hunting as a management tool. Then I open coded the interview segments pertaining to wolves, bears, and management, identifying themes as they emerged. Analyzing all statements mentioning wolves instead of only those about wolf hunting provided a holistic understanding of their relationships with wolves, to view hunting as

one part of a greater whole. Because memories and interview responses change with time (Wolford 2010), I view interviews as reflections of how interviewees understood the world in the present as they chose to represent it to themselves and to me.

Results

Of 27 interviewees, 11 reported increased tolerance for wolves with time. All 11 were hunters (3) or ranchers (8), half of whom also hunted. All were white, and all but two were men. The remainder of interviewees reported consistently positive (4) or negative (3) attitudes toward wolves, or they were past or current government or BC employees who spoke about their roles in their jobs rather than their personal opinions (9). All who reported increased tolerance serve on BC's board, staff, or committees or have close ties to those who do, compared to only one who reported a negative attitude toward wolves and none who reported consistent positive attitudes. Close ties include family relationships or working together on the same ranch. Those who reported consistent positive attitudes lived in the watershed but did not ranch, and only had hunted for food.

Interviewees who reported increased tolerance often expressed positivity about wolves in some form, either calling them "cool" or "neat," or stating that wolves belong in the ecosystem. Dave, a hunter, said: "Some of my rancher friends would shoot me but getting to see the big predators is cool... the wolves, the grizzly bears." One rancher was optimistic that wolves might help ranchers solve problems with elk by preying on elk; another observed that wolves had already done so.

This group of interviewees' responses emphasized six themes: Despite their positivity, all spoke about (1) the challenges of living with wolves and (2) their desire for a complete "toolbox" of management options, including hunting and culling. (3) All named hunting as the single biggest factor in increasing their tolerance of wolves or as a condition for their tolerance even

though only one hunted or trapped wolves. (4) Many expressed anger at the people they believed were responsible from denying them a necessary management tool (hunting). (5) A few named factors other than hunting as contributing to tolerance: time, and what one rancher called moving from “emotions” (fear and anger) to “solutions” (figuring out how to live with wolves). (6) All described positive relationships with government, but they did not attribute their increased tolerance to their relationships with government. Results are organized by these six themes.

Wolves are Difficult to Share the Landscape With

All ranchers and hunters interviewed emphasized that living with wolves is not easy. For ranchers, wolves brought risk of livestock depredation and added stress, work, and cost to mitigate that risk. Depredation was unevenly distributed throughout the watershed, with some ranchers facing routine depredation pressure and others none at all. For ranchers, the cost of depredation is emotional as well as financial. One rancher described losing a bottle-fed calf as follows:

“The day after we put him out [with the other cows], the wolves got him. You know... that was 12 hour shifts every day for three months and two months of working with the calf to have him killed the very next day... That's a tough one to deal with... You get attached to them.”

Even though the state compensates ranchers for confirmed depredations, wolves still cost ranchers financially. As Emily explained, “if a wolf kills one of your calves you have to prove without a reasonable doubt that that was a wolf kill,” but ranchers often can’t because “usually there's not much left” when they find the carcass. One rancher described wolves harassing his

cows for several years before preying on them. Jessica said wolves' harassment made it more difficult to manage grazing and it negatively impacted her cows' weight gain.

Ranchers also spoke about the cost of preventing depredation. Although government and BC provide some services at reduced or no cost, some non-lethal methods of depredation prevention are still costly. Some also felt non-lethal controls (especially electric fences) imposed on their desired lifestyles or were incompatible with how they operated their ranches.

Wolves' impact on hunters was a subject of debate because wolves' effect on elk populations differs across place and time and it is more difficult to demonstrate compared to livestock depredation because the effects of predation on prey populations is complicated.. Government officials interviewed emphasized that wolves' impact on elk differs across time and space. However, some attributed hunters' perceived decreased odds of taking elk to wolves. Some hunters spoke about wolves decreasing elk populations by eating elk, but some also described another way wolves complicated elk hunting. Many interviewees, including government wildlife officials, said that around the 1990s, elk began spending more time on private land in the watershed. Blake believed wolf predation on public land pushed elk onto private land. Another hunter, Landon, agreed, but also named wildfires and drier summers as push factors. Both named ranchers irrigated alfalfa crops as a pull factor drawing elk onto ranches. Hunters must get permission from private landowners to hunt on their land, and landowners who allowed hunting reported receiving many more requests from hunters than they were able to accommodate. Elk hunters were frustrated that they could not access elk on private land as easily as they could on public land.

A few also said they disliked witnessing the grisly aftermath of wolves killing wild animals. Emily described seeing wolves eat deer alive, saying: “That's pretty gross to see... But it's nature... nature's pretty cruel when you think about it.”

Wolves' return resulted in real and perceived increased work, stress, and costs (financial and emotional) for interviewees.' Pro-wolf environmental and animal rights groups' framing often denies these challenges of living with wolves, by minimizing the cost of depredation, blaming ranchers for depredation, denying wolves' impact on game populations, and emphasizing wolves' right to deprive hunters of a share of their game. As noted below, interviewees' explain pro-wolf groups' invalidation of their reality by referring to pro-wolf groups as ignorant, emotional, and irrational.

All the Tools in the Toolbox

Despite these challenges, interviewees who reported increased tolerance expressed willingness to live with wolves, so long as they were able to manage risk in accordance with their values. Ranchers, hunters, government officials, and BC board and staff all discussed managing nature using a metaphor of tools. The range of management options available constitute a metaphorical toolbox from which one should select the appropriate tool for each job. For example, Rick, a rancher involved in BC, said:

“I think eventually it's going to have to be [legal to hunt grizzlies]. At least have the ability to not have to call Wildlife Services or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or something when there's a problem with a bear, that we can take care of it ourselves and not -- without fear of being prosecuted, which kind of was the case with the wolves... I

mean, it was a federal offense if you killed a wolf when they first showed up on landscape for a long time, and then it got to well if they're bothering your cattle, you can shoot them. And without being prosecuted, but they better be in the pasture where the cows are... So, it wasn't like free reign just go kill wolves if they were within a mile of your cattle, no. And that's appropriate. I mean, it should be that way. So, eventually, I think all those tools will have to be in the toolbox.”

Ranchers who tolerated wolves sometimes used the toolbox metaphor to emphasize that they needed the option of hunting and culling wolves and sometimes used it to emphasize killing wolves is not always the correct tool. Carter described his toolbox as electric fences, carcass removal, range riders, fladry, and maintaining his cows' health. Referring to managing nature with tools was also common among Montana hunters, ranchers, and government wildlife officials in statewide data gathered from sources like public meetings, local newspapers, and hunting organizations' social media accounts.

Interviewees distinguished between tools they would use themselves, tools they believed were appropriate to offer as options but they would not use personally, and tools they believed were too immoral to allow for anyone. One trapper did not advocate banning wolf trapping, but he said he would not trap wolves because he loved dogs. Several mentioned they would not kill mothers with young, but interviewees disagreed about whether it was immoral to kill a very pregnant elk in February or to orphan an elk calf in August.

Ranchers and hunters who tolerated wolves were unanimous in their support for hunting, and they often expressed their support for culling and hunting with calls for having “all the [ethically appropriate] tools in the toolbox.” In the following section, I describe why interviewees said their toolboxes were incomplete without hunting.

Wolf Hunting

Interviewees who reported increased tolerance cited hunting as the most significant factor that helped them tolerate wolves – or described their tolerance for wolves as conditional on being able to hunt and/or trap them. For example, a trapper, said, “I love having [wolves] here – as long as we have harvest opportunity for them.” The most common reason given was the desire to manage wolf numbers with annual hunting seasons, but some ranchers also mentioned that hunting was necessary to restore wolves’ fear of humans (thereby making protecting livestock easier), and one (as noted above) enjoyed trapping wolves. Interviewees in this group were divided between those who caveated their tolerance of wolves with a desire to see wolf numbers reduced more and those who did not.

Support for hunting was embedded in a belief that the right relationship between humans and non-human nature was one of human “management” with the goal of providing for human needs while keeping the ecosystem in balance. They described management as both an individual and collective task in which the state used science to coordinate balancing populations of each species in the ecosystem while prioritizing human use of natural resources, and individuals contributed by hunting, trapping, and managing private land. Jake , a rancher who hunts, explained that hunting other species without hunting wolves would create an imbalance between wolves and their prey that might lead wolves to eating livestock:

“If you do the best you can to keep a healthy balance in your ecosystem of your deer, your elk, all your little animals, your predators, like the less conflict I think you'll have between those predators and the ranchers and the agriculture. Because there is plenty for

them to have out there. So, if you're just like, yeah, we're not going to touch these, because political reasons or whatever the case is. Then there becomes an imbalance, right?"

Jake emphasized his lack of animosity for wolves ("Can't hate a wolf for being a wolf") and his desire to continue coexisting with them ("I don't think they should be eradicated... I think they all have a place in the ecosystem"), but, like others who reported increased tolerance, he believed "they should be managed" with hunting. All hunters and ranchers interviewed saw hunting as a way to produce goods like food, recreation, and tourism revenue while managing wildlife population numbers to prevent wildlife from encroaching on humans and maintain ecosystem balance.

In addition to reducing the overall wolf population, ranchers reported hunting helped by increasing wolves fear of humans. Sean, a rancher, explained it as follows:

Sean: "Those wolves were very brazen... They had no fear of humans... And 2009 was our first hunting season, and that changed like within days..."

Interviewer: "Did it change their behavior in terms of depredation?"

Sean: "I think a little bit mostly... because human presence worked better. Before, human presence wasn't a threat to them and now human presence is something that threatens them a little bit."

Ranchers reported that wolves' fear of humans made non-lethal depredation prevention measures, especially the range riders, more effective. Range riders who patrol the landscape to monitor both carnivores and livestock try to use wolves' fear of humans to put pressure on

wolves to have their young away from livestock so the wolves focus their hunting on wild game in that area while remaining in one place until the pups are old enough to move each spring.

Last, the only interviewee who had hunted or trapped a wolf felt more accepting of wolves after he found he liked trapping them:

“When [wolves] really came on to the scene, ...the mindset I had was that this is bad, and we need to get rid of these things, and we don’t need this many. But after trapping them for a year or so, that started to change. I started respecting them more. You can’t help but mess with them for awhile and not respect their intelligence. It’s been a lot of fun trying to figure them out... I don’t ever want to see them wiped out, but they need to be managed.”

All interviewees who reported increased tolerance of wolves named wolf hunting as a reason for increased tolerance, and sometimes the sole reason for increased tolerance or a condition for their tolerance. Interviewees named a variety of reasons they believed wolf hunting (and, for some, trapping) helped them tolerate wolves, but all believed that hunting was a necessary component of the relationship humans should have with nature.

“This is a Problem with Humans”

Several interviewees who reported increased tolerance said they resented that people who did not understand their lives prevented them from managing the land the way they believed was best. They described feeling unable to “reason” with people who support hunting bans, calling them “emotional,” and, like Jake, calling bans “political.” In contrast, they describe themselves as rational and scientific. Rick said, “There's people that look at the wolf and the bear and almost

worship them and my God it's hard to reason with them that we've got – we've been trying to make a living out here.”

Jessica and Frank emphasized that the people responsible for banning hunting live far away and do not understand what living with wolves is like.

Jessica: “This is not a bear or wolf problem. This is a problem with humans who live on the east coast and the west coast who are very passionate who continue to file injunctions on things they don't know anything about. And that they don't live with. So yeah, I'm not angry necessarily at the wildlife themselves. It's maddening to have people steering your livelihood that don't know.”

Frank: “How does someone from a suburban coastal area have their viewpoint on wolves when they've never seen a wolf? Never seen what a wolf can do. You know, but you let a few of them loose in their town and Fluffy goes missing... and pretty soon they go, shit. These aren't the creatures you see in Disney movies.”

Jessica and Frank both said their tolerance for wolves changed when hunting became legal because their anger was at humans who used the ESA to ban hunting rather than at wolves themselves. Many interviewees (including government officials) believed that environmentalists' lawsuits kept wolves listed for political reasons years after scientists determined their populations had recovered. As expressed in the quotes above, several interviewees were angry that hunting was banned by the actions of people interviewees believed were uninformed, unaffected by the consequences of hunting bans, and unwilling to listen.

Moving From “Emotions” to “Solutions”

Although hunting was the most frequently reason interviewees cited for increased tolerance, three ranchers also attributed their tolerance to accepting what they could not change: wolves' presence in the watershed. When I asked Sean if the difficulties he faced from wolves upset him, he replied: “Yeah, it used to... I guess at some point, you realize that's the fate of your life, things change, and you don't have control over everything.” He added, “When they started letting us hunt and trap them, that, you know, at least took some of the pressure off of us and made things work a little easier.”

Jessica also reported acceptance once she realized wolves were in the watershed to stay, but when asked for details, she said her ability to overcome her anger was delayed until after wolf hunting was legal:

Jessica: “But it also becomes an adjustment where you have to realize that you can't just live in fear and we have to adjust what we're doing, how we do it and figure out how we're going to coexist, because [wolves are] not going anywhere.”

Interviewer: “Can you tell me what that was like going through the process of making those adjustments and figuring out what adjustments to make and how you felt? You know, starting from a place of fear and at what point maybe that changed?”

Jessica: “Well I think time is the biggest thing that has changed it. And just allowing that time to happen. But I think for us it initially started as fear. And then it changed to anger. You know, you're angry that you have these predators on the landscape with no ability to

manage them. When wolf hunting seasons were put back on the board and people could actually start hunting wolves, some peace came over you to think we can manage these numbers.”

Another government employee seconded Jessica’s belief that acceptance grows with time. He said that his agency teaches that people go through a process of shock, anger, reflection, and acceptance over time. He said that in his experience, people vary in the length of time needed to experience each stage, and some never reach acceptance. He estimates that for grizzly bears it takes 15 years to reach acceptance following property damage or depredation, and for wolves it takes longer.

Both Jessica and Sean connected the legalization of wolf hunting to their ability to take action to protect their livestock from wolves in addition to non-lethal methods of preventing depredation. One former government employee echoed Jessica’s connection between the legalization of hunting, one’s ability to do something about wolves, and overcoming anger, saying:

“What helped with the wolf thing was... that, OK, so wolves are delisted. And you can now buy a wolf tag, right? So, suddenly, those same folks that were chewing me out that first year, the second year, I'd listen for a while and then I'd say, so did you buy a wolf tag?... Are you going to try to do anything? So suddenly their hands weren't tied.”

Like Beca, Rick spoke about overcoming emotions as a precursor to figuring out how to coexist with wolves. Speaking about BC’s development of non-lethal programs, he said, “You got to get past the emotion before you can start thinking about solutions.” Then he described the transition from emotions to solutions for participants in BC:

“It was emotional, emotional. I think it was the unknown. You know, you just don't know what's going to happen. We didn't know what it was going to take to deal with them. Once we started... looking around a little bit of what was going on in other places, we started coming up with some ideas. And we didn't invent anything, I don't think... We just made it work for our landscape. I think where we're going to have to be creative though is in our summer. If we get more packs of wolves on the landscape, we're going to have to be more creative in our Range Rider Program, and more proactive, I think with working with the Fish and Wildlife Service and Fish and Game [FWP] to try and get more collared wolves, and then give our range riders the tools to be able to track those better.”

At the end of his statement, Rick seamlessly transitioned from describing BC's process in the past to thinking about how BC can work with government partners to continue to improve in the future. Whereas narratives of fear and anger reflected feelings of powerlessness (as when Jessica complained of having “no ability to manage” wolves when hunting was illegal), Rick's narrative of finding solutions is one of agency: working together with his community, growing more adept at preventing depredation, knowing more what to expect from wolves, and feeling supported by government. Jessica and Sean also collectively about their communities, when Sean said wolf hunting “took some of the pressure off of us” and Jessica said “we can manage these numbers.”

Beca, Rick, and Sean all described a transition over time from fear and anger to actively working to manage threats posed by wolves after accepting wolves were not going away. However, Jessica named hunting bans as an impediment to overcoming anger – and Rick named emotions like fear and anger as impediments to the community's ability to seek solutions in BC.

The Role of Government in Tolerance

Interviewees did not attribute increased tolerance of wolves to their relationships with government, but they spoke about their relationships with government in other contexts. Most spoke about positive relationships and positive experiences with individual government officials. When I suggested some ranchers dislike government, Carter replied, “That's because they haven't talked to them.” He recounted many positive interactions with government employees and credited both government and BC with helping his ranch thrive. Some interviewees who reported increased tolerance referred to government employees as “my friend” or “awesome.”

Expressing distrust in the government and recounting negative experiences with government employees was much more common among interviewees with consistently positive or negative attitudes toward wolves. Ray believed FWP solicited public input but did not listen to it, Cynthia believed FWP lied about the number of wolves, and Gail believed FWP promoted hunting unnecessarily to make money from license fees.

Although a few interviewees who reported increased tolerance described some distrust in or negative interactions with government, they also spoke about ways they worked well with government. For example, one rancher believed government bureaucracy was inefficient, but he trusted individual government employees he worked with. One interviewee who had volunteered in a government citizen advisory council believed the government disregarded the council's recommendations, but he felt he was able to work with government effectively through BC. Although interviewees did not credit their relationships with government in their tolerance for wolves, their positive relationships with government may play a role in their tolerance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Some theorize the public resists wolf policies incompatible with their values (Manfredo et al. 2020; Olson et al. 2015). Although values are central to wolf conflicts (Farrell 2015), “action is not determined by one's values. Rather action and values are organized to take advantage of cultural competences” (Swidler 1986, 275). Meaning is central to wolf conflicts (Nie 2003); theories explaining conflicts must also address their cognitive components. Interviewees’ determinations of whether the conditions in which they lived with wolves were tolerable rested upon a socially constructed sense of injustice (Gamson 2013). Interviewees who reported increased tolerance believed the ban on hunting – especially after wolves met federal recovery criteria and even more so once FWS initially delisted them – was a miscarriage of justice. It appears hunters’ and ranchers’ tolerance of wolves increased with time, government and community support, and legal outlets to take action to manage wolves as they [hunters and ranchers] believed was needed.

Injustice frames arise from the belief that motivated human actors cause harm and suffering; wolves themselves are natural and “nature is a poor target for an injustice frame” (Gamson 2013, 1). As Jake said, “Can’t hate a wolf for being a wolf” – but one can blame other humans for promoting policies that allowed wolves to recolonize Montana and for making it unnecessarily difficult to live with wolves. Interviewees’ determinations of whether other people were responsible for their difficulties with wolves was colored by their values, both about the right relationship between humans and non-human nature and the right relationship between government and those they govern. Those who reported increased tolerance had worked with

government employees through BC and directly to manage wolves in accordance with their values on their land and/or throughout the watershed.

Interviewees' determinations of injustice were also grounded not just in values, but in cognitions. Those who reported increased tolerance believed that wolves are challenging to live with, hunting is necessary for management, and pro-wolf lawsuits to relist wolves violated the principle of scientific management. Interviewees who reported increased tolerance expressed frustration that pro-wolf activists who held what interviewees believed was a flawed understanding of reality held enough power to impact government policy.

Interviewees who reported increased tolerance doubted the legitimacy of wolves' relisting due to lawsuits. One – a strong opponent of poaching – admitted that initially he was so opposed to wolves' presence in Montana, he would have killed one illegally. However, these interviewees believed in the legitimacy of government wolf management following wolves' delisting. This group of interviewees held longstanding, trusting personal relationships with government officials who validated their perceptions (and backed down quickly when accidentally invalidated them) (Richardson 2022). Past research suggests participatory collaborative governance (like BC) can increase legitimacy and produce some belief convergence when participants engage in informed dialogue while open to one another's ideas (Lundmark and Matti 2015; Lundmark et al. 2018).

Injustice frames can be the basis of collective action, if a critical mass of people interpret a situation as unjust, form a collective identity, and believe they have the power to enact change through collective action (Benford 1997; Gamson 2013). When one interprets a situation as unjust without believing collective action can produce change, resistance may take other forms, like poaching or counter-hegemonic discourse (Scott 1985). However, interviewees who reported

increased tolerance spoke about collective action that improved their situation without challenging the law.

Hunters and ranchers who reported increased tolerance actively engaged in solving problems had a channel to turn their anxiety and frustration into action. They could help BC develop non-lethal management programs or participate in them. Once wolves were delisted, they could attend and comment on wolf management policy at Fish and Wildlife Commission meetings, and they could buy a wolf tag and hunt or trap a wolf. One interviewee spoke of moving from “emotions” to “solutions:” taking action calmed fear and anger. When wolves were listed as endangered, preventing them from legally taking certain actions, they channeled emotions as anger toward the pro-wolf groups they saw as responsible.

More research is needed is the role of emotions. Injustice is a hot cognition; it “focuses on... righteous anger” (Gamson 2013, 1). One feels fear and anger in response to a perceived threat; fear and anger are adaptive responses that motivate one to act (Castillo-Huitrón et al. 2020). What is the relationship between “emotions” and “solutions”? Some interviewees described overcoming emotions as a precursor to finding ways to reduce risks posed by wolves, whereas others described a reduction in anger as a consequence taking action (for example, by hunting). What is the relationship between anger and feeling powerless and between acceptance and agency? Does time help soften anger into acceptance?

Research is also needed on two areas that may influence values and formation of collective identity: race and political affiliation. Many values white interviewees expressed originated in European and Euro-American culture (Dunlap 1988; Farrell 2015; Lopez 1979; Manfredo et al. 2020; Taylor 2002). Aside from research about Native Americans (Ohlson et al. 2008; Shelley et al. 2011; Wilson 1999), studies frequently do not mention the race of the study

population, with few exceptions (Lute and Gore 2014). Because some wolf policies are enacted by elected officials and political appointees, research should also explore the role of political parties.

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