It Doesn’t Make Sense

Reintroduction of wolves is not supported by Adirondack communities.

BY WILLIAM D. HUTCHENS

Not since the Governor’s Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century has there been as much controversy in the Adirondacks.

It’s about the possible reintroduction of wolves. Some see this as an opportunity to recapture a time gone by and, in effect, give rebirth to a wild animal in a habitat it once roamed freely. Others see it as an attempt to bring another unwanted predator to Adirondackers’ doorstep, with all the hazards, expenditure of taxpayer funds and potential government intervention facilitating the process that such entails.

No one disputes the almost incredible attraction of the wolf to all of us in today’s environment. It is respected for its exceptional intelligence, its intricate social behavior, its cooperative hunting tactics, and its adaptation to the entire spectrum of our continent’s climates. Indeed, it is beginning to reassert its claim on many wilderness areas from which it had been eliminated. The question is whether the Adirondacks should be one of those areas.

For my part, I have serious reservations as to whether the plan makes any sense for the Adirondack Park.

The issue has stirred would-be journalists and just plain folks to write scores of letters to the editors. It has spawned polls and surveys pro and con. And it has triggered a resolution by the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages (AATV), a consortium of virtually all towns and villages within the park — 91 towns and ten villages — flatly opposing the plan.

The Defenders of Wildlife, a responsible Washington, D.C.-based conservation organization, has undertaken a campaign to reintroduce wolves to the Adirondacks, similar to a project they spearheaded in Yellowstone in 1995. They have stated that “most New Yorkers love the idea of bringing wolves back to their state.”

As support, they point to results of a telephone survey they commissioned indicating 80 percent of Adirondack respondents favored the plan. While the questions asked might be characterized by some as introducing bias (“Is it important to you personally to save the timber wolf because of an obligation to preserve them for our children and grandchildren?”), suffice it to say the results seem to fly in the face of all the other evidence of public opinion.

In addition to the AATV resolution already mentioned, other responsible groups opposed or critical include the New York State Farm Bureau, Adirondack Conservation Council, the Land Rights Foundation, Indian Lake - Blue Mt. Lake Fish & Game Club, Hamilton County Fish & Game Club, Essex County Board of Supervisors, Warren County Board of Supervisors, and the Adirondack Landowners Association (the latter representing somewhat more than 10 percent of the non-commercial privately owned land in the Park), to mention just a few.

And then at least two additional polls: the Hamilton County News asked its readers last fall to fill out a survey form on the subject. Slightly more than 100 people responded. As reported in the November 18 edition of the paper, 88.5 percent of the respondents were opposed to wolf reintroduction. And the Adirondack Conservation Council, not to be left out of the act, asked 2,100 residents how they felt. The result: 94.5 percent opposed.

But the Defenders say those who oppose are the most vocal. On the contrary, one does not have to be vocal to be opposed. In fact, DEC policy has been quoted as follows:

“Several criteria must be addressed before management actions can be taken towards the possible restoration of a species. One criterion is that biological feasibility must exist. Another is that local communities must request restoration; lack of opposition is not indicative of community desire (emphasis added). Community requests for restoration must be based on informed consent of potentially affected members; consent of local officials is important, but not sufficient in itself. Considerations of adjoining communities must be addressed in any request. Finally, sufficient resources must be available to fund restoration and long-term management of the species in question. Thus, before DEC can make a final decision about wolf restoration, numerous intermediate decisions must be made by a variety of stakeholders.”

Wolves did roam the Northeast a century ago and were eliminated by the forces of man, bounty hunters, trappers, and so on. This does not mean an occasional wolf has not crossed our border since from Canada. In fact, an adult gray wolf that showed no signs of captive confinement was said to have been killed in 1968 in Gloversville, Fulton County.

Consequently, some suggest that nature might take its course, with wolves migrating south from Canada in due course. In fact, any significant restoration through such natural means is unlikely.

A July 1997 study, commissioned by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS),

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which has its headquarters at the Bronx Zoo in New York City, has found that wolf recolonization by natural means is more likely to be successful elsewhere than in New York. The St. Lawrence River represents the principal barrier to any southern migration.

In any case, serious questions about the Adirondack habitat exist. The WCS study stated "preliminary analysis of the amount of habitat available in the area shows that it is only about half that recommended by the US Fish & Wildlife Service as necessary to maintain long-term viability" (emphasis added).

One questions the wisdom of spending substantial state taxpayer funds in transplantation efforts and ongoing maintenance that could prove futile due to habitat limitations. And let's remember that the Adirondack "habitat" also includes numerous towns and villages. Is it reasonable to assume wolves would not become a nuisance in these areas, and prey on sheep, cows, calves, ducks, chicken and pigs . . . not to mention my dog, "Gingersnap?" Are we to presume that generations of wolves would somehow learn to remain in the remote areas of their original transplant and not disperse to more populated areas, as some of the wolves from Yellowstone have?

Not so, according to L. David Mech, the respected biologist and expert on wolf behavior. He points out that as wolves move into agricultural areas, conflicts with humans greatly increase. And, he says, "Compensation payments will become politically unpopular as the public learns it is subsidizing wolves with payments to farmers for their wolf-killed livestock." In Yellowstone and other areas where wolf reintroduction has occurred, federal funds have been available to foot the bill, as federal land was involved, unlike the Adirondacks. Accordingly, Defenders offers to absorb these payments. Is this a good idea? Do the payments really compensate for all the problems associated with the losses?

To be fair, the jury may still be out with respect to habitat. Defenders has commissioned a new feasibility study which is expected to cover biological, social, economic, and regulatory issues and impacts. They have also organized a Citizens Advisory Committee to provide some oversight in the process. Whether these efforts will result in significant new information that contradicts what we know today remains uncertain.

Another and perhaps very critical aspect of wolf reintroduction in the Adirondacks is the impact on the deer population and wolves' interrelationship with coyotes. Coyotes are, of course, the major wildlife predator of deer in the Park.

It is known that wolves will interbreed with coyotes. Many Adirondackers believe that wolf genes are already present, and some experts suspect that this is true. Indeed, cross-breeding with coyotes is pointed out by some as a major threat to potential long-term survival of the wolf gene pool in areas where they might co-exist.

On the other hand, wolves will readily kill coyotes. A recent article in the New York Times on the effect of wolves in Yellowstone indicates they may have killed half the coyotes in the area, aside from any evidence of hybridization. Although wolf reintroduction proponents say such activity by wolves controlling the coyotes is good for the deer herd, deer hunters are hard pressed to see it as anything other than simply the partial replacement of one predator by another, with the remaining total number of predators greater than before. And there would be no hunting or trapping season on the new predator, the deer hunters point out. For that matter, many hunters concede there is no way they will be able to tell the difference between a small wolf and a large coyote when the sights are drawn, say, at a hundred yards, and the moment of truth is at hand.

As for the deer population, it's a no-brainer that the wolf's main dish is venison. And it is thin soup to say the wolves kill only the weak and infirm. It's simply not so.

I have hunted throughout North America and seen the remains of caribou, moose and deer sprouting sizable antlers quite inconsistent with an infirm animal. And with clear evidence of a wolf-pack kill on the site. Others have filmed such kills. This is nature.

Wolf expert L. David Mech has also said, "Whatever meat is available the animal will eat, including refuse, carrion, bait and fresh prey. There is no reason the
wolf would purposely refuse to eat prime, healthy animals and choose only the infirm ones.” Which is not to say a wolf pack would pass up any yearling or ill deer that passed its way!

Many Adirondackers see the idea of another predator threatening the already declining deer herd as making no sense at all. Statistics available from DEC clearly point toward a serious problem with the deer population in certain areas of the Park during the last five years. In Hamilton County alone — a prime candidate for wolf reintroduction in view of its amount of open space — the total deer take dropped from 1,239 in 1992 to 825 in 1996, a staggering decline of 33 percent. And this wasn’t an aberration. With the exception of one fairly level year, each of the five years showed a lower total than the previous year.

Was this because of the steadily increasing population of coyotes, now estimated statewide at 15,000, or because of fewer hunters or some other reason? It is true that there has been a steady decline of statewide big game license sales during the same period, from 694,254 to 619,930 or about ten percent. A definitive answer is not available. But bringing wolves into the equation seems unlikely to be a plus! And this is not to mention what would happen to New York’s recent efforts to encourage the moose, another item on the wolf’s menu.

The previously cited Wildlife Conservation Society study examined the effect of wolves on the deer population in the Superior National Forest area of Minnesota, and had this to report: “When deer numbers reached low population levels (due to aging of the forest), wolves increased the rate of decline in the deer herd, leading to a near extinction of the deer population in the central portion of the Forest” (emphasis added).

Also, in a recent forum on wolf reintroduction, Fred Bonner, a biologist from North Carolina, reported “a drastic decline in the population of white-tailed deer as a result of red wolf introduction.”

Let’s be clear. Hunters as a group do not object conceptually to the reintroduction of wolves. In northwestern Wyoming outside Yellowstone, wildlife officials say there are nearly 10,000 too many elk and winter ranges are degraded to the point where expensive feeding programs are required. Recognizing the role of wolves in maintaining an ecological balance in this case, most hunters who belong to the Wyoming Wildlife Federation supported wolf recovery in the Yellowstone area.

One does not need to expand on the importance of the deer herd to the economy of the Adirondack Park. But the point should be clearly made that the situation in the Adirondacks, with its aging forest and declining deer herd, is far more analogous to that described above in the Superior National Forest of Minnesota than it is to Yellowstone. There is little basis for comparing whatever success reintroduction has had in Yellowstone to what might occur in the Adirondacks.

Another point raised by the proponents of wolf reintroduction is that they would control the expanding beaver population. Admittedly, beavers can sometimes be a real nuisance, but such problems really occur only in areas along roadways, certainly areas wolves would not frequent . . . if they choose to survive.

Which leads to another point: tourism. The Defenders claim that tourism was increased in Yellowstone by the reintroduction of wolves and point to the resulting popularity of tourists gathering for “wolf howls” and “sightings.” While the patchwork of public and private lands within the Adirondack Park bears no resemblance to Yellowstone, it is still hard to imagine how and where people would gather to participate in these activities. Would new roads be pushed into wilderness areas, perhaps calling for exceptions to APA policies? Hardly popular. Hardly likely. As for your chances of seeing a wolf, if they were around, don’t bet the farm on it! In 50 years of hunting in the Adirondacks, I’ve seen maybe two or three coyotes, and seen another one or two along the road, killed by cars. Coyotes are nocturnal, elusive and extremely shy of humans. Wolves, no doubt, are more so. Or would wolves be fenced in somehow to accommodate the tourists, as in some kind of wilderness zoo? The wolf howl thing really boggles the imagination.

Finally, there are serious concerns about land-use restraints which might well be needed to protect wolf packs. It is well known that state law may deny access in cases of “threatened or endangered species or natural communities where the destruction of such habitat or the removal of such species therefrom would impair their ability to survive.” Can one imagine how all this would play out with respect to a developing wolf population, the members of which are not likely to be cognizant of whatever boundary lines are established in the infinite wisdom of our state? What about wolves who eventually choose to settle and raise their pups on large tracts of remote private land where hunting leases, an important part of the Adirondack economy, exist?

To bring this into focus, what if some governmental agency actually did decide that in the interest of the wolves a certain section of such private land should be off-limits to access? How would that be controlled? Aside from the bounds of reason and existing law, it is part of the Adirondackers’ culture to look askance at those who say what you can or cannot do on your own land. Which is not to suggest that any member of the public would feel any differently about being denied access to his or her favorite area in the state-owned forest preserve.

There are questions of community support and funding, appropriate and adequate habitat for long-term persistence, relationship of interbreeding and/or conflict with coyotes, effect on a declining deer population, potential land-use restrictions, and maybe more. In short, more questions than answers.

But the seminal issue may well be this: Governor Pataki has said that wolf restoration “would have to have the support of local communities” before he would consider moving forward with a recovery plan.

Reintroduction of wolves in the Adirondacks is simply not supported by the communities there, and for good reason. It does not make sense.