Animal Rights and Wildlife Conservation

CONFLICTING OR COMPATIBLE?

By Jeremy T. Bruskotter, John A. Vucetich and Michael Paul Nelson

In October 2013, a man taking part in a guided elk hunt in Wyoming spotted a group of gray wolves in the distance. They were within the state's predator management zone, where wolves may be killed without a license, so after crawling to approach them, the hunter took aim and fired. The shot killed one of the wolves, and the hunter strapped the carcass to the top of his SUV, drove to Jackson Hole's town square and parked downtown across from the famed Cowboy Bar, according to a report in the local newspaper, the Jackson Hole News and Guide.

The take was lawful, but the incident unleashed a firestorm of angry responses on the newspaper's opinion page. Residents questioned not only the motivations and morality of the hunter; they called into question the legitimacy of the act as a form of hunting.

"This is what revenge looks like," wrote wildlife photographer Thomas Mangelsen in an opinion column in the newspaper. "When people raise their guns as an emotional expression of hatred toward a species, it is not hunting," he wrote.

▼ A passerby stops to photograph a wolf carcass strapped to the roof of an SUV in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Credit: Bradly J. Boner, Jackson Hole Daily

Manglesen and the outraged residents of Wyoming aren't alone. Mounting evidence indicates that societal views concerning our relationship with wild — and domestic — animals have been changing. They are moving away from a focus on using animals solely as a means to promote human well-being to a growing interest in the well-being of animals (Manfredo et al. 2003, Manfredo et al. 2009).

The first inkling of this shift was noted more than 30 years ago in an analysis of news articles spanning seven decades. That analysis found evidence of a long-term shift, which began following World War I, away from concerns for the "practical and material value of animals" (Kellert 1985). More recent research suggests that societal views about wildlife are turning toward an emphasis on greater care and compassion for wild animals (Manfredo et al. 2009).

This shift is reflected in attitudes about the treatment of so-called "nuisance" wildlife that damage property or cause other economic harms. A recent study indicates that while most Americans support a landowner's right to control nuisance wildlife, they are increasingly skeptical about the means of control (Slagle et al. 2017). The shift is also reflected in Gallup polling, which indicates the percentage of Americans who believe animals have the "same rights as people" increased from 25 to 32 percent between 2008 and 2015.

Concerns of this nature are not limited to the United States. In the early 1990s, the European Union implemented a ban on leghold traps and other methods that do not meet agreed-upon humane trapping standards (Council Regulation (EEC) No. 3254/91).

These examples, as well as others, suggest that the values, beliefs and attitudes guiding societies' relationships with the planet's wildlife are in the midst of profound change. We are expanding our moral community to include animals, and we are increasingly concerned for their welfare.

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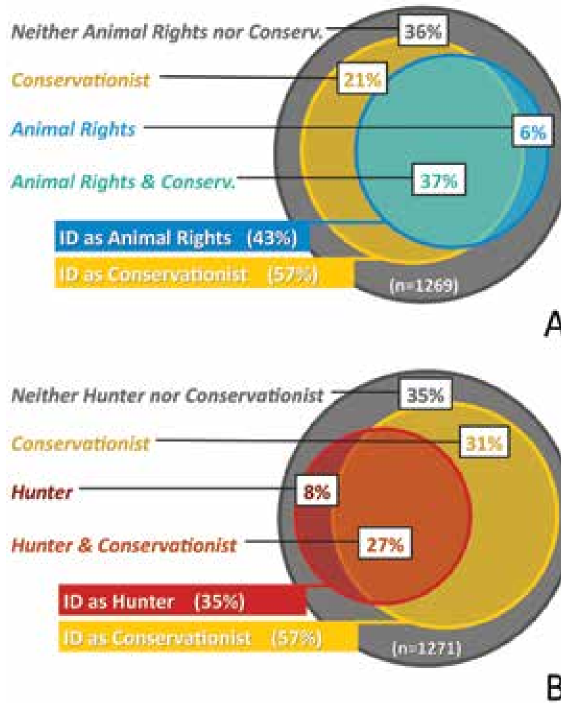
Wildlife conservation's philosophical roots

These changes are likely to challenge wildlife conservation methods in North America, which are strongly rooted in the traditions of hunting and trapping. Nineteenth-century overexploitation, including market hunting, led to severe declines of numerous North American wildlife species (Dunlap 1991). Those declines helped catalyze a movement during the early 20th century that emphasized sustainable harvest of wildlife (Leopold 1933) — exploiting a few species as much as society wanted without infringing on future interests to do so (Vucetich and Nelson 2010). This "hunter-centric" model of wildlife conservation sought to produce game animals to harvest (Geist et al. 2001). As Aldo Leopold wrote early in his career, game management was "the art of making land produce sustained annual crops of wild game for recreational use (Leopold 1933)."

This philosophy still guides wildlife management today. Fundamentally anthropocentric and utilitarian, it is rooted in the ideas that only humans possess intrinsic value and that wildlife is a resource that should be used to benefit humans. Wildlife conservation's commitment to these views is codified in the Public Trust Doctrine — the common law notion that underpins state governments' authority over wildlife in the United States and is present in some form in at least 21 other countries (Treves et al. 2017).

The doctrine holds that wildlife is a public asset held in trust by governments and managed on behalf of citizen beneficiaries (Freyfogle and Goble 2009). As the U.S. Supreme Court concluded more than 100 years ago in the landmark case *Geer v. Connecticut (1896),* the trustee-beneficiary relationship between a state and its citizens creates a duty "to enact such laws as will best preserve the subject of the trust, and secure its beneficial use in the future." Notably, the case dealt with a defendant who transported the carcasses of woodcock, ruffed grouse and quail from one state to another. Ultimately, the court's decision hinged upon not whether wildlife was of conservation value but whether wild animals could be treated as an object of interstate commerce.

Geer illustrates a commitment to anthropocentrism in U.S. conservation that continues to this day. Indeed, management textbooks still depict the purpose of wildlife management as producing "value" or "impacts" desired by human stakeholders — so



◀ The authors found that 37 percent of respondents self-identified as "conservationists" and "animal rights advocates." Twenty-seven percent self-identified as "conservationists" and "hunters." Just 6 percent self-identified only as animal rights advocates; just 8 percent only identified as hunters. The sampling protocol provides for a margin of error of 2.7 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Figures do not add to 100 percent due to rounding error.

long as their production does not infringe on our ability to meet societal desires in the future (Decker et al. 2012, Krausman and Cain III 2013).

Changing values challenge our long-standing philosophy

As societal values shift, the public's dissatisfaction with wildlife agencies' decision-making processes is increasing. A growing number of ballot initiatives and referenda seek to protect wild animals. Between 1940 and 1990, Americans approved just one statewide ballot initiative that restricted the hunting or trapping of wildlife — a ban on dove hunting in South Dakota, which was later repealed (Pacelle 1998). Since then, more than 50 state ballot measures have been initiated to protect the welfare of wild and domestic animals. Most were bans on various methods of hunting or trapping wildlife. More than two-thirds (68 percent) were successful (The Humane Society of the U.S. 2016). These numbers support the notion that concern for wildlife welfare is rising and people are frustrated with the traditional model of wildlife governance (Jacobson and Decker 2008).

The lack of responsiveness by wildlife agencies to animal welfare interests is not surprising. Wildlife professionals often view conservation and animal rights as antagonistic (Schmidt 1990, Muth and Jamison 2000). The Wildlife Society's standing position statement, Animal Rights Philosophy and Wildlife Conservation, describes the conflict between animal rights and wildlife conservation as "profound."

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Yet, that antagonistic view does not seem to be shared by the general public — or even by most self-identified conservationists, as the results of our recent survey show. We polled more than 1,200 adults via KnowledgePanel, a representative online panel of U.S. residents recruited to take part in survey research. We asked them to indicate the extent to which they identified as hunters, conservationists and animal rights advocates. Although a plurality (37 percent) self-identified as both conservationists and animal rights advocates, far fewer (27 percent) self-identified as both conservationists and hunters. Those identifying as conservationists were more likely to identify as animal rights advocates ($r = 0.52$) than as hunters ($r = 0.26$).

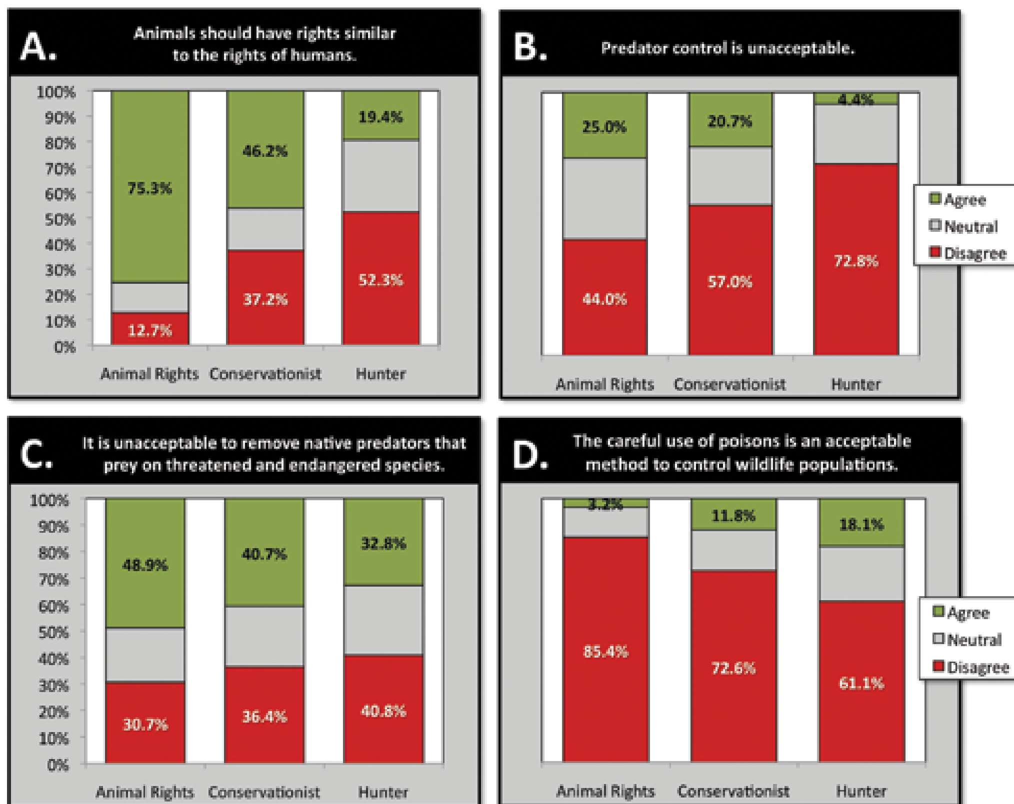
These data suggest that, in contrast to its hunter-centric origins, the U.S. conservation movement today identifies at least as much with animal rights as with hunting. More than two-thirds (69 percent) unequivocally endorsed the idea that wildlife possess intrinsic value, an idea that runs counter to anthropocentrism. To acknowledge the intrinsic value of a living thing is to acknowledge an obligation to treat it with concern for its interests and well-being (Vucetich et al. 2015).

Increased concern for animal welfare and widespread acknowledgment that wildlife possesses intrinsic value may be at odds with a vision of wildlife conservation deeply rooted in public trust thinking (Hare and Blossey 2014). The idea that wildlife is merely a resource, an asset to be managed to maximize human well-being, appears to leave little room for considering its welfare. The conflict is liable to be acute because maximizing human benefits is likely to come at a cost to the welfare of wild animals (Simberloff 2013). Harvest practices such as prairie-dog shoots, predator derbies and guided trophy hunts that favor human recreation over animal well-being are cases in point. Such practices often catalyze public outrage and controversy. Witness the controversy generated by the recent killing by an American trophy hunter of the African lion known as Cecil (Nelson et al. 2016).

Yet, rising concern for the welfare of wildlife need not translate into simple opposition to animal use or traditional practices such as hunting. Rather, citizens expect to see good reasons for why harming wild animals is justified. Under anthropocentric thinking, it is acceptable to exploit wildlife unless it is demonstrated to be bad for humans. Unsustainable harvests, for example, may deprive future generations of their ability to hunt wildlife. Under non-anthropocentric thinking, the burden of proof shifts. Exploitation is unacceptable unless adequate reasons for it are provided.

Americans' views about predator management illustrate the implications of this shift. We found that self-identified hunters, animal rights advocates and conservationists all tended to disagree with the statement "predator control is unacceptable." Perhaps surprisingly to wildlife professionals, only 25 percent of those who strongly identify as animal rights advocates agreed with that simple statement.

However, opposition to predator control may arise depending on the context or the method used. About half of animal rights advocates, and even one in three self-identified hunters, opposed the removal of native predators that prey on threatened and



▼ The authors constructed groups by pooling respondents who self-identified either "strongly" or "very strongly" as conservationists, animal rights advocates or hunters. Samples sizes provided the following margins of error: conservationists, 5.3 percent; animal rights advocates, 6.6 percent; hunters, 6.6 percent, with a 95% confidence level.

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endangered species. This could have significant implications for the conservation of spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest and caribou in southern Alberta. All three groups tended to strongly oppose the use of poison to control wildlife populations, preferring non-lethal methods such as guard animals, scare devices and fertility control (Slagle et al. 2017). Such tendencies help explain why agencies are experimenting with non-lethal methods even in cases where lethal methods have been effective.

One finding in particular may provide a glimpse of the future of wildlife conservation. Regardless of their group identities, respondents had a widespread tendency to acknowledge wildlife's intrinsic value. This was found among 69 percent of the general population, and it was even higher among those who strongly identified as hunters (79 percent), conservationists (84 percent) and animal rights advocates (87 percent). While these groups may understand that acknowledgement in very different ways, non-anthropocentrism appears to be an important point of common ground (Vucetich et al. 2015).

The findings suggest that policies that fail to consider the welfare of wild animals will face increasing public opposition. By angering most of the people who call themselves "conservationists" — people whose concern for wildlife extends to the welfare of individual wild animals — such policies could also undermine long-term efforts to broaden the tent of conservation. ■

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