

Dialogue and Social Conflict about Wolves

Information Sheet 8.009

People and Predator Series | Colorado Wolves

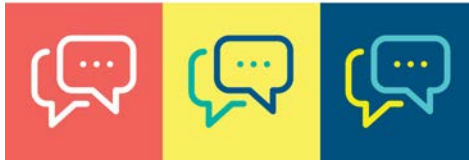
By the *Center for Human-Carnivore Coexistence* (5/20)

What can we do to have better dialogue about a topic as controversial as wolves?

Talking with friends, neighbors, co-workers, land managers, policy makers, and the general public about critical issues is normal and necessary. Talking about the future of wolves in Colorado is no different. Having a dialogue with others about these critical issues is important because people often prefer getting information about natural resource management issues through discussions with people they know.¹

Talking about sensitive topics with others can be difficult, however. Numerous *cognitive biases* we all have operating in our subconscious minds can limit our ability to learn and share new information that will lead to better decisions for ourselves and our communities.² For example, one type of bias can cause us to favor information that conforms with our existing beliefs and ignore new information.³ Most of us think of ourselves as moral and capable.⁴ When we hear something that threatens our self-image, we tend to ignore or fight the new information.^{2,4}

Our hesitancy to accept new information can also be caused by biases related to the media we select and our social groups.⁵ For example, we often choose to follow media outlets that we expect will provide interpretations and information that align with the beliefs of our



social group.⁵ We are also often influenced by political operatives and lobbyists to believe that scientific uncertainty about an issue is greater than it actually is.⁶ Our beliefs about an issue are strongly influenced by what we think others in our social group believe.⁷ Furthermore, we can misgauge the beliefs of others in our group based on a powerful spokesperson in that group.⁸

Cognitive biases can cause us to make poor assumptions about others, increasing conflict and preventing productive dialogue on controversial topics. Often we see other's biases while underestimating our own.⁹ Many of us tend to believe we see an issue objectively while others do not.¹⁰ This tendency causes us to assume people who disagree with us must be uninformed, irrational, or biased.¹⁰ We may also assume that a person's actions are primarily explained by their values and character, rather than by the situation they are in, leading us to negatively interpret the other person's words and actions.^{2,11}



Key Points

- Natural human biases may lead people to make inaccurate and damaging assumptions about other's perspectives. Using established techniques to overcome these biases can help us have better conversations.
- Social conflict is driven by biases, different attitudes and misinformation. At a deeper level, social conflict is fueled by basic human values and needs.
- Traditional ways of dealing with natural resource conflicts like public meetings and comment periods are insufficient for reducing social conflict. Rather, more participatory processes are needed that involve stakeholders in dialogue and shared decision-making.

For example, people may assume someone else would kill a wolf because that person doesn't value wolves, when in reality that person may only kill a wolf under certain circumstances to protect their livelihoods.

For many of us, it can be challenging to be open to new information and viewpoints, so how can we engage in meaningful dialogue about wolves in Colorado? Here are some tips that can help us overcome our biases:

- Sometimes showing people information that contradicts their viewpoint may cause them to cling more tightly to it, particularly if their identity is challenged.¹² Encouraging others to think about their important values before receiving new information can reduce their defensiveness and increase their acceptance.^{4,13} So, before talking about wolves, try talking with the other person about land, water, home, family, recreation and other important values.
- Framing an issue in terms of what the other person cares about is more likely to result in your audience engaging with a message or new information.¹⁴ When talking about wolves, consider that your audience may care specifically about wolves, or they may care more about wilderness, hunting, ranching, or recreation. Try asking how wolves relate to those things.
- People are more likely to respond positively to a request when the requester first provides a kind gesture.¹⁵ So, consider first saying something positive and respectful about the other person's point of view related to wolves before presenting new information or arguments.
- In some cases, highlighting the scientific consensus around an issue (i.e., the number of scientists agreeing or studies agreeing with a finding) in conversations can increase acceptance of this information.⁶ For example, if someone is concerned about the threat of wolves to human safety, you can point out that data on wolf attacks indicates the risk of wolves attacking or killing people is very low (see [Wolves and Human Safety Information Sheet](#)). Furthermore, sharing the large number of others who have a belief can increase acceptance of that new belief.^{7, 14}

- If you perceive misinformation in what you are hearing, try discussing logical inconsistencies in misleading communications.⁶ Logical inconsistencies around wildlife issues can arise when "fake experts" convey the impression of knowledge or expertise without possessing any relevant expertise. Try discussing the problem of "fake experts" in general before sharing any specific information about issues related to wolves.

In simple terms, some basic rules we all know can guide our conversations. When you enter a conversation, don't just try to convince. Instead, balance your desire to convince others with trying to learn and understand. Talk less. Listen more and listen carefully. Humbly ask questions to understand the other person's views. Have empathy for others.

What drives social conflict over wolves and how can we do better?

The topic of wolves is contentious and can create social conflict among ranchers, hunters, environmentalists and other groups.^{16, 17} Social conflict occurs when groups struggle over power and diverse values. Sometimes it includes people purposefully trying to prevent opposing groups from achieving their goals. Social conflict can inhibit effective management and can result in negative outcomes for people and wildlife.¹⁸



The social conflict over wolves in Colorado is driven in part by different attitudes and beliefs about wolves and the effects they may or may not have on ecosystems and people. Social conflict is also driven in part by unresolved debates about natural resource management and the deeper values that wolves symbolize.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ For

example, long-standing conflicting views about public land management exacerbates the debate about wolves. Also, many environmental groups advocate so strongly for wolf reintroduction because wolves have become symbolic of the broader fight to preserve and make amends with wilderness.¹⁶ On the other hand, interview-based research has found that opposition to wolves, particularly among many ranchers and rural communities, is driven in part by wolf conservation being symbolic of the many social trends perceived as economically and culturally threatening.^{17, 18}

At a stakeholder workshop held in Glenwood Springs, Colorado in February 2020, participants from environmental NGOs, state agencies, a sovereign Native American nation, and ranching and hunting groups discussed the deeper values behind the social conflict over wolf reintroduction in Colorado.²⁰ Participants shared that the debate goes beyond the pending ballot proposition to reintroduce wolves to the state. Rather, the debate includes deeper, more long-standing issues. These include conflicting views over how public lands should be managed, different cultural values of wildlife, and the impacts of changing demographics and values on more traditional ways of life.²⁰ Workshop participants identified many ways wolves in Colorado may positively or negatively affect their fundamental values and needs. Some groups, such as some ranchers and hunters, believed the ballot initiative to reintroduce wolves was part of a broader trend of society not recognizing their value and contributions to society as well as a pending threat to their economic viability. Individuals representing ranching interests discussed how they believe the initiative to restore wolves was failing to give recognition to their previous conservation efforts. On the other hand, environmentalists supporting wolf reintroduction expressed their belief that the ballot initiative is the first time their values related to wolves are being recognized in decision-making. They believed they had not received recognition in the past by the state legislature or state wildlife agencies. The discussion highlighted why the debate over wolf reintroduction and management can become so contentious and emotional, including feelings of betrayal. It is not just about wolves, but about people feeling that their fundamental values, needs, and identities are being threatened or ignored.

Traditional public engagement processes typically rely on public hearings and comment periods. These processes are insufficient for such value-based conflict and can exacerbate, rather than reduce, social conflict.²¹ This is because they tend to focus on biology, economics, and other technical fixes while ignoring more fundamental, non-material social and psychological unmet needs. Other approaches are needed. Participatory processes that involve diverse stakeholders with conflicting views in respectful dialogue and shared decision-making can lead to better, longer-lasting outcomes for all sides.^{22, 23} These processes involve stakeholder workshops and meetings in which stakeholders share their diverse values and needs and help develop management plans that address these needs. To be effective, workshops and meetings should be part of a multi-layered process that addresses the deeper-rooted value-based conflict, finds common ground, and creates mutually acceptable solutions.²³ These processes can enhance empathy and build trust between groups with different perspectives. In so doing, they can facilitate the development of collaborative solutions that are more widely accepted by the public.^{22,23}

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