

Moral Arguments Related to Wolf Restoration and Management

Information Sheet 8.011

People and Predator Series | Colorado Wolves

By the *Center for Human-Carnivore Coexistence* (6/20)

Moral arguments are arguments that something is “good,” “bad,” “right,” or “wrong.” They are often used to justify positions both for and against wolf restoration. A recent online survey of Coloradans found that respondents identified moral arguments as reasons for supporting wolf reintroduction. These included beliefs that: wolf reintroduction is the right thing to do; wolves deserve to live where they once thrived; reintroduction would make up for the past wrong of deliberately extirpating wolves from the state; and humans should fairly share the landscape with other animals like wolves.¹ Beliefs that link humans and other species are common in Native American worldviews. Native people in support of wolf restoration might argue that there is a balance in the natural world and reintroducing wolves would return some of that balance.² Many of these reported beliefs also relate to Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, which advocates that people should respect their community and expands the definition of community beyond humans to include other parts of the Earth, such as animals, plants, and water.^{2,3} Leopold argues that an action is morally right when it preserves the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. Wolf reintroduction is therefore often justified using this land ethic, as it is seen by some as an effort to enhance the integrity of the biotic community (see [Ecological Effects of Wolves Information Sheet](#)).⁴ Environmental philosophers have also made the moral argument

that reintroducing wolves to their native habitat is right because it would enhance the wilderness character of an area, promoting connections between people and wilderness.⁵ Finally, some use the moral argument that the ballot initiative in Colorado to reintroduce wolves is good because it is a democratic process for ensuring the majority of public’s values are adequately considered in decision-making about wildlife.¹



Moral arguments have also been used to oppose reintroduction. Some people argue that reintroducing wolves is not ethical if individual reintroduced wolves would be hunted or die from human-wolf conflicts.⁶ Additionally, media coverage of wolf reintroduction in Colorado often includes the moral argument that the ballot initiative for wolf reintroduction wrongly imposes the will of the urban majority on the rural minority in the state, who would have to live with the potential negative impacts of wolves (e.g., livestock depredation; see [Wolves and Livestock Information Sheet](#)).¹ There is opposition to reintroduction on moral grounds among Indigenous people, too. Native Americans have always been active stewards of the land, but some believe that we should



Key Points

- Moral arguments—arguments that something is “right” or “wrong”—are invoked on both sides of the debate about wolves. Moral arguments touch on some of our most deeply held values.
- Moral arguments for wolf reintroduction include: wolves deserve to live where they once thrived, humans should share the land with and respect members of the biotic community such as wolves, and wolves enhance the wilderness character of natural areas. A moral argument against wolf reintroduction is that it is imposing the will of the majority of Coloradans on rural Coloradans who have to live with the potential negative impacts of wolves.
- Different values associated with wildlife lead to different moral arguments for or against killing wolves as a management tool.

not directly interfere with nature. These people might say we should support the land's healing and natural processes, but we don't have the right to decide when or how the land heals, or what comes back.²

Moral arguments are also used to justify positions for and against regulated hunting of wolves and the killing of “problem” wolves that come into conflict with people. Some argue that killing native predators such as wolves may not be ethically justified.^{7,8} Instead, they advocate for the use of preventative management strategies that minimize conflict between humans, livestock, and wolves, reserving killing wolves as a last resort.^{7,8} Such people have been classified as “mutualists” or as having a “biocentric” view towards nature^{9,10}, a view that was both preceded by and informed by Native worldviews.² They believe that animals have rights to respectful treatment and should not be managed solely as a resource to be used by humans.^{10,11} A recent study found that approximately 35% of Colorado residents can be classified as mutualists and that the majority of Coloradans do not support killing wolves as a management tool (Figure 1).¹¹ Those with more mutualist values often point to research suggesting that higher animals experience similar emotions to humans.¹² They also feel that while the benefits of killing animals to populations, ecosystems, and society are often uncertain, the negative impacts of killing on the individual animal being targeted are certain.^{8,13} Individuals with this perspective may also be skeptical of intensive wildlife management in general, believing that people should manage wild animals less and their own behavior more.¹⁴ Social science research suggests that modernization has led to a growing percentage of the US population with this more “mutualist” view towards animals.^{10,11}

On the other hand, individuals with more “traditional” or “domination” views towards wildlife believe that wildlife should be used as a resource for humans.^{10,11} They believe that killing and hunting wildlife are morally justified if they further human interests and enjoyment. Traditionalists also support wildlife management to maintain ecosystem balance and species diversity.⁹⁻¹¹ Individuals with this viewpoint argue that death and predation are natural components of ecosystems⁹ and that humans are morally justified in killing wildlife to maximize benefits for both humans^{10,11} and eco-systems.⁹ Research finds that approximately 28 % of

Coloradans have these more traditional values towards wildlife.¹¹

Moral arguments touch on some of our most deeply held values. Diverse moral arguments drive the debate and social conflict over wolves, but in the end policy will demand compromises on all sides. Participatory processes that involve stakeholders in shared dialogue and decision-making are crucial to ensure stakeholders and policy-makers understand and consider the diversity of moral arguments underlying policy debates (see [Dialogue and Social Conflict About Wolves Information Sheet](#)).

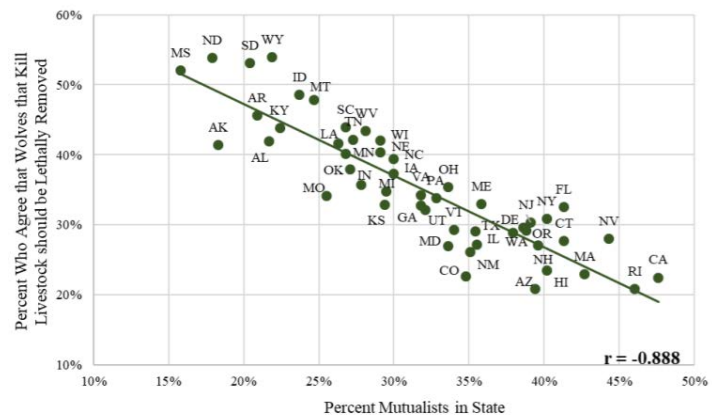


Figure 1: Percent of mutualists in each state, compared to the percent who agree that wolves should be killed for predating on livestock, from Manfredo et al. (2020)¹¹

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