

The Destruction of Nature

Valerius Geist boldly makes the case that misguided reintroduction programs are dooming North America's wolves. By Marjorie Haun

In 1983, countless moviegoers flocked to see one of the greatest fantasies of the decade, "Never Cry Wolf." The Disney depiction of Farley Mowat's purported autobiography portrayed the wolves he interacted with during a research expedition in the Arctic as docile, benevolent mouse eaters. But Mowat's tale was a fiction that has since been derided by scientists and wildlife experts alike. Nevertheless, Mowat's near deification of wolves hoodwinked a generation of North Americans and drove a spate of uninformed laws and policies with the momentum of blind emotion. Now, more than two decades since the cinematic hoax was pulled on millions, wildlife managers, ranchers, hunters, and property owners are struggling with the fallout of misguided wolf worship, and the dire consequences of their growing dispersion throughout North America.

The research of one man is laying bare another destructive consequence of wolf reintroduction programs which casts a pall over the future of wolves themselves, and which few others have even considered. Valerius Geist, professor emeritus of environmental science at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, explains: "I'm very much for the real wolf. That is what I'm trying to save. Hybridizing wolves with dogs and coyotes is a way to exterminate the real wolf by destroying its genetics. What is being done with wolves here and in Europe has nothing to do with nature conservation."

Valerius—Val to his friends—is hardly anti-wolf. He has in fact taken the bold position that human interference with wolf populations is as destructive to the predators as it is to the species upon which they prey. Wolf biology is being fundamentally changed and diluted as these apex predators are planted into "settled landscapes."

"After the enormous public expenditures to maintain wolves," he says, "all the effort and costs are for naught, because in settled landscapes wolves degrade via hybridization with dogs and coyotes into worthless hybrids. That is, into coydogs and feral dogs."

Val was born in 1938 in Nikolaev, a Ukrainian port city near the Black Sea, to parents who were both marine architects. Having survived Stalin's purges, Val lost his father

during World War II, and his family became refugees. "We fled to Germany in 1943, where we were well treated. U.S. troops took our village in 1945, and the G.I.'s, I am very glad to say, behaved very well. I happened to be ill, and I will never forget their acts of kindness towards a sick child and a frightened mother.

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A wolf pack tears at the carcass of a juvenile elk. Each wolf will kill and eat up to 22 full-grown elk per year, and sometimes many more in what is known as "reflex killing."

We stayed in Germany till 1953 when we immigrated to Canada."

Val's assimilation in Canada was fostered when he joined the Regina Rifle Regiment. The veterans who trained him were "exemplary men who taught me to be a Canadian."

A voracious reader, Val consumed the works of outdoorsman Jack O'Connor and the rugged westerners Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway. His fascination with the outdoors and wildlife biology impelled his path in higher learning and he earned his Ph.D. based on the study of mountain sheep, which inspired his first book, "Mountain Sheep: A Study in Behavior and Evolution."

Over the years, he has published and edited 20 books. But far from a heady theoretician, Val is a man of hands-on science, and,

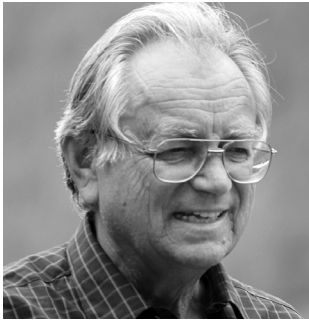
having spent two years in isolation while studying Stone's sheep for his Ph.D., his understanding of wildlife was formulated in the austere laboratory of the Canadian wilderness. His first brutal lessons were learned in southwestern Canada.

"When wolves are introduced, they first destroy wildlife. When I worked in Banff National Park in the 1960s there were about 2,500 elk. After wolves returned in the 1970s, elk dropped to less than 300. Moreover, elk became invisible, as they were not only hiding, but the bulls quit bugling during the rutting season. We have the same silent bull elk

on Vancouver Island where I now live, courtesy of wolves, cougars and big black bears." Today the moose of Banff have disappeared, due either to regional extinction, or behaviors which keep them hidden at all times.

Val has observed the same patterns in the northern United States. After being reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park in 1995, wolves proliferated. In short order, the famous northern elk herd plunged from 19,000 to 4,000. According to Val, that herd would have been wiped out entirely had they not adapted by migrating into private ranches and nearby towns where wolves pose less of a threat.

The altered ecosystems and deviating behavior of prey species came as no surprise. "That's exactly what elk have been doing in Canadian national parks for ages: go into



“When you introduce wolves, real wolves, into settled landscapes, they hybridize with coyotes and dogs and become absolutely worthless hybrids.”

—VAL GEIST

towns to escape predation,” Val says. “Deer do that also. Currently in western Canada they are doing it on a grand scale and flee into suburbs, farms, hamlets and even into the very core of cities. Deer on Vancouver Island are concentrated in human settlements and virtually missing in the vast backcountry.”

Wolves are prodigious killers, whether hunting for food or in a frenzy of reflex killing. Research in Yellowstone has shown that wolves kill about 22 elk per wolf per year, and the wolves begin to spread beyond the park once their kill rate declines to 16 elk per wolf per year. But the impact on large grazers goes beyond mere predator-and-prey scenarios. Wolf-borne diseases are an unnerving specter and are already laying waste to entire herds in the Intermountain West.

Hydatid Disease

In his lectures on wolves, Val is emphatic about the horrific consequences of infection from hydatid disease. “It is a nasty parasitic disease, caused by ingesting the eggs of the dog tapeworm, *Echinococcus granulosus*. It can be deadly!”

The threat of transmission of this parasite from wolves to dogs is serious. It can happen when handling the bodies and furs of infected wolves or vegetation contaminated with tapeworm eggs from nearby wolf scats. Lawn mowers, hay balers, or even water that has come into contact with wolf scat can cause the eggs to be spread and ingested. In a deadly cycle, infected elk, moose or deer will carry the cysts filled with tiny tapeworm heads primarily in the lungs and liver, and sometimes in the brain, which is fatal. Infected animals will fall ill and become easy prey for the wolves. The wolves ingest the viscera containing the cysts. Then, masses of tiny eggs will be introduced into the environment via wolf

Elk populations have been decimated by wolf predation as well as the spread of wolf-borne disease in Yellowstone National Park and regions in the Intermountain West. Significant numbers of elk in eastern Idaho and western Montana are now infected with hydatid disease.

feces. And the cycle begins once more.

Hydatid disease doesn't discriminate between people who live in the country and those in the suburbs. Any dog can be infected. “The primary danger comes from dogs which have fed on infected gut piles,” Val

says. “Since in winter elk will seek refuge in suburbs and hamlets, any resident dog finding dead elk is likely to get infected and infect its owners in turn. There is also a real danger to ranch families on whose lands infected elk and deer gather to winter and which crowd in about buildings to escape the marauding wolves.”

Chronic Wasting Disease

Although wolves are known carriers of

bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis, *Neospora caninum* (causes abortion in cattle), and rabies, chronic wasting disease is what Val describes as “a juggernaut descending onto American wildlife.” Some researchers believed wolf predation would wipe out CWD in grazing species, but it has done the opposite. “Wolves generate panic among deer and prey leading to desperate long-distance flight as well as desperate searches for locations free of wolves, primarily due to human presence.” Having personally observed such panic behavior in deer and livestock alarmed by wolves, he knows the wolves will follow the prey. “Because wolves in dispersing go great distances,” he warns, “they can spread ingested CWD prions via feces and urine over very great distances.”

CWD has been described as a wildlife form of “mad cow disease,” and brings with it the most-grisly symptoms. Val predicts that the widening dispersion of infected wolves



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and prey will spread the disease to private farms and ranches, as well as open private and public lands used for hunting and recreation. Considering that a ranch or hunting refuge with animals, soil and vegetation infected with CWD would lose nearly all commercial production value, the impact on private property could be devastating.

Ecological Management and Biodiversity

The destruction of wolves and other ripple effects of wolf reintroduction programs are symptoms of a disordered philosophy hampering true conservation of wolves, other species, and the environment which must sustain them. A hundred years of active wildlife management in North America is being undone by politically driven policies, like those governing wolf-reintroduction initiatives. Using the degraded ecology in U.S. national parks as an example, Val explains: “Right now the National Park Service is bemoaning the fact that...biodiversity is plummeting and species are going extinct, while at the same time the parks now have over 6,500 invasive plant and animal species. Management in national parks is primarily protection—that is, doing nothing!”

What Val is describing are the contradictory factors of human interference in species distribution and a “nature will run its course” management approach, both of which are the *modus operandi* for environmentalists and federal agencies alike. So-called “conservation” groups have failed both the environment and species. What Val refers to as the “wonderful North American model of conservation” had nothing to do with political activism or Green measures and everything to do with hands-on local game management and the stewardship of private ranchers and farmers. “How come we have today so many more elk than three decades ago? Though, of course, not in Yellowstone National Park! There, the ‘within park do nothing policy’ has driven the park

“The wildlife form of ‘mad cow disease’ brings with it the most-grisly symptoms. Widening dispersion of infected wolves and prey will spread the disease to farms and ranches.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT ROCKHOLM

Echinococcus granulosus cysts, also known as dog tapeworm, overwhelm the lungs of an adult elk. The cysts, if punctured or eaten and digested by dogs or other carnivores, can spread the horrific hydatid disease into the environment, infecting both animal and human populations.

elk almost entirely onto private ranch land.”

Invasive species—what Val calls “the hoodlums of the plant and animal world”—are epitomized by degraded wolf hybrids spreading throughout the United States. The reasoning behind wolf reintroduction programs must be reworked if the wolves and the habitats they affect are to be conserved.

“Let us be clear,” Val says. “To conserve wolves for the future as a natural species, they must be segregated from dogs, and in America, from coyotes as well. And wolves must be maintained in natural, functioning packs. And that is exactly what we had until the latter half of the 20th century in North America, at least in western and northern North America. Wolf populations were kept out of settled landscapes and controlled closely, which kept wolves away from coyotes and minimized encounters with dogs. It also generated

abundant wildlife and kept wolf-borne diseases to a minimum.”

A rare man of pure science, Valerius Geist is unafraid to take on the mythology befouling wolf management and the do-gooders who write policies based on pop-culture fictions. The special interests who claim they intend to save wolves are, in fact, responsible for the decline and destruction of nature. With a scientific background that goes back 60 years, Val persists tirelessly, traveling, giving presentations, and granting interviews, in a quest to bring the truth about wolves and wildlife conservation to sportsmen, ranchers, wildlife managers, and lawmakers. His quest is not to draw acclaim to himself or further a political agenda, but to save the natural world from the ignorance of its self-proclaimed saviors. ■

Marjorie Haun lives in the high desert of eastern Utah where she regularly interacts with wildlife of all sorts and a few wild people.