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# Book Review

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## Our common blood

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Peterson, Brenda. 2017. **Wolf nation: the life, death, and return of wild American wolves.** Da Capo, Boston, Massachusetts. x + 292 p. \$27.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-306-82493-7; \$17.99 (e-book), ISBN: 979-0-306-82494-4.

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Pain is the illusion of devastating separateness—its epitome lies in the joyous feeling of safety in killing. We kill only ourselves. Our suffering is our common blood.

—Lee Burkins, *Soldier's heart: an inspirational memoir and inquiry of war*

Science and statistics inform us that large carnivores—lions, tigers, bears, and wolves—are on their way out. In most cases, the numbers of big cats, big dogs, and bears are teetering dangerously close to nil and their habitats have dwindled to less than 10% of historic ranges (Bradshaw 2017). There is hope, however. Nature has built in remarkable resilience, so that when hunting bans and conservation efforts are put into place, carnivores are able to have families and function with some sort of ancestral ease. Surprisingly, when toothed and clawed rebound, so do their prey. Ecologically, and logically, large carnivores bring landscapes back to health.

William Ripple, Oregon State University, and his associates describe how, when gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) returned to Yellowstone National Park after a seventy-year absence, the entire ecosystem began to thrive (Ripple and Beschta 2006). In a few short years, wolf recovery brought on concomitant recovery of cottonwoods, alders, berry-producing shrubs, and passerines. By reinstating the top trophic dog, nature's pulse revived to its ancient rhythms. While some argue that such studies oversimplify complex ecosystem dynamics, the science and success of carnivore restoration provide living proof of the essential and critical roles that apex species play.

One would think that in the age of the Anthropocene such successes would prompt widespread restoration of large carnivores. Indeed, there are many similar efforts around the world. Two sub-species cousins of the North American gray wolf, the Iberian wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*) and the Italian wolf (*Canis lupus italicus*) were close to extinction by the 1930s, but a ban on hunting brought back the species. Following these near-death revivals,

however, comes an almost immediate killing response. This is showcased by the story of the American gray wolf.

As in Europe, wolves were effectively eliminated from the coterminous U.S. by the 1930s. The last Oregon wolf was killed in 1946. In 1967, gray wolves were narrowly saved from extinction when they were listed under the Endangered Species Preservation Act, the precursor of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). By 1978, the gray wolf, including all its subspecies, were listed under the protective wing of the ESA. However, the new grace enjoyed by wolves was short lived.

Twenty-five years later, in less than three wolf generations, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) ruled that gray wolves should be downlisted from their endangered status to threatened. This meant that wolves would become fair game for hunters. Federal courts countered by overruling the USFWS citing that the agency's proposal was "arbitrary and capricious." The USFWS was not daunted.

Starting with the issuance of special exemption permits and delisting in certain regions, the USFWS continued to seek ways to side-step the courts' decisions and popular opinion that favor the wolf. Once again, the federal courts overruled the agency. However, victory was temporary. A series of legal blows and counterblows continued until 2011, when, for the first time ever, Congress delisted a species from the ESA. The gray wolf's fate is now left in the hands of individual states.

Brenda Peterson, author of the new, fascinating, and comfortably-bound book, *Wolf Nation*, chronicles the history and fallout from these legal battles in various locales throughout the US including the sorry saga of Washington state's Profanity Peak wolf pack who are among the more than 5,000 wolves killed since ESA delisting. Not only have wolves had to contend with hostile state and federal wildlife agencies, some of their historically strongest advocates have literally joined in the kill.

Recounted in the documentary, *The Profanity Peak Pack: Set Up and Sold Out*, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Defenders of Wildlife, Conservation Northwest, Wolf Haven International, other members of the Wolf Advisory Group (WAG), and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife voted to and did kill seven of twelve pack members on public land (Predator Defense, 2017). On top of the \$53,000 to kill a wolf from the Huckleberry Pack in 2014 and the \$76,000 to kill the entire Wedge Pack in 2012, the 2016

Profanity Peak killings cost \$135,000. Obviously, killing is lucrative for someone.

While there are numerous books about wolves ranging from Barry Lopez's classic *Of wolves and men* (1978) to the more recent ecological treatment by Cristina Eisenberg, *Wolf's Tooth* (2010), *Wolf Nation* focuses on the emotionally charged debates surrounding the species. The book opens with an overview of the people and events leading to today's intense conflict and tragedy. Fortified with a dense bibliography, the author embeds tales of conflict in history and biology to provide the reader with sufficient context to grasp the tenor and content of this social and ecological knot. This backdrop sets the stage for successive chapters full of intimate portraits of individual "celebrity" wolves, Yellowstone's 06 and Oregon OR7 whose dramatic survival stories have captured media attention, and interviews of front-line wolf advocates and adversaries around the country.

Even though carnivore issues are a familiar old saw, the spitting acrimony and unbridled hate toward the wolf documented in *Wolf Nation* is startling, particularly when science demonstrates that the gray wolf is not only vital for ecological health, but poses no threat whatsoever to human life and property relative to present-day ills that are responsible for pushing all species, including our own, to extinction. Human-caused climate change, violence, overpopulation and consumerism, not Red Riding Hood's nemesis, reveal as the real killers.

Humanity's schizophrenic "save/kill wolves" behavior is an emergent central theme in *Wolf Nation*. With lyrical weaving together of facts and narrative, the author describes the tortuous dance of opposites—"war and love... hatred and redemption"—the predator paradox that haunts the American gray wolf (Shivik 2014). Readers follow Peterson on a fifteen-chapter cultural and geographical tour listening into the diversity of players involved, each of whom is vying for the position of reigning arbiter of truth and righteousness: sheep ranchers, cattle ranchers, trophy hunters, agency scientists and nobs, children, teachers, conservationists, and everyone else in between.

We learn that not all humans have been gripped by modernity's killing complex, the profound intolerance and fear which drives wolf-haters to mass slaughter. American Indians lived well and prospered with wild canine kin. Unlike transplant colonizers who systematically vanquished bears and wolves in Europe then went on to do the same on the continents they appropriated, the indigene psyche was not intimidated by the wolf. As another new tome describes, indigenes looked to wild canine kin for guidance and wisdom (Meyerhoff Hieronimus 2017).

So, why do strains of the same species behave so differently? Why is it that Indians generally regarded the wolf, grizzly, and puma with respect while European colonizers and their descendants are crippled by fear and the

compulsion to kill? This is a commonly pondered, perplexing question. But, some insight can be gained by looking more deeply into the psychological difference between indigene and occupier. Ecophilosopher Freya Mathews (2005, p. 58) writes that to be indigenous means:

... to have one's identity shaped by the place to which one belongs: one is a creature of its topography, its colours and textures, saps and juices, its moods, its ghosts and stories. As a native, one has one's taproot deep in a particular soil: one has grown in that soil, and continues to be informed and sustained by its essence.

Critically, the native "is kin to all the other beings who arise out of and return to that patch of earth."

In contrast, American colonizers deserted the places to which they belonged. They did not grow in the same soil as the wolf and hence, lacked a natural feeling of being "kin to all the other beings who arise out of that patch of earth." Just as the wolf can regain balance in the absence of human wrath, however, so can our species' minds.

Charlie Russell is a third generation Albertan whose grandfather settled outside Waterton Lakes National Parks in 1905. Technically a descendent of colonizers, Russell has, nonetheless, lived in equanimity among grizzlies and wolves—even during his ranching days. According to Russell,

I consider bears, wolves, elk, and other animals like equals and my experience tells me that that is how they see us, for the most part. We have different jobs as it were, but we live in the same community and what they are up to is at least as important as what I am doing or likely more so. There are some with whom I am particularly close and others I am not—much the same way I feel about humans. I guess I am not that hung up on what people look like on the outside. It's what's inside that counts

(Bradshaw 2017, p. 46)

Russell echoes what neuroscientists are saying: the brains and minds inside the wolf, dog, bear, and octopus are shared with and comparable to our own. Humans have much more in common with the wolf than external appearances suggest. To wage war against wolves is to wage war against ourselves. The survival of our species and souls are inextricably intertwined with those of wolves.

Peterson has crafted a compelling narrative for general readership and students and professionals in wildlife biology, environmental ethics, history, and policy, and conservation as well as the social and political sciences. But she has done something more. By encasing the personal and collective dramas of the wolf wars between the quiet covers of *Wolf Nation*, the author presents the

reader with an insightful cameo of the nuclear conflict ravaging the North American wild. She concludes, “In Yellowstone and throughout the country as well as in our science and stories, the wolf nation must thrive if we are to make the world wild and whole again” (p. 257).

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