

Do Individual Wolves Care If Their Species Is On the Brink?

By [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)

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A 12-year-old asked me this question focusing on Colorado's restoration plans.

The state of wolves in Colorado raises many important questions about our relationships with other nature: Who lives, who dies, and why



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Two emails hit any inbox almost simultaneously about three hours ago. The first message was about an essay by [Emily Pontecorvo](#) called "[Colorado voted to bring back wolves. Why was the race so close?](#)" that focused on "Proposition 114, a historic measure that would require Colorado officials to restore and manage gray wolf populations in the western portion of the state." In Ms. Pontecorvo's piece we read, "while a 2019 survey of Colorado voters indicated overwhelming support for the initiative, with 84 percent of respondents saying they would vote in favor of it, the results show a different story. As of Friday afternoon, the state election site was reporting a 50-49 split, with a little more than 33,000 votes tipping the odds pro-wolf."

The second message was from a 12-year old Coloradan, Ellen, who's been closely following this controversial issue. The timing also was somewhat uncanny because I was in the middle of writing an essay called "Conservation Science, Psychology, and Human Exceptionalism" about two outstanding books that raise numerous issues about humans' relationships to other nature: *Engineering Eden: A Violent Death, a Federal Trial, and the Struggle to Restore Nature in Our National Parks* by Jordan Fisher Smith and *Conservation Politics: The Last Anti-Colonial Battle* by David Johns, with whom I've done an interview titled [Conservation Science Shouldn't Be All About Us](#).^{1,2}

In his must-read book in which Mr. Smith offers an invaluable historical perspective about our relationships with wild animals and their homes he notes, "Yellowstone was not created as a wildlife refuge; it was a tourist [attraction](#) that began functioning like one." (P. 93) In other words, humans came/come first. Viewing Yellowstone and other locales in this

light raises numerous questions about whether or not we should try to care for wild places and manipulate ecosystems or take a hands-off approach. Many of the wide-ranging discussions in both of these books concerning the ways in which we intrude into the lives of nonhumans directly apply to Colorado's ambitious and divisive project and ultimately who lives, who dies, and why.

Compassionate conservation

"With a guiding principle of 'first do no harm,' compassionate conservation offers a bold, virtuous, inclusive, and forward-looking framework that provides a meeting place for different perspectives and agendas to discuss and solve issues of human-animal conflict when sharing space." —[What is Compassionate Conservation?](#)

Wolves in the crosshairs. Some might think that Ellen's question—"Do individual wolves care if their species is on the brink?—is silly, but it surely is not. She was deeply concerned that some wolves would be harmed and killed and was very uncomfortable about this inevitable scenario. I was impressed that she was thinking this way and wrote back that I don't think wolves think much or care about the state of their species and that I would be getting back to her shortly. However, I'm sure they care very much about how their family, friends, and other wolves are doing. This has been clearly documented by numerous wolf researchers and [discussed in detail by wolf expert Rick McIntyre in his outstanding books on the wolves of Yellowstone.](#)

In an essay called "[Owls, Cormorants, Wolves, and Possums: Who Lives, Who Dies?](#)" I wrote about the way in which some humans decide to engineer nature and make life-death decisions in which individuals are harmed or killed to save individuals of the same or other species.

And, [now that wolves have been delisted and have lost federal protections,](#) there is ever-growing concern about the fate of these iconic and magnificent predators who can now be hunted for fun and games as trophies. Do I think that individual wolves, for example, care if they're on the brink? As I mentioned above I don't, but that's not what's important. What is important is that like it not, when *individuals* are moved around to benefit others of their own or other *species*, there are harmful and fatal trade-offs and some individuals inevitably suffer and some die as a result of the move or are killed by humans who don't want these new trespassers regardless if they were once "native" to an area. That's the stark reality of the situation of our intruding into the lives of other species—when we engineer or manage ecosystems—for whatever reasons we choose.

The key issue is focused on the fate of the lives of *individual* animals, rather than on the state of their species. The basic tenets of [compassionate conservation](#) are, (1) First, do no harm, and (2) the life of every single individual is valuable because they are alive and have intrinsic or inherent value. So, trading off individuals' lives for the good of other individuals of their species or for the good of individuals of other species isn't acceptable and should be avoided at all costs.³

All in all, [conservation efforts should be guided by compassion rather than by killing.](#) Reintroduction projects are take a lot of hard work and the long-term effects of the animals who are placed in various ecosystems are wide-ranging and ongoing as new ecosystems evolve and respond to their presence. And of course the newly introduced animals, in this case wolves, will compete with resident competitors such as coyotes [who they decimated in the Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park,](#) and there also are prey who would not otherwise have been harmed or killed by wolves. Clearly, there are numerous ethical questions that need to be given serious consideration in these sorts of endeavors.

Should we try to manage nature or should we take more of a hands-off approach?

"We usually think conservation means saving animals. But its history is tinged with blood. John Audubon, a patron saint of the American conservation movement, killed hundreds of birds, partly for sport and partly for specimens to pose for his paintings. Aldo Leopold, a father of ecological science, endorsed killing wolves to increase deer populations." —Warren Cornwall, [There Will be Blood](#)

Engineering Eden and *Conservation Politics* provide thorough and detailed discussions of this and numerous other important questions about whether or not we should redecorate, rewild, repatriate, or revitalize nature when things have gone awry.⁴ I'm more in the hands-off camp. I would love to see wolves back in Colorado but would prefer that they come back home on their own, and are fully protected with enforceable consequences if they are harmed. Those who kill them shouldn't get away with [murder](#), and that is what it is.

Deciding when we should or should not interfere makes for very difficult decisions, and this is especially so when we will be directly implicated in harming and killing other animals. We inevitably wind up on a very slippery slope about what we should do in this or that situation and unfortunately, [violent bloodbaths far too often result when we step in](#). I want to [stress](#) that this does *not* mean the people who are responsible for these events are "bad" people. Rather, many claim they have the best interests of the species in mind, and that they're okay with harming and killing some individuals so that others may live. We are an integral part of nature and so too are other animals. I bristle when I hear some people talk about ecosystems or "[the environment](#)" without mentioning their nonhuman residents and what happens to them when we step into the picture.

Clearly, there are numerous difficult issues to think about and I'm thrilled that Ellen wrote to me. I sent her a copy of this piece for her to think about and encouraged her to get back to me with any questions.

Stand by for further discussions of these and other concerns about our relationships with other animals and their homes. I'm strongly encouraged and feel a lot of hope when [I know there are youngsters out there asking difficult questions about these and other similar topics](#) because these daunting and vexing questions won't disappear if we ignore them. Also, more and more nonhumans are coming back into what we call "our homes" during the on-going pandemic and raising similar questions and concerns. [We need to treat our new neighbors with respect and dignity because in fact, we are the intruders](#) who can do whatever we like to these magnificent beings. *Their very lives rest in our hands and hearts. We are that powerful.*

References

Notes

1) The description of [Engineering Eden](#) reads: The award-winning story of the century-and-half-long attempt to control nature in the American wilderness, told through the prism of a tragic death at Yellowstone—now in paperback. In the summer of 1972, 25-year-old Harry Eugene Walker hitchhiked away from his family's northern Alabama dairy farm to see America. Nineteen days later he was killed by an endangered grizzly bear in Yellowstone National Park. The ensuing civil trial, brought against the US Department of the Interior for alleged mismanagement of the park's grizzly population, emerged as a referendum on how America's most beloved wild places should be conserved. Two of the twentieth century's greatest wildlife biologists testified—on opposite sides. Moving across decades and among Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier, and Sequoia National Parks, author and former park ranger Jordan Fisher Smith has crafted an epic, emotionally wrenching account of America's fraught, century-and-a-half-long attempt to remake Eden—in the name of saving it.

2) The description of [Conservation Politics](#) reads: Whilst the science of conservation biology is thriving as a discipline, ultimately global conservation is failing. Why, when the majority of people say they value nature and its protection? David Johns argues that the loss of species and healthy ecosystems is best understood as human imposition of a colonial relationship on the non-human world - one of exploitation and domination. Global institutions benefit from transforming nature into commodities, and conservation is a low priority. This book places political issues at the forefront, and tackles critical questions of conservation efficacy. It considers the role of effective influence on decision making, key policy changes to reduce human footprint, and the centrality of culture in mobilising support. It draws on political lessons from successful social movements, including human anti-colonial struggles, to provide conservation biologists and practitioners in scientific and social science disciplines and NGOs with the tools and wider context to accelerate their work's impact.

3) For numerous references about compassionate conservation, see "[Compassionate Conservation, Sentience, and Personhood](#)."

4) Also see David Johns, [Human Confusion: Why There Must Be Justice for Non-Humans](#). Rewilding Earth.

Bekoff, Marc. [The "It's OK to Kill Animals Humanely" Apology Doesn't Work](#).

_____. [Conservation Science Shouldn't Be All About Us](#). (David Johns writes about freeing Earth and other species from human domination.)

_____. [Killing Barred Owls to Save Spotted Owls? Problems From Hell](#).

_____. [Murdering Animals: A Book About Social and Species Justice](#).

_____. [Murder, She Didn't Write: Why Can Only Humans be Murdered?](#) (It's time to change the language we use for writing about killing other animals.)

_____. [Compassionate Conservation Isn't Veiled Animal Liberation](#). (This growing field isn't "animal liberation dressed up as conservation science.")

_____. [Compassionate Conservation: More than "Welfarism Gone Wild"](#)

_____. [Compassionate Conservation Matures and Comes of Age](#). (Among the major goals of compassionate conservation is killing isn't an option.)

_____. [Neighboring Animals Offer Valuable Lessons About Coexistence](#). (As animals come to town in the Anthropause, changes occur for them and for us.)

_____. [Conservation Psychology, Coexistence, Wolves, and Youngsters](#). (A new study shows the importance of dealing directly with controversial issues.)

_____. ["Why Is It Wrong to Not Want to Kill Animals?"](#) (An email from a youngster raises many important issues. Lee, a young boy living in New Zealand where there is a violent on-going war on wildlife, didn't want to participate in sanctioned school killing contests, and was deeply concerned and confused about these bloodbaths. For more on what's happening in New Zealand see "[Jane Goodall Says Don't Use 1080, Jan Wright Says Use More](#)" and numerous references therein.)

_____. [The Reign of Wolf 21, Yellowstone's Benevolent Alpha Male](#). (An interview with renowned wolf expert Rick McIntyre about his latest book.)

_____. [The Story of Yellowstone Wolf 8: From Underdog to Alpha Male](#).

_____. [The Wolves of Yellowstone Love to Play—Just Like Dogs](#).

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