

Living with Wolves

Mark J. Hanson, KUFM Commentary

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Human beings have long had an ambivalent relationship with animals—perhaps none more so than with the wolf. As an increasing number of states struggle with how to live with wolves, we can now more closely examine how our relationship to the wolf becomes a powerful mirror of ourselves.

Ancient cultures depended on wild animals for food. And great animals such as the bison and the salmon were revered as sources of life. Killing them invoked a sense of guilt, which was appeased by a ritual of thanksgiving, and recognition that life comes from death and renews itself. People found their place within this mystery, which gave expression across the globe in religious themes of death and resurrection.

As English philosopher Mary Midgley notes, the human relationship to the natural world changed with the development of agriculture and the domestication of animals.ⁱ Domesticated livestock—goats, pigs, and cows—became not just food, but symbols of contempt. Think, for example of how we apply the names of these animals to people. Wild animals—like wolves and grizzlies—became not merely a nuisance, but more importantly, embodiments of the worst of human vices. From mythical childhood stories, to contemporary letters to the editor, wolves are depicted as cruel, beastly, and bloodthirsty. Midgley suggests that such labels are used to provide a justification for killing them, because they deserve it. But more than that, by killing wolves, people are repelling the perceived savagery of the natural world that threatens human civilization, as well as attacking the very human vices they have projected onto its animals.

The story is an old one. In fifth century BC Athens, Euripides writes a tragic tale of how King Pentheus of Thebes resisted worship of the god Dionysus, who represented the dynamic forces of nature in both its harmonious and its destructive aspects.ⁱⁱ Pentheus was determined to protect civilization from the forces of wildness, which he labeled “immoral.” The women of the city became intoxicated by this god and fled the city for the wilderness. Pentheus’s efforts to subdue Dionysus, and symbolically the wildness within humanity, led to his downfall. The upward progress of civilization met its demise in stubborn denial of the fury and mystery of wild nature.

Euripides story is a signpost in the long history of the human war against nature and our ambivalence toward animals. Many notable species of wildlife in Montana were all but eliminated a mere hundred years ago. To be sure, the economic loss suffered by ranchers from wolf depredation is real, and their response is understandable. But if we seek to demonize and then eliminate wolves, rather than find ways to live with them, we will miss an important opportunity to learn what Pentheus couldn’t, namely, that denying the dynamism of the wild in an arrogant defense of human civilization can only lead to a denial of the full knowledge of ourselves, and perhaps, to our demise.

Midgley draws notable comparisons and contrasts between human beings and wolves.ⁱⁱⁱ She notes the findings of wildlife biologists, namely that wolves pair for life, are faithful and affectionate parents and mates, show great loyalty to the pack, keep their dens clean, and have a fairly elaborate system of etiquette. In short, they are not much like the mythologized version of the big, bad wolf. She tells of how the French historically would skin the wolf alive while complaining of the wolves' treachery. Yet the wolf's so-called treachery pales in comparison to the measure of killing of which humanity is capable. While animals may kill others *outside* of their packs, the biblical story depicts the first sin of humanity after the Garden of Eden as the killing of a brother. The wars and genocides of the twentieth century alone killed tens of millions of people. And millions more people, as well as thousands of species, will die because of our preference to feed our consumptive habits at the expense of wild nature. As Midgley notes, our savagery comes not from our animal nature alone, yet we project it onto animals, and onto none more readily than the wolf.

When we search for the wildness within our world and within ourselves, we find not savagery and beastliness, but our place within the interconnectedness of natural processes—both harmonious and destructive. We find that we are part of an ongoing cycle of life and death on this planet that is ultimately indifferent to human desires. From here we can gain a new perspective on the unsustainable lifestyles of consumption that, like a cancer, may kill off our host. But we can also find hope for a new way of relating to the natural world that respects the wildness both within the world and within ourselves.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics, at the University of Montana

ⁱ Mary Midgley, "The Problem of Living with Wildness," in *Wolves and Human Communities*, ed. Virginia A. Sharpe, Bryan Norton, and Strachan Donnelley (New York: Island Press, 2001), pp. 179-90.

ⁱⁱ Euripides, "The Bacchae," in *Three Plays of Euripides*, trans. Paul Roche (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), pp. 25-26.