

Of Wolves and Men

We who live in the Rocky Mountain states have uncommon opportunities to experience nature and develop a sense for its wildness. I was privileged to have such an experience recently when I visited the Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park.

It was 5:00 a.m. when I entered the Park near Cooke City. It was cold and crisp. The sky was a blanket of stars. I got the same sensation one has when entering a large cathedral—I wanted to be quiet, as if noise in this place was inappropriate, if not a violation.

It was only about five minutes after lowering my window that I heard the first howls of the wolves. It was chilling. It was also especially amazing to me—perhaps, because of how rare these sounds are to most people.

As the sun rose, the wolves could be seen running about, not far from a large herd of bison, who seemed content to ignore the wolves' playfulness and ongoing calls. Human activity increased as well, and I admit to being bothered by the noise of a bus overcoming the natural sounds that had inspired my sense of awe in this place.

I was reminded, then, of a bumper sticker I had seen one week earlier in the Bitterroot Valley. It said simply: "Save 100 elk; shoot a wolf." Yes, we in the Rocky Mountain West also find our recreation here, just as we must find economic value in this land. Because of such views, we must endure the inevitable battles over wolves in the Ninemile, grizzly bears in the Bitterroot, and snowmobiles in Yellowstone.

Multiple interests often make for trade-offs when it comes to the politics of land management. We must, at times, accept them, for compromises can be valuable too. As great as it was to hear the wolves of the Lamar Valley, the experience was enabled—even if slightly compromised—by allowing the very kind of petroleum burning vehicles that brought me there and that shepherded the camera-toting tourists in the bus that growled down the Valley.

And yet, if every issue of wilderness preservation is subject to compromise, then not only is true wilderness lost, but something of moral importance to us all is lost as well. In his 1949 essay "Thinking Like a Mountain," Aldo Leopold writes of the thrill of the hunt, finally finding a wolf pack to shoot. After the shots were fired, Leopold relates a remarkable experience. He says, "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that fewer wolves meant more deer. But after seeing the green fire die, I sense that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

Leopold notes that a measure of success in our hunting, ranching, and other economic interests is all well enough, but too much taming of the wild only yields danger

in the long run. We should have enough experience in wilderness management by now to know that privileging human interests exclusively only defeats them. “Perhaps this,” he concludes, “is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men.”

It is in this sense, I believe, that hearing the wolf’s howl is a morally significant experience. If we allow it, it moves us to set our own interests within a broader context that matters not just to such creatures and those who love them, but to all of us. The logic of unchecked self-interest, whether in recreation or economic pursuits, is ultimately self-destructive. It also is morally corrupting, unless it finds its uneasy compromise with a broader sense of our place in the world.

A bill is now in the works in the United States Senate to open up a part of the Artic National Wildlife Refuge for oil drilling. Although the bill only allows modest exploration, it is a foot in the door. Is this a proper compromise? I don’t think so. Regardless of who you believe, that there is only a maximum of six month’s oil consumption there, or something more, the point is one of principle. Places such as this are simply all too rare.

True, most of us will never visit such a place. But that is the point. Its existence preserves something far too ethically valuable—a place where wild animals howl, and no buses are to be heard.

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