

Uncle Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire "Wolves Will Eat Your Babies!"

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We have seen a rising tide of hysteria in the last few years over the recovery of gray wolves in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming and over the Mexican wolf (lobo) in Arizona and New Mexico. Wolf-haters are using any argument, plausible or not, to demand the second extinction of wolves in the wild.

The most terrifying arguments against wolves and other carnivores is that they will eat children. Cynical wolf-haters in Catron County, New Mexico, are currently waving this faux bloody-diaper to demand the removal of all lobos because their mere presence is causing psychological trauma to local children. I'll explore this 2007 antiwolf campaign in a forthcoming *Around the Campfire*. In this issue, however, I want to put the danger from wolves into perspective.

Typical of the modern Little-Red-Ridinghood fear is a column by Stanford economist and always-pissed-off "free-market" ideologue Thomas Sowell. Ten years ago, he wrote, "Even when children are killed by wolves or other animals on that list [the Endangered Species list], the main concern of the environmental fascists is to prevent 'hysteria.'" ¹ One would assume that in order to be published in reputable newspapers, Sowell has files stuffed with hair-raising, documented reports on lethal attacks by endangered species (flocks of marbled murrelets attacking Oregon schoolchildren at recess?), but typical of

¹ Thomas Sowell, "Could the worm of the zealots at last be turning?" *The Albuquerque Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1997, p. A10.

those fanning such “hysteria,” he does not see fit to give a single example of children being harmed, much less killed, by listed critters. Nor do the newspapers running his column seem to worry about facts any more than do supermarket-checkout-stand tabloids.

More common folk than a Stanford professor share his Brothers Grimm fear. At the 1995 public hearing on Mexican wolf reintroduction in Socorro, New Mexico, my sister, Roxanne Pacheco, brought her little boy, Bennie, and some of his cousins dressed up in wolf costumes. Late in the hearing, a woman testified that the “woman with all the little wolf babies” would change her mind after wolves killed and ate them. In 1999, mass hysteria broke out in southwestern New Mexico's rural San Francisco Valley (Catron County) as residents convinced themselves that wolves were stalking the streets at night, killing their cats, dogs, and livestock. Children would be next, despite the fact that no evidence of wolves nearby was found. (Catron County holds the champion's belt, by the way, for most benighted county in America.)

Now, I suppose it is possible that a wild wolf could attack a child in Catron County. It is also highly improbable, as only a tiny handful of cases exist of a healthy, wild wolf attacking anyone in North America.² (In a much-publicized case in Saskatchewan last year at first it looked like wolves killed a hiker, but now it looks like a black bear did the deed.) Instead of agonizing over the remote possibility of wolf attacks in lightly populated, sprawling Catron County, why not worry about real dangers? It is far more possible that a child will be injured or killed in Catron County in an automobile accident because it is not properly strapped in. It is possible—*indeed, almost certain*—that next year a child in Catron County will be the victim of physical or sexual abuse by an adult

² Tim Mowry, “Woman recovering after wolf attack,” *Fairbanks (Alaska) Daily News-Miner*, July 12, 2006.

in the household. I write this based on eight years experience of living in Catron County.

This overblown fear of wolves is a fear of the unknown. It is a fear that numbs, a fear that enrages, a fear that overwhelms common sense. It is a fear that sweeps away the facts and paralyzes rationality. Those who work to prop up the nineteenth-century resource-exploitation industries on public lands cruelly exploit it.

A prime example of irrational fear surrounding wolves comes from the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau. On May 16, 2000, the Farm Bureau issued a press release concerning the “life-threatening attack” by wolves on a woman jogger in Gila Hot Springs (a small rural subdivision surrounded by the Gila Wilderness Area). Norm Plank, executive vice president of the Bureau, solemnly warned, “I can assure you no human is a match for a starving pack of wolves in a feeding frenzy.”³

What of the woman attacked? How severe were her injuries? Was there any hope of recovery? Well, according to Renée Despres, the attack was a “nonincident.” She was jogging with her two Labrador retrievers when they came upon two Mexican wolves. Her two dogs “ran towards the wolves and then came back. The larger wolf followed,” according to the story in the *Albuquerque Journal*. She chucked a few rocks at the wolf and it ran away. “Despres said she did not feel threatened and thought the wolf that trailed the dogs was just curious.” She took her dogs home and went on to finish her run.⁴

This incident shows how we conservationists might deconstruct outlandish lies by wolf-haters. One, Plank says he “can assure us.” That

³ Plank would have been correct to say that no truth is a match for a Farm Bureau spokesperson in a media frenzy.

⁴ Tania Soussan, “Jogger Hurls Rocks At Mexican Wolves,” *Albuquerque Journal*, May 17, 2000.

statement presumes expertise about wolves. Does Plank have any? Has he studied wolves scientifically? Has he read scientific papers about wolf behavior? Has he ever even seen a wolf in the wild? Two, he implies the woman was attacked by a “pack.” In reality, there were only two wolves. Three, he says the wolves were starving. What does he base this on? Where’s his evidence? Finally, he claims they were in a “feeding frenzy.” But the woman says that one wolf was just curious and took off after she threw a couple of rocks. Plank certainly has an odd definition of a feeding frenzy. It is essential that conservationists pick apart all antiwolf fantasies to this degree. Nail each point down and show that it is hogwash. Give the reporter or whomever a conspiratorial eye and say, “C’mon, you’re smart enough to see through these kinds of claims. You’re a reporter. You’re supposed to be skeptical and ask questions. It’s just a three-little-pigs story.” After such gentleness, I think it is fine to treat a reporter who repeats Nature-bullshit with scorn, and to question their credibility and journalistic skills. When a reporter, such as the one who wrote up the “attacked” woman’s side of the story, does a proper get-at-the-facts story, we should praise her. Praise for good reporting on controversial conservation issues is vital if we are to turn around sloppy news stories.

Nevertheless, dangerous animals are out there. Conservationists need to constantly point that out. In 1997-1998, for example, domestic dogs attacked nine *million* people in the United States. Twenty-seven Americans died from these attacks.⁵ Nineteen of them were children. Between 1991 and 1998, rottweilers killed thirty-three Americans and pit bulls killed twenty-one. Between 1979 and 1998, pit bulls killed sixty-six, rottweilers thirty-seven,

⁵ “Dog Days,” *Time*, September 25, 2000, p. 110.

German shepherds seventeen, and huskies fifteen Americans.⁶ In contrast, between 1890 and 2006 only seventeen people in the United States were killed by mountain lions.⁷ There is no documented case of a wild wolf killing a human in North America. Insofar as the recent case in Saskatchewan goes, a credible source has told The Rewilding Institute, “The official investigation will conclude that the man was killed by a large carnivore and the preponderance of evidence supports the conclusion that he was killed by a black bear.” The report will be out soon, though I’m sure it will not keep the wolf-haters from continuing to blame packs of wolves in a feeding frenzy for committing the awful deed. But conservationists must respond with this new information when reporters say that wolves were responsible for the deadly attack.

Along unfenced highways in Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah 10,000 motorists collided with cows during 1996 and 1997. Thirty-five people were killed.⁸ In these states motorists are liable for the damage they do to a rancher's cow; the rancher is not liable for the safety hazard. When I was living in the small town of Ely in western Nevada in 1982-1983, a woman and her child died a grisly death after hitting a cow late at night along a U.S. highway. The owner of the cow sued the dead woman's husband for the value of the cow.

Although a wolf pack or even a lone wolf could fairly easily kill a human, wolf expert David Mech has wondered why wolves do *not* attack us. He has lived with wolves in the Canadian High Arctic and writes that “none has ever made me feel afraid of it.” One of the reasons for the lack of wolf attacks is

⁶ The Associated Press, “Man's worst friend is now the Rottweiler,” *The Albuquerque Tribune*, September 15, 2000.

⁷ Tony Davis and Enric Volane, “How close do mountain lions come to you?” *Arizona Daily Star*, July 16, 2006.

⁸ The Associated Press, “Open-Range Foes Say Cattle a Traffic Hazard,” *Albuquerque Journal*, August 10, 1997.

their fear of people. In places where wolves are not afraid of humans, Mech thinks that our standing on two legs may intimidate them as though we were bears, which wolves wisely avoid. In the very few cases in Eurasia where there are documented cases of healthy wolves killing people (such as in India), the victims are largely unattended children scurrying around in brush, and the wolves are habituated to humans and “perhaps they are so desperate from lack of prey that they must resort to scavenging closely around humans' abodes.”⁹

I had a close encounter with a wolf in a remote area of Arctic Canada. I was not standing up, though. I was caught in a far more vulnerable position with my pants down answering a call of Nature. I glanced up and less than one hundred feet away a large black wolf sauntered by, uninterested in me. I was not in any way afraid—I was joyously spellbound. Though it would be a real hoot to watch Sowell or Plank in such a situation. Imagine it.

Of course, wolves and other predators do kill (that's why they are called predators). Among such prey are pets. And some rural and suburban dwellers howl about predators when they kill their roaming dogs and cats. But, as Kenny Dove, Game Warden for Albemarle County in Virginia, says, “When you move into prime wildlife habitat, that's what you're going to get: prime wildlife.” In 1998, our cat, Diablo, was killed by a coyote in our neighborhood. Nancy and I really loved Diablo; he was a cat among cats. We grieved for Diablo, but we did not demand that coyotes be eliminated from the nearby Sandia Mountains to make our neighborhood safe for cats. We recognized the reality of living near wilderness and that coyotes were here first. We now keep our other cats locked in at night.

⁹ L. David Mech, “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Revisited,” *International Wolf*, Spring 1998, pp. 9-11.

So, what if there are no wolves or other critters with big teeth to fear? No problem! Scared folks with a twisted view of Nature can always find something. Even prairie dogs terrorize some overwrought folks. Ben Brown, manager of the private Gray Ranch in southwestern New Mexico, writes, “A few of our neighbors panicked when they learned of our intentions [to reintroduce prairie dogs]. They discovered that prairie dog populations are extremely susceptible to sylvatic plague. They mounted a campaign of misstatement, exaggeration and hysteria that has just about everyone in this part of New Mexico convinced that the ‘black death,’ which swept Europe in the Middle Ages, is at their doorstep.” However, when plague hits a dog town, it sweeps through like a prairie fire. This means there is very little chance that prairie dogs from a healthy town will have plague. Nonetheless, all prairie dogs brought to the Gray were dusted with flea powder and confined for a week before being released. There was vanishingly little chance of plague slipping through.¹⁰

Ben Brown's neighbors in the Bootheel Heritage Society, who have worked themselves into a lather about prairie dogs, need only look to the big city to calm down. I live in a pretty nice neighborhood in Albuquerque. Two blocks away, there is a prairie dog town. For over four miles, it parallels Tramway Road and an adjacent paved path used by bicyclists, walkers, in-line skaters, and parents pushing baby strollers. My neighbors and I delight in the prairie dogs. I regularly see folks bringing grass clippings and other food to the chubby rodents. There is no hysteria about “black death.” The folks in the Bootheel Heritage Society should change its name to the Bootheel Superstition Society.

Being a realist about human nature, I do not expect facts or reason to turn wolf-haters away from their fears and superstitions. But there are others,

¹⁰ Bennett A. Brown, “They're safe, they're homebodies, and they improve the range,” *The Albuquerque Tribune*, June 23, 1999.

including some reporters, who sympathize with the Salem-style excitement about wolves because they don't know any better. It is the task of biologists and conservationists to teach reporters and others the truth about wild animals, and to take them to task when they uncritically report on antipredator falsehoods.

A good way to get our message across might be to point out the irony that all along we have pretended that Europe was overcivilized and denatured while the American West was wild. In truth, there are 15,000 to 18,000 wolves in Europe; 2,000 wolves roam Spain alone.¹¹ What sissies our wolf-hating he-men and she-women of the West really are. For authenticity, Hollywood should film all Westerns in Spain instead of in such domesticated places as Wyoming and New Mexico.

--Dave Foreman

Among the prairie dogs

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¹¹ Paul Paquet, personal communication.

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