

**GEIST  
WOLF ESSAY**  
PART 3 OF 3





# LET'S GET REAL!

## BEYOND WOLF ADVOCACY, TOWARD REALISTIC POLICIES FOR CARNIVORE CONSERVATION

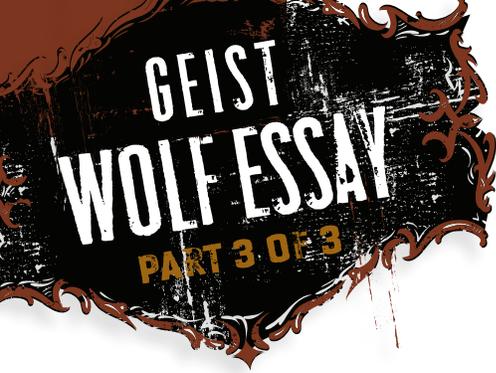
Investigations into the death of Kenton Carnegie unearthed matters that are deeply troubling (see “Death by Wolves” in the Winter 2008 issue of *Fair Chase*). Under the guise of scientific authority, political advocates declared that black bears, not wolves, had killed Kenton Carnegie. By reporting these claims in prestigious publications such as *National Geographic* and *National Wildlife*, they mislead the public into believing their version of the story. Never mind that the facts clearly showed otherwise, and that the official inquiry declared wolves to be the cause of Kenton Carnegie’s death. Advocacy won the day, resulting in widespread belief that bears killed Kenton Carnegie and that wolves are harmless.

The North American myth of harmless wolves is deadly! This belief has killed at least three persons in North America alone in the last decade including two bright, well-educated young people. Witness the instances of children under parental care sticking fingers towards captive wolves in the innocent belief that wolves pose no threat. I must confess that I, too, embraced the myth throughout my academic career and four years into retirement—based on years of experience with painfully shy Canadian wilderness wolves. It took a misbehaving pack on Vancouver Island, and a review of historical matters, to teach me differently.

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## MYTH OF THE BENIGN WOLF

Advocacy behind the “benign wolf” myth is extremely powerful. It almost seems that the better educated people are, the more likely they are to believe and fall victim to this myth. Such was the case with Kenton Carnegie, and also 24-year-old Trisha Wyman, a wildlife biologist killed on April 18, 1996, by a captive wolf pack in Ontario. After that event, I spoke in length with Dr. Erich Klinghammer of Wolf Park. Called in as an expert witness to examine the case, he discovered that there was surprise at Wyman’s death. After all, wolves were not supposed to attack people!

Wyman had visited the park previously to study wolves and was given the dream job of looking after and interpreting the animals. She lasted three days before falling victim to her charges. A similar fate befell a lady who kept wolf hybrids as pets. On July 17, 2006, this captive pack of nine wolf hybrids killed their owner, Sandra L. Piovesan of Salem Township, Pennsylvania. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that Piovesan treated her wolves like children, and said as much when neighbors asked about them. “They (the wolf-hybrids) give me unqualified love,” Piovesan was quoted as saying. She fed the animals road kills that sometimes caused the neighborhood to smell bad. She said that she liked the wolf-dogs because they were pretty. The notion of the “harmless” wolf, while unstated, was implicit.

The view that wolves do not attack people except in cases of rabies is so strongly held today that even an exploratory attack on two camp personnel at Camp North Landing, Saskatchewan, was not recognized as a threat. Currently, reintroduced wolves in the western U.S. are showing signs of targeting people; however, their intentions continue to be misinterpreted. The widespread view of the “harmless wolf” may have prevented North American wolf specialists from developing an understanding of the circumstances when wolves are dangerous to people and when they are not. In North America, unlike in some European and Asiatic countries, the circumstances

when wolves pose a danger to humans are rare but not absent.

The examples above are but part of a greater force that advocates predator protection based on emotions and sensationalism rather than fact. Various organizations do battle on behalf of seals, whales, wolves, mountain lions, grizzly bears, and other charismatic species. They engage the media with sensational stories, using showmanship and enlisting pop culture stars to capture the public’s imagination—all predicated on claims of a science basis. In the case of gray wolves, the political objective is to spread the species throughout its historic range including “in multi-use landscapes surrounding houses, farms, villages, and cities.” Central to this goal and associated legislation is the myth of the “harmless wolf,” repeated so often that it transformed long ago into a politically correct “truth.” Moreover, this myth is apparently upheld in the science community and has given rise to a popular counter-claim; namely, that all information pertaining to dangerous wolves is an outgrowth of the misleading fairy tale about Little Red Riding Hood. Further, this fairy tale is claimed to reflect ancient, primordial, and irrational fear of wolves and gross misinformation about their behavior.

The Coroner’s inquest following the Kenton Carnegie tragedy in Saskatchewan did not touch on policy matters, which is unfortunate. It only answered the narrow question of which animal killed Kenton Carnegie, to which the answer clearly is wolves. Change the question slightly to what caused Kenton Carnegie’s death and the answer is: the myth that wolves do not attack people. The inquest did not address this myth, its origins, or the scholarly deficits that generated such beliefs. Neither did the inquest ask what circumstances caused the wolves to habituate to humans, other than the availability of camp refuse. It did not inquire about the scarcity of natural prey and its causes, or about escalating livestock losses in the area. The inquest did not consider that in British Columbia, thanks to legislation quite different from that in Saskatchewan, the tragedy would very likely not have happened. In British Columbia, any licensed hunter may take three wolves in a long season, and this readily removes habituating wolves. Saskatchewan, in contrast, has no general season and wolves may be taken only by trappers and by people suffering wolf depredation, provided they get prior permission.

During the inquest, I detailed these facts to the media, but my letters were ignored. However, there is more to the matter than became available to the public through

the inquest. The policies that led to Kenton’s death escaped critical examination as my attempts to surface these concerns were suppressed by the news media.

How can beliefs about “harmless wolves” persist in spite of centuries of recorded experience to the contrary in Russia, Finland, France, Sweden, Germany, India, Afghanistan, Korea, Japan, central Asia, Turkey, Iran, or Greenland? Peter Freuchen, an explorer of Greenland, reported in *Arctic Adventure* that he lost a companion to wolves (p. 23, pp. 329, 332). Freuchen had his own harrowing experiences with wolves trying to break into his cabin (pp. 16-19). He shot a wolf stalking his children (pp. 347-348), and was unable to provision his outpost by dog sled because every attempt was halted by wolf attacks. Freuchen shared an observation made by a long-time resident and hunter in Greenland: where there are wolves, there are no people and vice versa! And while details in Hazaribagh, Northern India, may be different, the causes of wolf predation on humans are much the same. The stage is set by prey scarcity, few opportunities to kill livestock, and *de facto* protection of wolves. Next comes the systematic targeting of people as prey, mainly children.

To understand the stubborn persistence of the “harmless wolf,” we need to explore the myth’s origins and then examine the nature of the contradicting evidence.

## TRACING THE MYTH’S ORIGINS

The origin of the “harmless wolf” myth can be traced to a highly respected Canadian biologist, Dr. Doug Clark. He investigated the killing of people by wolves in Europe and concluded in an unpublished paper, “The Beast of Gévaudan,” that while such attacks were real, rabid wolves caused them all. Clark’s exoneration of healthy wolves was based on his experience with Canada’s wilderness wolves; in that respect, Clark’s experience is much the same as my own. And yet he erred. Apparently he was unaware of the behavioral distinction between rabid and non-rabid wolf attacks. This is puzzling because others including scientists, historians, and even laypersons did differentiate between the attacks of rabid and non-rabid wolves based on examination of the same material.

Clark failed to notice that in the days before modern medicine, there were survivors of wolf attacks who could not have been bitten by rabid wolves. Rabid wolves are lethal. Consider that historically, the most frightening aspect of being bitten by a rabid wolf was the victim’s “mad” state and near-certain death within about six

months. Rabid wolves attacked swiftly with great ferocity, biting multiple victims as well as livestock and non-animate objects. Their bite was aimed at the victim's face and head. Rabid wolves do not stalk, sneak, hunt, or drag the victim away for consumption. Contrast this with the reported cases in which victims have managed to escape after being attacked, subdued, and even dragged away by wolves. From these attacks, clearly perpetrated by non-rabid wolves, a pattern of selectivity emerged in which wolves targeted primarily children. Rabid wolves exhibited no such selectivity. As well, adult humans could escape most attacks by single wolves, but never that of a pack. Subsequent historians such as Moriceau found that in France about one-third of the attacks were by non-rabid wolves. The same proportion was reported by biologists such as Linnell et al.

Alas, the fairy tale by the brothers Grimm, *Little Red Riding Hood*, is not based on myths, ignorance, or a misunderstanding of wolves. Rather, it is based on very real and terrible experiences with wolves throughout the centuries. Excepting historic Japan, where unarmed peasants cultivated and revered wild wolves as a defense against crop-raiding deer and wild pigs, I have not found instances where unchecked wolf packs lived peacefully alongside people. Even in Japan, tolerance ended when wolves became infected with rabies and inflicted this dreaded disease on humans. Wolves were then persecuted and exterminated by 1905.

Clark's conclusions were picked up by North American wolf biologists. Why did so few biologists bother to investigate the historical material relating to wolf attacks? Possible reasons include language and cultural barriers, premature insights based on young captive wolves, or failure to see that such investigations require a background in the scholarship of historians rather than the sciences. Undoubtedly these biologists were influenced by the lack of human casualties attributed to wolves—unlike the numerous cases of human deaths caused by bears and cougars in North America. An explanation for this is that wolves, like coyotes, take a long time to target humans as alternative prey. Individuals that do so become conspicuous

and are quickly eliminated by arms-bearing North Americans. Bears and cougars have no such conspicuous targeting behavior.

Native people seem much less enamored of the myth of harmless wolves than are urban environmentalists. As to the claimed lack of evidence that wolves prey on people, a native hunter gave the following response: "Evidence? Wolves eat the evidence!" Such was the case with Kenton Carnegie. Wolves had devoured not only his body, but also some of his clothing until interrupted by the search parties.

The myth of the harmless wolf gained traction globally following the publication of a very popular book by famous Canadian author, Farley Mowat, in which wolves were depicted as harmless, lovable mouse-eaters. While Canadian biologists did not fall for this prank, the literati did—and are still falling for it. It's interesting that Mowat's book was embraced by the Soviet Union's communist party, which

matter in a book on wolves. Translated into Norwegian, his work was denounced by the Soviets and the responsible ministry was ordered to destroy the translation. It was subsequently published in Swedish. An English translation lingered unpublished because no publisher wanted to touch it; yet, it has recently been published.

## THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE

A second reason the "harmless wolf" myth persists is that accounts of wolf attacks are observational in nature rather than consisting of scientific data. Witness accounts are usually recorded second-hand by the police, priests, doctors, and county clerks. Second-hand records are often subjective, however. Moreover, while church and municipal records are a good source of reported wolf attacks on people, few such records survived the frequent and destructive wars in Europe. The limitations of such records and first-hand accounts do not do justice to

the subject. There is also suspicion that some reports, especially in newspapers, may have been padded or are somehow not trustworthy. The truth of those assertions is not for scientists to decide, but for historians.

The expertise of historian scholarship is required to locate, verify, clarify, and place into perspective the records of wolf predation on humans. For instance, planner Johnny Löe and scientist Elvin Röske reported a total of 607 humans killed by wolves in 15 countries. The French rural historian Jean-Marc Moriceau documented more than 3,000 fatalities in France alone. Scientists reporting in Linnell et al. (2002) did well, but failed to match Moriceau's scholarship. Scientists, no matter how sincere or competent in their respective fields, are not qualified to deliver historical scholarship. What scientists can do competently is to winnow historical research for patterns and trends that relate to what is known about wolf biology—while recognizing that our understanding of wolf biology, too, is changing.

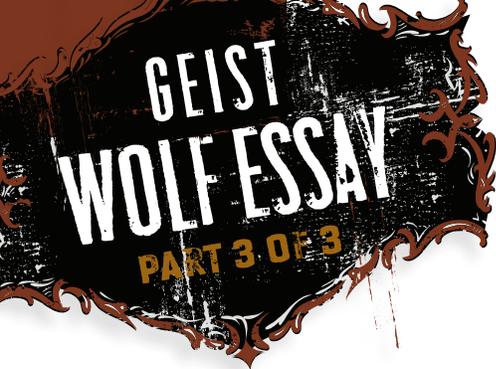
North American wolf biologists have not sought the assistance of historians, in

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY FOR CARNIVORE CONSERVATION

- 1. The notion of conserving wolves in multi-use landscapes surrounding houses, farms, villages, and cities is untenable and needs to be replaced with a more realistic policy.**
- 2. A Continental Carnivore Conservation Strategy should be negotiated between Canada and the United States within the context of a Terrestrial Wildlife Conservation Treaty.**
- 3. We need to take seriously the matter of zoning, determining where large predators will be conserved and where not.**
- 4. There is a great public good that hunters give to society at large, which I call the "freedom of the woods," and this needs to be recognized and encouraged in policies.**
- 5. Any model of carnivore conservation must take a large-scale perspective that includes areas where large predators may dwell unmolested by humans.**

For Dr. Geist's footnotes, references, and explanations of his policy proposals, log into the Associates Web Community at [WWW.BOONE-CROCKETT.ORG](http://WWW.BOONE-CROCKETT.ORG)

had a history of systematically suppressing information about man-killing wolves. Since coming to power, the party had used "scientific" propaganda to convince that wolves were harmless, probably in order to forestall the call for arms by the public. The Russian scientist Pavlov disclosed this



part, because of language and cultural barriers. Early on, their views were shaped by working with young captive wolves and by an abiding respect for Clark's authority. Had biologists done systematic investigation of foreign historical material, they would hardly have concluded that the fairytale of *Little Red Riding Hood* was based on ignorance, misunderstanding, malice or an exaggerated fear of wolves! In places where prey are scarce, livestock unavailable, and people unarmed, wolves focus on humans—then as now—with frightening consequences. No sovereign would have accepted the high costs, economic losses, or meager results of wolf control in centuries past were it not for telling reasons.

### **CAN WOLVES AND PEOPLE COEXIST?**

During the inquiry into Kenton Carnegie's death, biologist Mark McNay testified that aggressive encounters with wolves in North America are on the increase with current wolf recovery. The historical and current evidence indicates that people and wolves can coexist where the wolf population remains at low levels and all habituating animals are removed. These circumstances effectively maintain a buffer of wild prey and livestock between wolves and humans. However, the notion now enshrined in law in North America and Europe, that wolves can coexist with people in multi-use landscapes surrounding houses, farms, villages and cities, is not tenable. Under such conditions, territorial wolves and people will come into contact. Once they have habituated, even well-fed wolves will test people by approaching them, nipping at their clothing, and licking exposed skin. A clumsy first attack may leave victims injured but alive, but serious attacks soon follow. While a healthy man with determination may succeed in fighting off or even choking a lone wolf, a lone person cannot defeat a pack. And all this assumes the absence of rabies.

When wolves begin to patiently observe humans, it signals that they are targeting humans as prey. Such wolves may

be short of natural prey, or they may be well-fed on garbage and already habituated to humans. Patient observation means that wolves have begun to familiarize themselves with humans and that an attack is likely to follow. The same pattern has been described in urban coyotes that learn to target children. In both cases, the animals need to be taken out.

In British Columbia any licensed hunter can remove habituating wolves, and this provides a safety valve. Healthy, free-living wolves are virtually non-huntable. The animals most likely to be killed by hunters are disadvantaged by age, condition, or rejection by their pack. Consequently,

## **COMPREHENSIVE POLICIES**

**All wildlife conservation policies should aim to sustain native, unadulterated genetic stocks in environments that support the continuation of adaptive processes.**

**Wildlife conservation policies also need to engender tolerance, acceptance, and public support; without this, wildlife cannot thrive.**

even liberal hunting laws need not threaten wolf abundance.

### **NEEDED: COMPREHENSIVE POLICIES**

All wildlife conservation policies should aim to sustain native, unadulterated genetic stocks in environments that support the continuation of adaptive processes. Wildlife conservation policies also need to engender tolerance, acceptance, and public support; without this, wildlife cannot thrive. History teaches that political support accrues to species that are either used by a large segment of the population, or revered as an icon. In North America, wolves maintained at very low levels do not pose a threat to livestock, pets, or humans; moreover, they become romantic icons. At high densities, however, wolves may severely reduce or destroy wildlife populations. This has been demonstrated by the Japanese experience and other historic accounts, by rigorous studies, and by my personal experience. Large predators in North America kill more game than do hunters by an order of magnitude. I've come to understand that unregulated predator populations threaten the very institution of public ownership of wildlife.

Wildlife in North America has a long history as a treasured resource that generates substantial wealth and employment. It has been vigorously defended by its owners, the citizens of the U.S. and Canada. As the public's interest in wildlife diminishes, I see conditions developing for the transfer

of wildlife resources and habitats to private ownership. Already in some states and provinces we're seeing the privatization of deer and other big game. In the future, the public may have no more say over private bears and wolves than it has currently over private deer. Our goals must aim to maintain genetically pure stocks of predators in native landscapes, sustain game abundance for public use, and provide for public safety.

We need a comprehensive policy for carnivore conservation. The ideal policy will be a prescription for diverse and abundant game populations, viable populations of native predators, and high levels of hunter participation. This approach would safeguard

the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation by insuring that a large fraction of the population is actively engaged in the policies, politics, and pastimes that enable a secure future for wildlife. In managing wildlife, one is reminded of the French proverb that says, to have a beautiful park, one

needs a very sharp axe and a heart of stone!

I'll close by listing what I believe to be essential elements in a comprehensive policy for carnivore conservation. While space allows only a listing of these components, I invite you to visit the Club's web site where my references are listed to share my thinking on each one.

1. The notion of conserving wolves in multi-use landscapes surrounding houses, farms, villages, and cities is untenable and needs to be replaced with a more realistic policy.
2. A Continental Carnivore Conservation Strategy should be negotiated between Canada and the United States within the context of a Terrestrial Wildlife Conservation Treaty.
3. We need to take seriously the matter of zoning, determining where large predators will be conserved and where not.
4. There is a great public good that hunters give to society at large, which I call the "freedom of the woods," and this needs to be recognized and encouraged in policies.
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