

We're Not As Divided As We Think We Are - Social Identity Effects on Attitudes Toward Wolves

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Polarization among social groups can threaten the long-term success of conservation efforts. When group identities (defined as aspects of self-concept tied to group membership) are made salient, perceived divisions can intensify, particularly when individuals misjudge the beliefs of others. Despite its importance, the fluid nature of identity and its variable effects on conservation attitudes and outcomes remain understudied. To address this gap, we conducted two randomized controlled experiments with residents of U.S. states where wolves are present ($n = 2,296$). In Study 1, activating political identity significantly affected attitudes toward gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) and amplified differences between groups. In Study 2, providing a straightforward correction to in-group metaperceptions mitigated these effects by reducing perceived polarization and constraining the influence of identity fusion. In an unrelated third Study of Montana hunters and landowners, we show how even subtle identity cues (e.g., in survey recruitment material) can similarly influence self-reported attitudes toward wildlife. Together, these findings highlight opportunities for conservation policymakers and practitioners to avoid unnecessarily triggering identities commonly linked to conflict and to challenge misleading narratives that overstate social divisions. Addressing inaccurate metaperceptions and incorporating identity-aware communication approaches may strengthen public support for wildlife conservation initiatives while minimizing preventable conflict.