
WESTERN MONTANAN RANCHER'S, HUNTER'S AND TRAPPER'S WOLF TOLERANCE IN LIGHT OF PUBLIC HUNTING AND TRAPPING

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The Public Trust Doctrine placed wildlife in trust, via state control and regulation, for the benefit of the people. Managing agencies that lose sight of the importance of public acceptance of predator policies and management actions may find themselves legislatively or judicially subverted. This study examines how the Montana public wolf hunting and trapping seasons have affected tolerance of gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) among rural resident ranchers, hunters, and trappers. Twenty residents from the Blackfoot, Bitterroot, and Ninemile Valleys were qualitatively interviewed over the summer and fall of 2013. Potential participants were initially identified using purposive sampling, with subsequent interviewees located through snowball sampling. Preliminary results show that the hunting and trapping seasons have not yet caused changes in attitudes towards wolves in these groups; however losing the hunting and trapping seasons would have a negative impact. The majority of interviewees stated a desire for some avenue of management and control of the Montana wolf population. One apparent theme was that residents are more likely to accept hunting as a means of lethal control over trapping due to concerns of indiscriminate, inhumane take. Wolf presence conjures up a mixture of both awe and fear in these groups. Ranchers are primarily concerned with the threat to livestock and livelihood, while hunters and trappers are uneasy about predator and big game balance on the landscape. As intended, the public wolf hunting and trapping seasons allow ranchers, hunters, and trappers to feel some measure of control over the perceived threat of wolf presence.