

The wolf conflict in Norway: An economic, political and social conflict

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The wolf (*canis lupus*) is an apex predator and a very adaptable species that have persisted in a large variety of ecosystems throughout the northern hemisphere. They are one of the most debated species and one of the most complex environmental debates in Norway today. The current wolf population in Norway consists of 32-34 individuals (Wabakken et al., 2011), and we are bound by international agreements to protect the wolf as an endangered species. Wolf management is a highly debated issue and creates division in Norwegian society, which maintains the wolf population at very low levels (Andersen, et al., 2003). The conflict surrounding this species is affected by a large variety of economic, political and social issues. A political ecology analysis can greatly contribute to understand this complex debate and contribute to ensure the future survival of the wolf.

The relationship between human society and the wolf changed from respect to hatred as we transformed from hunters and gatherers to agricultural communities. The wolf became a direct threat towards human livelihoods (Lopez, 1978). Our relationship with nature also changed with the introduction of Christianity and the Domination Thesis. This was based on the idea of humans as superior to other species and nature. Followed by utilitarianism by the philosopher John Lock in the 1600, nature's value became dependent on its usefulness for human livelihoods. This represents an anthropocentric view on nature with humans in the center of all considerations, which also affected the relationship between human communities and the wolf (Robbins, 2010 and Bjerke & Kaltenborn, 1999).

People associated new meanings to the wolf as a symbol of wilderness which agrarian societies tried to eradicate. They came to represent what should be subdued in the human spirit as a symbol of the beast within man and bad qualities such as greed, lust, mercilessness and violence (Robbins, 2010 and Lopez, 1978). In Christian mythology the wolf was presented as evil and dangerous. The animal became associated with undesirable elements in society such as witches, werewolves, murderers, rapists and pedophiles. In later years the wolf has become a villain in children's stories such as "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Three

Little Pigs” (Lopez, 1978 and Hundefide, 1996). The last centuries humans have eradicated the wolf from large parts of their former living areas. The persecution and hatred of the wolf throughout the North American and European continent is unparalleled in modern history. The wolf has been shot, poisoned, tortured and burned alive for public amusement and eradicated from most of its previous living areas (Steinhart, 1996).

The perspective on wolves and nature itself has gradually changed the last decades. As wilderness areas and wolves became scarcer in both Europe and North America a more ecocentric view of nature emerged. Wilderness areas became worthy of protection not because of its usefulness for society, but because it had a value in itself. This perspective was first purposed by Aldo Leopold in 1949 when he wrote “The Land Ethic” inspired by an epiphany he had while killing a wolf and witnessing its suffering (Robbins et al. 2010 and Fox & Bekoff, 2009). The wolf is still a symbol of wilderness, but the meaning of wilderness has gradually changed. Some argue that reintroducing the wolf is a process of reintroducing wilderness areas to the world (Robbins et al. 2010). These cultural images of the wolf form the basis for conflicts concerning the presence of wolves in Norwegian nature today and still strongly affect people’s opinions about wolves.

The wolf has been a vital part of ecosystems in Norway for centuries, but became functionally extinct from Norway by 1960 due to human prosecution. It was protected in 1971 but only the last the two decades has it naturally reintroduced to Norway (Andersen et al., 2003). Still the return of the wolf has caused increased conflicts with economic activities especially in relation to depredation of sheep and reduction in the wild moose populations (Skonhoft, 2005). The sheep industry in Norway has developed in a predator free environment where 2 million sheep graze freely in the summer with little supervision. Each year sheep are killed by large predators, but the losses to bears, wolverines and lynx are in total much higher than the number of sheep killed by wolves (Andersen et al., 2003). The total economic loss of wolf depredated sheep is small, but can have strong effect on individual farmers (Skonhoft, 2005).

The wolf can also cause local declines in game species such as moose which is an important animal for hunting in rural areas in Norway. By eradicating all the large predators in Scandinavia we have been able to maintain unnaturally high population of game species such as moose (Steinhart, 1996). There are negative effects associated with this such as overgrazing in some areas and an increased number traffic accidents involving moose.

Considering these factors the decline in game species caused by the reintroduced wolf populations also has limited economic costs for human communities (Skonhoft, 2005).

The limited economic implications of maintaining a wolf population in Norway suggest that there are other social and political factors also influencing this debate. Even though the majority of the Norwegian population supports a viable wolf population, 10% of the respondents in a research by Lindell and Bjerke (2002) state that the wolf has no right to reside in Norwegian nature. Their research also shows that only every tenth Norwegian would not want to have wolves closer than 5 kilometers to their home.

The wolf debate in Norway is presented by the media as a conflict between rural and urban areas. However there are other social factors that have proven to be more central in the wolf debate (Skogen, 2001). This is related to class differences in Norwegian society, different environmental perspectives and rapid changes in rural communities. A study from Hedmark by Kaltenborn & Bjerke in 1999 shows the difference in perspectives on nature in three different social groups where sheep farmers have much more anthropocentric view on nature than wildlife managers and research biologist, which present a more ecocentric view. This also coincides with negative views on the wolf and is documented in other research from both Trysil and Stor-Elvdal by Skogen (2001) and Kränge & Skogen (2001). An anthropocentric view on nature also influences environmental concerns in the sense that these social groups are more engaged in environmental issues affecting their own interest directly. Wolves are not a directly useful resource to humans and are by many not seen as an environmental issue, but rather as a threat to traditional activities and use of the forest resources (Kaltenborn & Bjerke, 1999 and Kränge & Skogen, 2001).

Life in rural areas is rapidly changing away from the primary industry towards the service sector. This creates a more diverse population in rural areas with a growing middle class and higher education levels. The old Norwegian community that maintained traditional forest activities is gradually disappearing in the rural areas (Skogen, 2001). Hundeide (1996) suggests that the wolf has become a symbol of this development in rural communities in Norway and being opposed to wolves is associated with support for a traditional way of life. In Stor-Elvdal young men with little education struggle to get work in a transformed local community, but use hunting and recreation in nature as a link to the old rural ways. The wolf is perceived as a threat to these activities and being opposed to wolf's presence is part of their cultural identity. The reintroduction of wolves represents another political decision forced

upon local communities from the urban elites of society. This social construction of the wolf conflict as a substitute for a deeper conflict creates polarization of the debate and makes conservation of the wolf an increasingly difficult social and political issue (Krange & Skogen 2001 and Skogen, 2001).

In Norway no human has been killed or injured by a wolf the last 200 years, but there still exist a cultural fear of wolves. A study done by Lindell and Bjerke (2002) shows that 48% of the respondents stated that they were very afraid of wolves and 40% were slightly afraid. This is affected by the natural fear of these animals as a biological legacy. It is further enforced by people's lack of experience with wolves since they have been absent from Norwegian nature for so long (Brainerd & Bjerke, 2002). The social construction of the wolf as an evil creature presented through Christianity, fairytales and the media reinforces people's fear of wolves (Hundeide, 1996). Giving people more knowledge about the actual biological species can contribute to change these social constructions and give people a more realistic view on what the wolf actually is (Brainerd & Bjerke, 2002 and Lindell & Bjerke 2002).

A NINA report concerning the large predators in Norway state that information campaigns directed towards changing people's values and perspectives on nature could also be effective to create understanding and support for wolves. Learning about the environment should try to sustain a new ethics that value the mutual dependence between all life forms and how humans do not have the right to dominate and exploit nature. Acceptance of wolves and the challenges this creates could be a test of the success of such changes in values. Information and education programs should not become indoctrination, but expand people's ability to form their own opinions and critically evaluate issues such as the wolf debate and its social constructions. It is possible to adjust educational efforts to the complex social and political conflicts affecting local attitudes towards wolf management. Giving people the possibility to influence management decisions and discuss these issues in focus groups could also help to reduce conflicts. Such initiatives have proven successful and influential in other countries such as the US and Sweden and there are no reasons why they should not have similar effects in Norway (Brainerd & Bjerke, 2002)

From this brief introduction into the wolf conflict of Norway it becomes apparent that this is a conflict with deep historical roots and influenced by a vast range of economic, social and political issues. The social construction of the specie has created a powerful symbol loaded with meaning and emotion for a large proportion of the Norwegian society. It represents a

disappearing wilderness, different perspectives on nature and a social conflict between different ways of life. Aldo Leopold once stated that management of wildlife is not about managing the animals, it is about managing people (Bath, 2009). Today the wolf's continued survival in Norway has become a social and political issue and a substitute for conflict over deeper values on human relations with the natural world. To ensure the future existence of the wolf these complex meanings and social constructions must be analyzed and understood before effective measures such as educational programs and conflict resolution can be implemented. The persistence of the wolf challenges the Norwegian society economically, socially and politically to value and protect all parts of the natural world and maintain a sustainable relationship with our surrounding environment.

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