



Death of a Thousand Cuts

A new kind of ranching in northeastern Washington. By Chance Gowan

A DEATH OF A THOUSAND CUTS WAS A FORM OF TORTURE THAT PEAKED DURING THE MING DYNASTY. IN ITS APPLICATION, THE RECIPIENT WAS REPEATEDLY INFLICTED WITH SMALL CUTS OVER AGONIZING PERIODS OF TIME, UNTIL THE TOTALITY OF WOUNDS TOOK THE LIFE OF THE RECIPIENT. SUCH HAS BECOME THE NATURE OF AGRICULTURE IN AMERICA.

The snow has begun to fall in the mountains of northeast Washington. Cowboys from the Diamond M Ranch are searching for the last straggling cattle, hoping to bring them home safely before the wolves get them. Most of the cattle have already been moved to winter pasture. The wolves followed the herd as they were driven to the lowland pastures, snagging a few more calves along the way. Now, fearing the danger of exposure, the wolves have retreated into darker recesses of the forest. A few cattle

remain in the high country and it's a race between man and beast to see who can find them first.

The mixing of wolves and livestock, whether it is goats for milk, sheep for wool, or cattle for beef, has never resulted in a concoction that's been sustainable in developed societies. To coexist, a discernable barrier—a means of separation—must exist between them. For over a century a peaceable sanctuary has existed for wolves. That means of separation has been undeveloped wilderness.

When cattlemen ventured too deep into wilderness, they knew they could lose cattle to the wolves. In turn, when the wolves dared to venture into established ranching areas, they experienced a similar risk. A kind of truce developed. Wolves and ranchers both thrived within their own territories—a balance was achieved.

Then, environmental do-gooders decided that more wolves were needed. They were trapped out of the wilderness and relocated in the midst of populated agricultural zones. Laws were passed to protect the wolves and they were given a kind of free pass to roam where they pleased, without fear. It didn't take them long to discover it was easy to kill calves and sheep. Soon the population of wolves exceeded what the natural environment could support, which brings us to this story.

People who live in cities like Seattle or San Francisco would never tolerate wolves in their backyards—they have barriers. So why is it they expect those who put food on their tables and clothes on their backs to tolerate wolves in theirs? There are many in urban societies who subscribe to a concept of “magical thinking,” happily believing that the steaks in their freezer or the wool in their L.L. Bean sweaters just magically appear out of nothing.

Somehow, as a society, the masses seem to have lost touch with the nature of things. As long as “it” is there for them when they want it, that’s all they need or want to know. The struggles that have been incurred in order to place those items in their hands is something they choose to ignore.

In the West, a huge conflict between wolves and man now exists. “Find a way to coexist,” the wolf proponents say. “The answer is simple. If there are wolves on part of your grazing allotment, put your livestock someplace else, or rent private pasture. Problem solved, let the wolves run free,” stated one smug blogger obviously content with his blissful magical thinking. Large acreages of private pasture, for rent, in cattle country? Please show us where, Mr. Blogger.

The Hedricks, the McIrvins and teams of cowboys from surrounding ranches are engaged in a race against time, a race against



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This calf was discovered just hours after wolves had consumed all but the head and hide. Wolf tracks were everywhere but state biologists couldn't verify the cause of death or that wolves were to blame.

the psychological despair and fear that is keeping the remaining cattle in the high country. Cattle are not stupid. They run from danger and, for now, have escaped the slashing teeth of death. But they won't be safe for long. The packs are regrouping at rendezvous sites and are beginning to track them down.

“They’re afraid to come out, afraid to go back to where they were attacked,” says Justin Hedrick. “Coming out of the mountains will require the cattle to walk straight through areas where they were ambushed, areas where they can still smell blood on the ground. If we don’t find them and escort them out, they’ll just stay up there till they

freeze—or are slaughtered by wolves.”

The pro-wolf groups, living safely in their urban condominiums or gated communities, are fond of viewing wolves in more anthropomorphic terms, likening them to human families where the alpha male wolf is the dad, the “proud leader, loyal mate, and expectant father who works hard for his family,” to quote the propaganda from the Center for Biological Diversity. They see them as warm and cuddly and often get together in cities to have “howl-ins” to show their solidarity with wolves!

The notion is cute, and I’m sure howl-ins help them explore primal feelings that are buried somewhere deep in their urban-dwelling psyches. But they’ve forgotten that our ancestors lived in a shadow of great fear for large predators. They’ve never faced a charging bear or watched a wolf kill their child’s cuddly little puppy. A wolf is programmed to do two things: procreate and kill for food—and predators always kill whatever is easiest.

Ranching requires endless hours of hard work. To remain in business, attention must be paid to every detail. The Diamond M Ranch isn’t a slipshod operation. They carefully nurture the lands they graze. “We’ve been grazing this allotment for 74 years,” says Len McIrvine, “and in all that time we’ve never had a single notice of noncompliance



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Bill McIrvine, always wary of approaching wolves, keeps the calves tightly bunched to protect them as they move to the next pasture.

from the Forest Service.”

They pregnancy test all of their cows. Due to harassment and attacks by wolves this year, 20 percent of their cows will be open (not bred, or their fetus aborted due to stress). Typically, before the wolves arrived, less than two percent of their cows would be open.

They also know which cows had large, healthy calves by their sides when they went to summer pasture. So far this year, over 70 of those cows have returned without their calves. When you factor in the loss of that many calves, and the additional loss of 20 percent of next year’s calves, that’s an annual loss of more than 200 cattle. Which equates to a gross loss for the ranch that’s well into six figures, a loss that’s directly attributable to wolves.

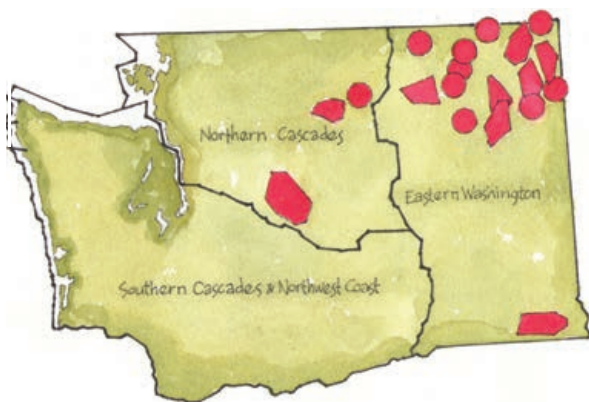
Academic researcher Dr. Rob Wielgus (assistant professor at Washington State University) is an ardent proponent of wolves and an outspoken opponent of ranching. He refuses to recognize these types of depredations. He’ll say they lost 10, maybe 12 head, because that’s all the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) had “verified” this year. Verification is no easy task. Unless the carcass is fresh, it’s nearly impossible for biologists to verify the cause of death. That means the McIrvins must find the dead calf within minutes of an attack and protect it, sometimes for days, until a biologist arrives.

Realize that when wolves kill an animal, the pack is summoned and they eat everything—bones and all. According to Bill McIrvine: “Often, they’ll leave nothing but the lower jaw and the tail. They eat almost everything else.” It’s pretty hard to verify anything when all that’s left are a few bones.

I’ve spent most of my professional career in research. My longtime mentor was Dr. Jack Ward Thomas, chief of the U.S. Forest Service under President Bill Clinton. He taught me: “It’s easy to design a research project that will give you any answer you want. The trick is to design a project that is completely void of your personal biases and then collect and



WDFW employees examine a calf that suffered mortal wounds from a wolf attack. How many bureaucrats does it take to count tooth marks? BELOW: Large wolf track with a pup alongside. Photo taken just outside the urban boundary of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.



Red areas are confirmed wolf pack locations. Polygons show packs that had multiple wolf locations; circles represent packs that stay close to home. The “wolf recovery region” is shown in white, mostly on the coast. State law requires that wolves be evenly distributed across the entire state before protections can be lifted. Officials wouldn’t say when they planned to release wolves in Seattle or Tacoma. The cattlemen are hoping it will happen soon.

analyze data in the same manner.”

When people like Rob Wielgus turn a blind eye to facts, they are knowingly skewing the outcome of their research and deliberately reporting only the information that supports the biases they built into their research model. Wielgus also designed his study based on his

belief that if ranchers would simply follow theoretical protocol, they would have few wolf depredations or none at all.

Len McIrvine and the six generations that occupy the family ranch have been riding the allotment hard, tending their cattle closely, and following the protocols prescribed by WDFW to “avoid” wolf depredation. But it became a losing battle and after state biologists had verified enough wolf kills, “lethal removal” of the problem wolves was authorized.

Wielgus couldn’t live with the fact that wolves were killing scores of cattle and his laboratory-concocted protocols were not resulting in the harmonious coexistence he’d prophesized. So on August 18, Wielgus contacted the *Seattle Times* and said: “This didn’t have to happen; this livestock operator elected to put [release] his livestock directly on top of their den site. I just want people to know.”

The next day he sent an email to the *Times* stating: “No ranchers in Washington who cooperated with us or WDFW had any losses over the last three years.... Len McIrvine has refused to cooperate.... He hates wolves...and welcomes conflict...because the wolves die on his allotment.”

Not being content with his existing slanderous statements, Wielgus sent yet another email to the *Times*: “After careful thought...go ahead and quote me. Where McIrvine grazes, dead wolves follow. He will be proud of it!”

The problem is ranchers who had cooperated fully with Wielgus and followed his protocol to a “T” did have depredation, contrary to the academic’s statements. The Diamond M Ranch had followed WDFW protocols and in fact had gone above and beyond the call of duty in protecting their livestock. Donny Martorello, the agency’s wolf policy lead, also stated, “McIrvins have been following WDFW protocols.” He praised their cooperation and added, “These producers met our expectations.”

The McIrvins and Hedricks had released their cattle over five miles away from the den site—at the exact location stipulated by U.S. Forest Service officials. They had not “put

COURTESY SCOTT NIELSON

COURTESY MIKE ZEIMANTZ

MAP © JOHN BARDWELL

them on top of the den site.” Wielgus was caught in a huge lie and people started asking questions.

Finally, on August 20, officials at WSU could no longer hide. They knew Wielgus was spreading blatant lies and couldn’t take the heat anymore. So they issued a declaration that was as weakly worded as possible: “Some of Dr. Wielgus’ statements in regard to this controversial issue have been both inaccurate and inappropriate.... They have contributed substantially to the growing anger and confusion about this significant wildlife management issue.... These statements are disavowed by our institutions.”

Under mounting pressure, Wielgus publicly acknowledged that he had “absolutely no basis for making such statements” but had likely gotten exactly what he was hoping for. His disparaging remarks resulted in a huge outcry from urban-dwelling wolf lovers. Then WDFW officials who were involved in eliminating (i.e., killing) the problem wolves started to receive threats. To this, Wielgus feigned horror and released his last media statement, “My friends in WDFW have received threats...it’s gone too far.” He quickly extracted himself, pretending to be

shocked that his inflammatory statements had provoked such controversy.

Unfortunately, Wielgus’ grandstanding and slanderous remarks provoked attacks on the families of the Diamond M Ranch at quite a different level: “We were receiving calls around the clock, terrible, vile, unspeakable threats, that were horrifyingly real,” says Justin Hedrick. “The worst part was, many of the calls were directed at the main ranch house, where my elderly grandmother lives. She listened to people use awful, vulgar language while they threatened to butcher her grandchildren and burn their homes down while they slept at night.”

The FBI Taskforce for Domestic Terrorism is investigating, but apparently is not investigating Wielgus for inciting terrorism. And WSU is, ostensibly, not taking any disci-

Lies published by Wielgus resulted in endless death threats for the families of the Diamond M. WSU castigated him by stating that it would “develop protocol for media interactions.”

comes at a cost where wolves are relegated to running in true wilderness—away from places where honest people work hard to put clothes on our backs and food on our tables, then so be it!

In five years this problem won’t be solved. There will still be wolf advisory groups, aka WAGS, sitting in endless meetings, pulling each other’s tails. And within that time, according to WDFW’s own statistics, the number of wolves in Washington will have at least quadrupled. Where will they all go?

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From left: Bill McIrvine, Brandon Johnston, and Justin Hedrick pen the cattle in a safe spot prior to shipping. It’s never safe to leave the calves unprotected with hungry wolves lurking nearby.

plinary action against him either. Instead it’s “developing protocol for media interactions” (whatever that means).

When those with “environmental concerns” force farmers and ranchers out of business and the products that nurture our society cease to be produced on our soils and we’re forced to import food and energy from faraway places (that care little for environmental issues), where will we be as a society? Do we just put it out of mind, saying, “It can be produced or grown more affordably in foreign countries”? How can they afford to do that? Go take a swim in the Yangtze River in China and you’ll quickly see that it comes at tremendous environmental (and human) cost.

We have to provide a path for this great nation of ours to sustain itself. And if that

Northeast Washington is already plum full.

In five years, will these family ranches, a century in creation, still be here? Sadly, unless honest people with spine and gumption step forward and make hard decisions, some of them will be lost next year. Nearly all may be gone in five years.

With the loss of these big private landholdings will come important environmental losses. When settlers arrived in the West, they chose the best lands with the most fertile soils and the most prolific waters because those were needed for productive agriculture. These lands now form an ecological bridge between federally managed lands, which are important, but not nearly as important as the better quality, hugely productive and diverse private lands.

The ranchers and farmers of America

have been the stewards of these lands. They've kept them healthy and ecologically intact for more than 100 years. Once they are forced into bankruptcy these ecological strongholds will be lost forever.

The sad truth is, once a ranch has been forced into bankruptcy, they are nearly always subdivided into little ranchettes. And, with subdivision, the immeasurable value of these open lands will be lost forever.

For the ranchers, caring for these lands is in their blood, in the blood of their fathers, and in the blood of their children. None of them are getting rich. The McIrvins have never taken a penny in restitution for the cattle eaten by wolves. They ranch for love of the land and the legacy they leave to their family.

Wolves are the single biggest threat to their future. And it's managing the rigidly unyielding demands of those in far-off cities—those whose vision is based on emotion and shortsighted ambition—that poses the greatest threat to ecological stability and species viability. I'm not sure the battle is winnable. The time frames are too short and



The alpha is drenched in blood as the young wolves scavenge the remains.

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the financial gain available to unscrupulous environmental “nonprofits” is too great. But I do know this: If this struggle is lost, the most productive nation in the world will be irreparably damaged and weakened, forever.

There is room for the wolf; there just isn't as much as dogooders demand. They'll continue to thrive in places where their existence doesn't come at the cost of agricultural production or force the destruction of habitat that is critical to fish and wildlife.

We can't take everything we need from Third World countries. Without sustainable sources of food and water and the maintenance of large open spaces, our viability as a country will be lost. Our nation is dying a death of a thousand cuts, and we're the ones holding the knife! ■

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Ranchers Attacked From All Sides

In summer 2016, several prominent ranchers, a state senator and I drove 19 hours to meet with Jim Pena, the U.S. Forest Service's regional forester in Portland. At issue were grazing standards that he was stipulating for 17 national forests covering nearly 170,000 square miles.

His standards are so restrictive ranchers cannot possibly comply. They will effectively end grazing. We attempted to point this out and provided research to support our concerns.

His minions gave us the bureaucratic line while Pena stared out the window without interest. Soon he stood up and said, “Thanks for coming in,” to which I stated, “We just drove 19 hours for this appointment; certainly you can honor us with a little more time.” His face glowed beet red and he slapped his palms on the table yelling, “I don't go for your this or that stuff!”

The room went quiet. Pena has a reputation as an overbearing manager with a short temper. He composed himself, sat down, and Sen. Dassel addressed Pena's plans to expand wilderness, explaining the deleterious impacts on ranch families and rural communities.

Pena expressed no interest. He had made his decision. He was right; everyone else was wrong. That day, after an exceptional effort of good faith, the ranchers, politicians, and communities of eastern Washington were effectively thrown to the wolves, again.—CG