



Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance
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Bio-Warfare on Wildlife

I was saddened but not surprised to learn recently that members of Jackson Hole's Antelope Wolf Pack are infected with mange. This skin parasite has been taking its toll on wolves east of Yellowstone for the past decade and is identified as one of several reasons for the recent 40 percent decline in the Northern Yellowstone wolf population (27 percent decline for all of Yellowstone National Park). Mange spreads through direct contact, and considering the highly social nature of wolves, they seem particularly vulnerable to such an outbreak.

Once the condition takes hold, it can take months for death to occur. Severe itching causes excessive scratching and severe hair loss follows. And in this climate, this leads to hypothermia, frozen skin and infections. Simply stated, it's a prolonged and agonizing death no civilized person should ever wish on any living creature.

I'm saddened, too, because there is reason to believe that the mange mite is not native to this region, but was deliberately introduced to the West's wolf and coyote populations for the very purpose of killing these native predators. The 1905 rancher-dominated Montana Legislature passed "an Act to provide for the extermination of wolves and coyotes by inoculating the same with mange, and to place such duties under the charge of the State Veterinarian...and...he shall secure a sufficient number of wolves, wolf pups, coyotes and coyote pups to demonstrate fully the feasibility of producing...the contagious disease known as Mange...and...shall when the same are fully infected with said disease...convey (release) the same in six different directions from the place said animals are kept, not less than eight miles away in each direction."

This was a deliberate, legislated act of bio-warfare.

Just 36 years ago, while conducting coyote research on the National Elk Refuge, I photographed a coyote with nearly all the hair missing from its tail -- a likely victim of mange. It appears the century-old "Act" is still impacting our wildlife populations. Mange is here and is poised to be a significant killer of our wolf, coyote and fox populations. This is yet another reason to take a conservative approach to "managing" wolves in the West -- they face a daunting array of non-native threats.

Through a deliberate act, our predecessors caused this to happen, but we shouldn't be surprised -- remember, we first used bio-warfare on our own kind when we deliberately gave smallpox-infested blankets to Native Americans. So why should we expect better for our wildlife when we see how we treat our fellow man? We must change our ways and embrace compassionate, thoughtful conservation.

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