



## A talk on the wild side

# Co-existing with large carnivores

by Shawn Morford\*

Large carnivore populations, habitat requirements, and behaviours—the biology of animals such as grizzly bears has received much attention by researchers in British Columbia and elsewhere. Wildlife managers have used this important information to help protect and enhance carnivore habitat, and it has assisted decision makers in establishing and refining management guidelines.

Recent research, however, argues that managing large carnivores outside of protected areas is less a problem of biology, and more a problem of cultural perceptions, decision processes, and institutional limitations. **Dr. Murray Rutherford** of the School of Resource and Environmental Management at Simon Fraser University, was involved in a study of Wyoming's Yellowstone region along with other policy researchers from Yale University and the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative.

Their results, presented in *Co-existing with Large Carnivores: Lessons from Greater Yellowstone* (Clark, Rutherford, and Casey [editors] 2005), offer managers and policy makers important information about reducing conflict and achieving greater consensus in carnivore conservation.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Murray in February 2006. Highlights of that conversation appear below.

**Shawn:** What issues were behind the need for this research in Yellowstone?

**Murray:** Recovery efforts have been fairly successful at increasing grizzly bear and wolf populations inside Yellowstone National Park and adjacent protected areas, but these animals have begun to move farther out into a surrounding landscape dominated by human uses, such as ranching, oil and gas production, and residential development. Sightings of mountain lions are also up, although exact population numbers are hard to determine. At the same time, the number of humans living in the region has increased very rapidly. This has led to numerous conflicts between animals and humans, and also conflicts among various interest groups over how to manage these animals.



Seth Wilson, Wildlife Committee, The Blackfoot Challenge

Local participants discussing wildlife issues in western Montana.

To ensure the long-term viability of large carnivores, we thought it was crucial to find better ways to co-exist with these animals outside protected areas. We wrote the book to help those in Greater Yellowstone, but we believe that lessons from this setting are transferable to other areas where humans need to live with large carnivores.

**Shawn:** What is contributing to increasing conflicts related to large carnivores?

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# Large carnivores a political symbol

**"P**eople tend to identify with others who share their perspectives, and to define themselves as a group in opposition to those with differing views."

—Dr. Murray Rutherford

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**Murray:** In addition to animals dispersing into areas where they haven't been for years, there are far more humans around. Dramatic social changes are taking place in the American West. Greater Yellowstone is a spectacular area in which to live, and more people continue to discover this. The town of Jackson is growing rapidly, and the surrounding ranches are being subdivided to build trophy homes. Open space is gradually being lost.

**Shawn:** Your study found that issues related to managing large carnivores are partly a problem of polarized cultural perceptions. Can you explain what is meant by this?

**Murray:** People tend to identify with others who share their perspectives, and to define themselves as a group in opposition to those with differing views. In Yellowstone, this type of polarization has increased in recent years. People with very different values from those of the traditional Wyoming rancher have moved into the area. These two cultures disagree about many issues—some call this the New West versus the Old West. Carnivore management, however, has become a flashpoint for their differences.

**Shawn:** Your research talks about "symbol inflation." What is meant by this?

**Murray:** "Symbol inflation" refers to the way in which some words or expressions become tied to emotional and political feelings, thereby losing their ordinary meanings and triggering strong emotional responses. To some people, wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions stand for the powerful, cruel side of nature that must be subdued and dominated by humans. For others, they represent beauty, majesty, or awe-inspiring strength. In many settings, large carnivores also serve as political symbols. To Wyoming ranchers, carnivores may symbolize the evil federal government that imposes restrictions on their rights and freedoms. To environmentalists, these same animals may symbolize the restoration of natural ecosystems to "the way they should be" in all of their complexity and beauty. Because these animals carry so much symbolic baggage, it is very difficult to discuss a real problem, such as when a particular grizzly bear kills a particular rancher's sheep, without it quickly degenerating into broader issues such as

"Who should govern and how should they govern?" or "Why are my views and my life not being respected?"

**Shawn:** Your study recommends an increase in citizen-driven, participatory projects to localize solutions to conflicts. How has this approach both reduced conflict and helped to meet large carnivore habitat and population goals?

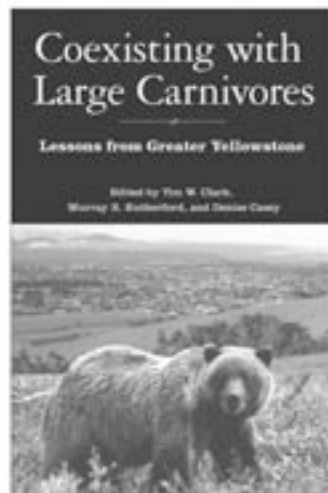
**Murray:** A good example involves a conservation biologist in Montana who has been working with a local conservation organization, agency folks, and ranchers. They are identifying and mapping potential bear attractants on ranches, such as carcass dumps, beehives, and calving areas, and comparing these maps with current and anticipated bear ranges. Then they minimize and manage attractants by fencing beehives and calving areas and removing carcasses. By working together to make specific on-the-ground improvements that benefit all parties, the project is building trust and social capacity. It is also helping to ensure that more bears survive. If people get to the point where they can talk about specific problems with carnivores, rather than their broader political and cultural differences, they can make progress.

**Shawn:** Why do you think it's important for science to address human and institutional questions in addition to studying the biological aspects of wildlife concerns?

**Murray:** This one seems simple to me—humans, and the results of human decisions, are by far the predominant cause of death for these animals. So, although understanding the biological aspects is crucial to realistically grasping their biological needs, human and institutional questions are just as important. To fix the problems over the long term, these questions must be addressed.

**Shawn:** What messages can resource managers obtain from your findings?

**Murray:** We recommend three main strategies. The first is to identify and understand the range of important socio-political variables in a given local setting. This includes both social processes (people and their perspectives, what they value, and how



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# Expect more conflicts between humans and wildlife

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they pursue their interests) and decision-making processes. These variables will ultimately determine whether any proposed management plan will succeed or fail. We provide a framework and tools for mapping the socio-political context for conservation initiatives.

The second main strategy is to change the symbolism. This involves working on small-scale problems on-the-ground to build trust and dialogue. Over time, people are able to deal with real problems rather than symbolic problems.

The final strategy is related to institutional reform. We discuss ways to change wildlife management institutions so that politicization is reduced and better decisions are made about carnivores and other wildlife. Well-functioning institutions encourage broad participation and democratic debate—they help citizens to find and implement “common interest” solutions to public problems.

**Shawn:** How do you think the lessons you learned in the United States apply to large carnivore management in British Columbia?

**Murray:** Because of the large amount of public land and wilderness we have here, it is easy to think of British Columbia as completely different, but there are actually many similarities. According to BC STATS projections, the province’s population is expected to increase by almost 36% between 2001 and 2031. Although many of these people will live in urban areas, interactions with wildlife will increase as the urban/rural/forest interface expands. We currently experience these kinds of conflicts on the edges of wilderness and protected areas, and within many urban areas. Conflicts are likely to increase, and if we want to maintain viable populations of large carnivores, we will need to find ways to manage those conflicts successfully. We have a great opportunity to learn from others who have already faced these issues. 🌲

*Clark, T., M. B. Rutherford, and D. Casey. 2005. Co-existing with large carnivores: Lessons from Greater Yellowstone. Island Press, Washington, D.C.*