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## Of foxes, goats and bears: rethinking wildlife policy

Guest Shot / By Bob Frodeman

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One of the pleasures of life here is the constant presence of wildlife. Ski up Game Creek and look to your left: You may see a couple dozen elk. All summer the ospreys eat their catch from a crooked tree over the Hoback — a wonderful if gruesome sight.

But there are problems, too: dead moose on 390, chronic wasting disease on the National Elk Refuge and tourists tossed in the air by bison. And more recently, foxes, mountain goats and bears.

M15 was the fox at Colter Bay put down by rangers at Grand Teton National Park. This was thought necessary because he had become habituated to people. As a ranger noted, “jumping in an occupied golf cart or jumping up on a picnic table with a family eating ... that’s a super red flag for us.” So the fox was given the death sentence.

I’m not criticizing the rangers. They were following policies thought to be consistent with current science and ethics. The same is true about last fall’s shooting of mountain goats in the park. It’s these policies I want to question, not the actions of individuals. For our wildlife policies assume a purity in division between people and wildlife that is neither possible nor desirable.

Wildlife policy responds to changing science and ethics. Take our national parks. In the 1950s, park rangers set food out to attract bears in order to entertain park visitors. There’s little doubt that the current policy is an advance over those days.

But have we reached the end of our thinking on these topics? I doubt I’m the only one troubled by the killing of a fox that had been subjected to scientific probing across his life (i.e., the ear tags) and who was simply responding in an intelligent way to his circumstances. Why did he suffer the ultimate punishment? Why wasn’t he moved far away or taken to a shelter where he could serve as an animal ambassador to be visited by schoolchildren, or offered to a zoo? Or even allowed to live free, with signs on picnic tables saying that if you get bitten that’s the result of people feeding animals?

Environmental policies evolve as our knowledge does. Current policies are the result of research reflecting the work of environmental ethicists as well as environmental scientists done in the second half of the 20th century. We grew wiser about ecosystem dynamics and developed new philosophic perspectives, so we changed our ways of interacting with animals. That is, no more bears dancing to the tourists' tune.

Those policies had a number of effects. For instance, they are why we give animals names like M15 and 399. This is supposed to objectify the animals, lessening our feelings for them and distancing them from our lives. Too much emotional involvement was thought improper. That embodied the sin of anthropomorphism, where we attribute human characteristics to animals as if they have feelings, or thoughts, or that they care in the way humans do.

This view, however, is an anachronism. When I took a graduate course in the biology department in the 1990s at the University of Colorado-Boulder, every graduate student in the class agreed with the statement that animals were robots driven by instinct, lacking either feelings or free will. (It made dissection in the lab easier.) But at that very moment the field of biology was changing. Ethology, the study of animal behavior, was coming onto the scene. In the past 20 years we've learned a great deal about the social and emotional lives of animals. Many animals have complex social lives, and exhibit qualities such as joy and mourning. They are not so different from us after all.

Our policies have not caught up with these insights. We needn't distance ourselves from our feelings about animals or give our fellow creatures names that depersonalize them. And we should recognize the deep human need to relate to animals in nature. A recent environmental ethic called "compassionate conservation" values the welfare of individual animals even as it works for the benefit of animal populations.

The inadequacies of our current policy almost came to a head a couple of months ago. Grizzly 399 and her cubs moved south of the Tetons and were spotted in Jackson neighborhoods. There was concern that they would become acclimated to human sources of food (actually, that ship has sailed). Fortunately, they turned north back into the park. But are we really prepared to impose the death sentence on 399 and her cubs? Think of the reaction, both locally and internationally.

I too was dismayed by the recent story of the feeding of 399, her cubs, and other animals. Such actions endanger people as well as animals. But neither are we going to persuade people to stop becoming emotionally involved with animals.

Wildlife policy needs to adapt to the fact that our lives are intertwined with our animal neighbors. There is no pristine state of nature where animals pass their lives separate from ours. Within bounds, our feelings of empathy for the natural world are something to celebrate.

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