

Ecology Unit Reading D: The Story of The Wolf

Act I: Wolves Are Considered Bad

In the early 1900s, wolves were considered dangerous killers who competed with humans. Wolves killed deer and other big game, apparently reducing the number of game for hunters. Wolves also sometimes killed cattle and other livestock. Both hunters and farmers seemed to have good reasons to get rid of wolves. In Minnesota, the government paid bounties for dead wolves, rewarding people for killing them. It was thought that decreasing the numbers of predators would increase the numbers of game animals, but that didn't happen.

Act II: People Begin to Reconsider the Wolf Question

In the 1930s and 1940s, people began to question their assumptions about wolves. Even after people nearly eliminated wolf populations, game species were not recovering. Naturalists like Sigurd Olson and Aldo Leopold began to suspect that eliminating wolves wouldn't solve the problem. Olson realized that wolves were an integral (central) part of their wilderness community. Leopold came to understand that when people consider animals only for their economic worth, they ignore the important role animals play in the larger balance of nature. People like Leopold and Olson realized that wolves were important to the greater ecology, but they didn't fully understand the wolf's role in its ecosystem.

Act III: The Wolf Is Protected

In the late 1950s and 1960s, people began to realize that wolves were about to disappear. Wisconsin and Michigan passed laws to protect wolves in 1957 and 1965, respectively. Unfortunately, those efforts came too late: there were no wolves left in Wisconsin or Michigan (outside of Isle Royale) by 1965. Minnesota eliminated its wolf bounty in 1965 but continued to allow hunting of wolves.

In 1973, the federal Endangered Species Act was passed, protecting wolves from harm or hunting. In the late 1970s, wolves returned to Wisconsin, and in the late 1980s, wolves returned to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Wolves were finally recovering in the Midwest.

Act IV: Wolves Are Reintroduced to Yellowstone

In 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone National Park. At first, many people who lived by the park in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho were opposed to the idea. Many of these people were ranchers who feared the wolves would kill and eat their livestock. Others were hunters who worried that the wolves would eat all the elk. No one knew what would happen.

By 2004, the wolves in Yellowstone were successfully reproducing and expanding their territory. As the ranchers have feared, some wolves have killed some livestock. Mostly,

however, the wolves hunt wild elk and deer.

In Yellowstone, scientists were able to study the “before” and “after” of the wolf reintroduction. They have uncovered some evidence that proves that Leopold and Olson were right: wolves are a very important part of the ecological community. In Yellowstone, the wolves have killed off half the coyotes (their main competitors for food). The decrease in coyotes has led to an increase of rodents, which has led to an increase of other smaller predators like hawks, eagles, foxes, fishers, wolverines, lynx, and bobcats. Wolves have also eaten many elk, and the wolves’ presence has forced the elk to move about more, seeking protection from the wolves. Since the elk are moving more, they are no longer staying in the willow stands along the streambeds, eating all the young willows. This means the willow trees have begun to recover, and the birds, fish, amphibians, insects, and beavers that rely on the willow stands are increasing too.

Act V: Wolves in Minnesota

In Minnesota, the wolf population has recovered from around 750 in 1973 to around 2,500 in 1998. The wolf range has expanded back down into central Minnesota. Wolves do occasionally kill livestock, and hunters still worry that the wolves will kill all the deer. However, deer populations in Minnesota are at unnaturally high levels in the early years of the twenty-first century (deer do very well in recently lumbered areas and along farm fields). Wolves also tend to chase down and kill deer that are weak, sick, or feeble. Hunters, on the other hand, kill the deer that happen to walk nearby, whether healthy or not. Now, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering removing wolves in Minnesota from the “threatened list,” and returning management of wolves to Minnesota’s state government. When that happens, Minnesota plans to establish a minimum population level of 1,600. If there are more wolves than that in Minnesota, the state could allow hunting of wolves again.