

Bring Back the Wolf!

Stories like The Three Little Pigs have given the wolf a bad name. Wolves are an apex predator that are at the top of the food chain. Throughout history, people have been afraid of this top predator. The fear of wolves became intensified when people expanded west through the United States in the 1800's. People moved west and set up their houses right in the middle of wolf territory. As a result, the wolves fed off their livestock and lurked



in the woods. Farmers began to fear for their livestock so they began shooting wolves. The government actually supported the killing off of wolves and set up different programs to encourage it. Eventually, in the late 1930's, the gray wolf was completely killed off. The gray wolf vanished from the mid west. Since then, biologists have been studying the effects of the absence of the gray wolf. After discovering the many harmful effects to the ecosystem, the federal government decided to reintroduce the gray wolf to Yellowstone National Park. In 1994 they released 14 gray wolves into the park. The wolves set up packs and began breeding. This successful reintroduction has brought back balance to the ecosystem, benefited the local economy, and has proven that wolves are not to be feared.

The first benefit of the reintroduction of wolves is it benefited the ecosystem. Without wolves, the elk population steadily increased until it was out of control. The aspen trees and willows that elk fed on were over grazed. They were almost extinct from the park. This was a major problem for the beaver. In 1994, there was only one beaver colony left. There used to be an abundance of beaver, with at least nine colonies in 1930! The beaver could not survive without the willow and aspen to create beaver dams. The beaver dams kept the rivers healthy because they even out run off, store water, and provide cold, shaded water for fish. Without the beaver dams, the willow stands were not able to grow. This caused the songbirds and butterflies, that lived in the willow stands, to almost vanish.

Close Reading

First Read

Read the article to get the big idea or the gist of what the article is about.

Second Read

Mark up the text. Use your close reading bookmark to make notes about your thinking.

Pair Share

Find a partner who is done with their second read. Share and discuss your notes with each other.

Third Read

After reading the text a third time, answer the question your teacher asks you.

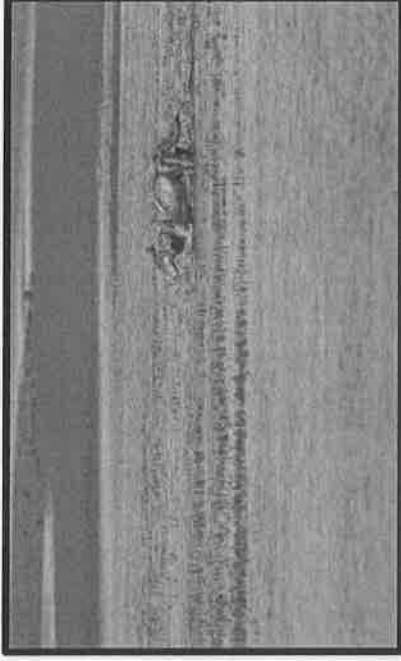
Picture Credit: Fool4mycanon

When the gray wolf was brought back to the park, a trophic cascade effect happened. A trophic cascade is when one organism creates a cascading effect through the food web. For example, the elk were now under pressure. The elk herd now has to stay on the move to keep away from the wolves. By moving the elk herd constantly, the willow and aspen were no longer over grazed. That affected the beaver. Now the beaver population increased because they had enough willow and aspen to build dams. Another example is the over populated coyote. The wolves began preying on coyotes and because of that, the red fox population returned. The coyotes had hunted the red fox to near extinction. With willow stands growing and aspen trees popping up, there was now enough habitat for songbirds and butterflies to return. You could almost say the reintroduction of wolves brought the butterflies back to Yellowstone National Park.

Another part of the food web experienced a positive impact from the wolf reintroduction. When wolves eat, they do not finish the entire animal. Instead, they eat their fill and go back to their den. When they leave the kill, scavengers arrive and finish it off. Scavengers such as ravens, follow wolves to eat the leftovers. Eagles, magpies, and even bears will eat the rest of the wolf's kill. Yellowstone has seen an increase in these scavengers' populations. It is clear that the effect of reintroducing the wolf has caused positive ripples throughout the entire food web.

An unexpected benefit of wolf reintroduction was the local economy saw a boost. Thousands of visitors come to see the wolves each year. As a result, the economy has grown by 35 million dollars each year! This gives the park more money to maintain forests and take care of other living species. They also can focus on educating the public about wildlife. Due to the increase in visits to the park, more people are realizing that the gray wolf is not the big bad wolf portrayed in storybooks, but rather a top predator that is interested only in its prey. The gray wolf has shown no interest in humans. There has not been one recorded wolf attack on a human in the park. Fences have been built for protection of people and other animals. GPS devices attached to the wolves monitor movement and keep the wolves from hunting sheep and other livestock. Because of this, less than one percent of the local livestock loss is due to wolf attacks. Most loss of livestock is actually due to weather, disease, and other more significant dangers. The wolves have forced local ranchers to improve ranching practices. They now use guard dogs and regularly change grazing areas to keep livestock away from wolf dens. The livestock are much happier being on the move, then when they were just staying in one spot eating all day. Cowboys have even returned to ranches to help herd the livestock. You could almost say the old west has made a comeback! This has created more job opportunities in the area. The economy of Yellowstone National Park is really taking off.

Photo credit: Jim Peaco



A wolf crosses Alum Creek in Hayden Valley, Yellowstone National Park

Interestingly enough, in 2003 wolves killed a total of 500 sheep in Montana; but coyotes killed 11,800 sheep. Coyotes are a bigger problem to ranchers than wolves are. It is easier to blame wolves and make a big deal out of it because of all the negative attitudes towards wolves. By having wolves in Yellowstone Park, the public is getting educated about the true nature of the wolf. People are observing the wolves firsthand and they are realizing that science trumps superstition and stories. This wolf paranoia is becoming a thing of the past. Now that people are better understanding the true nature of wolves, the attitudes towards wolves are changing. A wolf is not to be feared; but understood. So, if you see a wolf in nature, do not panic. Remember that the wolf is not interested in humans. Just make sure you are not in the way of his prey or his den. You are in his territory so you have to play by his rules.

It is a relief to know that nature has been balanced again in Yellowstone National Park.

Photo credit: Jim Peaco



A wolf is released in Rose Creek, in
Yellowstone National Park.