

Wyoming Tribune Eagle of November 30, 2016: "Pumas back to Yellowstone?"

For the past few decades, managers of national parks have kept an eye on Yellowstone, specifically, on its controversial reintroduction of wolves. The wolves' effect on elk grazing and, hence, on saplings and riparian growth has been astoundingly beneficial. Some conversationalists argue for the need to go further and reintroduce big cats as well—American cougars, also known as pumas—to keep in check the deer population.

President Theodore Roosevelt is lauded as the greatest conservationist president in U.S. history. By the time he left the White House in 1909, he had set aside an astonishing 230 million acres of natural habitat. Fifty-one federal bird reserves, four national game reserves, 150 national forests, five national parks, and eighteen national monuments are ascribed to his decision-making. Of these, the Grand Canyon and the Kaibab deer herd were especially dear his heart.

Regrettably, his anti-predator policies, however well-meaning, did serious damage to the species he tried to protect. As symbol of national treasure, the Kaibab deer was safeguarded against hunting, yet their predators attained no such protection. On the contrary, following the 1906 Kaibab establishment, government exterminators eliminated 554 bobcats, 4,889 coyotes, uncounted eagles, the last 30 wolves of the region, and over 800 pumas. Roosevelt's U.S. Bureau of the Biological Survey churned out any number of professional exterminators, observes William Stolzenburg in "Heart of the Lion."

Wiping out its predators had unfortunate effects on the Kaibab deer whose numbers, freed of checks and balances, exploded. Roosevelt died in 1919, five years before his beloved Kaibab project fell apart. By then meadows, river banks, and forests lay in ruin from overgrazing and -browsing. Ground-nesting songbirds and squirrels disappeared in lockstep. In the winters of 1924 and 1925, when the herd had swelled to 100,000 head of deer, the animals starved by the thousands. Professional hunters were called in to put an end to the misery of nine out of ten deer.

Yellowstone National Park's inception in 1872 was heralded as the first national park in the world. Sadly, by 1926 Yellowstone had sustained an "unsightly wound" at the hands of trappers who shot and killed its last resident wolves. The wound became a festering sore—until conservationists prevailed and wolves were returned to the park.

This happened during the winters of 1995 and 1996, when 35 wolves were captured and flown in from the Rockies of Alberta, in "one of the great ecological experiments of the century," writes Stolzenburg. Within months of the wolves' return, landscape ecologists and forest hydrologists detected signs of recovering flora where earlier they found but ailing trees and streams. "Those cottonwood and willow and aspens that had so long languished under the reign of the elk, those streams that had gone bare and eroded under too many hoofs and mouths" showed signs of recovery. The ecologists matched their finding with those of zoologists who noted a resurgence of small mammals and other wildlife; for example, beavers, who in turn provided habitat for scores of aquatic creatures.

Stolzenburg argues that other national parks, "from the rain forests of Washington's Olympic to the desert canyon lands of Utah . . . to the hillside oaks of California's Yosemite," must follow the Yellowstone example. All these parks are ailing, their ecosystems' demise due to an imbalance of predator to prey that resulted in "the swarming of deer." He argues, convincingly and passionately, for a return of America's great cats into all national parks, although even today, cougars in the Black Hills and panthers in Florida are shot by licensed hunters. Not only that, anyone who feels "endangered" by a big cat has permission to kill, few questions asked, even though attacks by these lions on humans are scarce. More people die of vending-machine accidents, scores more die from dog bites, than from a big-cat attack; Stolzenburg shows.

As for the objections of hunters that predators eliminate the deer they themselves wish to harvest, the author invalidates that argument with evidence from Aldo Leopold's findings of South American regions "running thick with lions, wolves and deer."

Like Roosevelt, Leopold is credited with valiant conservation efforts, yet early in his career as wildlife biologist he, too, promoted a policy of predator extermination. In 1933 he published a book on predator control that became the textbook for many park managers. Soon after—a scant two years, in fact, following his seminal publication—Leopold recognized his error. After visiting a game park in the Sierras of Mexico, where predator and prey executed their millennia-old dance of pursuit and survival, Leopold recognized he needed to nullify his previous policy. He began to argue for a co-existence of predator and prey. Although his insights were ignored then, they prevailed in the Yellowstone "experiment" of wolf reintroduction. It remains to be seen what will happen to efforts to reintroduce America's big cats.