

FAQ's related to wolf ecology, and the bills introduced in Wisconsin to begin a wolf hunting season.



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(Please note: the term “hunting”, as used in the FAQs below, refers to both hunting and trapping, as both would be allowed under the proposed legislation.)

- *Let's start with a little background information. How many wolves do we have in Wisconsin?* The most recent population estimate, made before pups were born in the spring of 2011, was around 800 wolves.
- *Just to get some perspective, how does that compare to bears?* Bear populations are more difficult to estimate; differing methods have created population estimates ranging from approximately 13,000 to 26,000 bears.
- *It must be hard to count wolves. How are they counted in Wisconsin, and are the numbers reliable?* It takes a lot of effort to count wolves well, but it can be done. Wisconsin has an excellent methodology for wolf census work that is well described in the Wisconsin Wolf Management Plan (available on the DNR website). While the census undoubtedly misses some animals, TWA has reviewed the methodology and is confident the vast majority of the state's wolves are being counted.
- *But I hear there are a lot more wolves in the state - could that be true?* At times, it's absolutely true. Wolves are counted in late winter, when their populations are near the low point in the year. When pups are born in the spring, the population increases rapidly, then declines over the year until the next year's litters are born. When a population is stable, the births and the deaths roughly balance out; if births exceed deaths, the population grows and if deaths exceed births, the population declines. But it is important to remember that the population estimates used and given by biologists are typically based on the late winter counts, when the population is near its lowest point in the year.
- *I know the wolf population is growing. Won't the Wisconsin wolf population get out of control if we don't limit it?* Wolves are highly territorial animals, so they space themselves out across the landscape. The increases we have seen in their population since their return to Wisconsin have been the result of wolves expanding into unoccupied habitat; when all of the suitable habitat is occupied, the population will roughly stabilize. This has already happened in Minnesota.
- *But what number are they going to stabilize at?* No one knows exactly, but in Minnesota, which has about 3 times as much wolf habitat as Wisconsin, the population stabilized at roughly 3000 animals. The best answer to that question would be gained by letting the animals themselves tell us – that is,

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if we would allow their population to grow until it stabilizes like it did in Minnesota. Most wolf biologists think we are fairly close to that level in Wisconsin now.

- *Aren't wolves hurting our deer population?* Actually, on a landscape level, there is very little evidence to support this often repeated claim. Many factors influence deer populations, but it is clear that factors such as food availability, weather, human hunters, and even car collisions have a far greater impact on deer populations than wolves. And of course wolves, which evolved with deer over thousands of years, will take the easiest deer they can harvest; a diseased or injured deer that succumbs to wolves may otherwise have died from other causes.

At a local level, wolf impacts may be more significant. If your tree stand happens to be located in the core of a wolf pack territory, the behavior and presence of deer in your immediate area are likely to be altered, perhaps giving the impression that the deer have been "wiped out", but this is not the case. Deer are the primary food of wolves in Wisconsin— and they would not have a territory in the area if the local deer population were not abundant enough to support them.

- *Aren't wolves inherently dangerous animals that threaten human safety?* Wolves raise fear in many people – not surprising given the way they tend to be portrayed in the popular media, including a recently released movie. Yet while the fear of wolves may be great to some, the danger they actually present is exceedingly minor.

It is unwise to approach any large, wild animal but direct negative impacts from wolves on humans are extremely uncommon. Deer have attacked people and caused many fatal vehicle accidents; black bears have occasionally attacked and caused human mortalities; people die from bee stings. Even the beloved dog is responsible for the loss of human life every year. We don't minimize the populations of these species because of the dangers they pose, yet the "fear/threat" factor continues to be used by some as an argument to reduce wolf numbers. While in some situations it may be appropriate to remove particular animals because of human safety concerns, there is no legitimate human health and safety benefit to be gained from broad scale wolf population reduction.

- *Can Wisconsin's wolf population sustain an annual hunting season?* With tight harvest controls and a continuation of intensive annual population surveys, a modest harvest is biologically possible.
- *Could a hunting season be a significant tool to reduce wolf depredations?* It depends on what you consider significant. A person who is losing calves to wolves in the spring needs immediate help, and so hunting will never replace the need for other, more immediate, depredation management tools. However, if a harvest is to take place, it is preferable to focus that harvest in areas where depredations have occurred, and have the least harvest on packs that have not been involved in depredations.

It is also important to note that it is possible that hunting could actually increase depredations in some instances. A pack that was not depredating may be more likely to do so if it is stressed by the

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removal of 1 or more members – particularly if those members are adults who had previously avoided humans.

Overall, the depredation control benefits of a hunting season are likely to be fairly small, but if this goal is a primary objective of the harvest, it would likely require establishing a relatively large number of relatively small management zones around areas with a history of depredation. This is not possible under the bills currently proposed.

- *What about the provision to hunt wolves with dogs?* Very little of this has been done in recent history, so the scientific literature has little to offer us on this topic, but many biologists feel this is likely to lead to an increase in dog depredation problems.

In addition, Wisconsin is the only state in the nation that pays owners whose dogs are killed by wolves. While the current bills state that dogs lost while hunting wolves could not receive reimbursement, the proposed wolf season overlaps with the seasons for several other species hunted with dogs, including coyotes and bobcat. It would be very difficult if not impossible to verify that wolves were not being hunted if a depredation occurs. Thus, depredation payments may increase rather than decrease under these bills. Payments for killed or injured hound dogs already account for over 1/3rd of all the depredation payments made in Wisconsin. If hound depredation payments rise, it could erode public support for wolves in the state.

- *What about the provisions to hunt at night, or from certain types of roads?* While these provisions may not have great biological significance, they do raise human safety concerns. For these reasons they have not been allowed in Wisconsin for any other big game species. They may also lead to problems regarding the misidentification of prey under nighttime hunting conditions.
- *Is a harvest season consistent with the state management plan?* Not at this time. While the current management plan clearly considered the possibility of a hunt, it also clearly states:

“A public harvest can be considered if other control activities do not adequately maintain the population near the 350 goal. All other control activities such as government trappers, law enforcement office controls, and landowner controls will first be used to attempt to maintain the population at this goal.”

Obviously, these other control activities have not yet been given an opportunity to function. TWA strongly supports these provisions in the plan, and feels they should not be abandoned at this time. With delisting, Wisconsin wolves will now be subject to losses due to lethal depredation control, land owner permits and other new management provisions. Instigating a hunting season before the biological impact of these other provisions has been determined would confound the quota setting process, possibly putting wolves at risk and increasing the likelihood of legal challenges to the state management system. [Note that this is not the situation in Minnesota, which is also considering a wolf

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hunting season, because Minnesota wolves were never protected from lethal depredation control measures.]

The plan also notes that “the public harvest of wolves would require extensive public interaction as part of the process.” That has not been the case thus far with the bills that have been introduced.

- *If wolves were hunted, what level would the population be managed at?* While the hunting bill does not specify a population goal, testimony provided by the bill sponsors and supporters at the Assembly bill hearing indicated that it is their intent to manage the population at the 350 animal level. This would involve reducing the current wolf population by approximately 60%.
- *Where did that number come from, and is it biologically sound?* That question is more complex than it might sound, and a good answer gets a bit involved.

The 350 number is derived from the current state wolf management plan. There is confusion and disagreement about the meaning of that goal in the plan; some have interpreted it as a ceiling – or the highest population that should be allowed, some as the lowest the population should be allowed to go. However, the actual authors of the plan indicate that they meant the 350 figure to be a threshold level that when surpassed would allow implementation of certain management tools. In addition, the 350 figure was based primarily upon estimated social tolerance. This is what the plan actually says:

“The Wolf Advisory Committee settled on a management goal of 350 wolves as a reasonable first attempt at assessment of social tolerance. The 350 level was intended to be minimum level at which proactive control and public harvest would occur. This management goal falls about half way between the delisting level (250 wolves) and the perceived biological carrying capacity (500 wolves) for the state.”

This section highlights several important points. First, the 350 figure was recognized by the plan authors as a “first attempt” that would be refined as the Wisconsin wolf population became better understood. This first attempt was made when the state wolf population numbered about 200 animals – and before 350 wolves had ever existed on the contemporary Wisconsin landscape. That figure is now 15 years old, but is yet to be updated, ignoring all we have learned about Wisconsin wolves in the last decade and a half. Secondly, this figure was selected when the biological carrying capacity in the state was thought to be about 500 statewide. Thus, the 350 figure, which applied to wolves off of Native American Indian reservations, represented about 75% of the expected biological carrying capacity. Many hunted species are managed at roughly 75% of carrying capacity, because it provides a reasonable harvest opportunity, while keeping the population at a relatively stable level that is somewhat protected from modest over-or-under harvests, or variable impacts from changing environmental conditions.

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We have learned a great deal about wolves in the last 15 years, and about the ability of the Wisconsin landscape to support them. It is now clear that the biological carrying capacity of the state is a fair bit higher than was generally believed 15 years ago – perhaps even twice as high; we won't know for sure until the population stabilizes - if it is allowed to do so.

The relationship between the biological carrying capacity and the level the population is managed at is critical; it determines not only how many animals can be harvested, but how much risk the population is exposed to. It may not seem obvious, but a wolf population with a biological carrying capacity of 1000 that is managed at the 350 level is at greater risk than a population that has a carrying capacity of 500.

The relationship between carrying capacity and the population goal also determines what percentage of the population would be targeted for harvest each year. Population dynamic studies show that the highest sustained harvest level occurs when the population is managed at half of carrying capacity. It is possible that the carrying capacity in Wisconsin is only in the 700-800 range, even though the population is currently higher than that, because newly introduced or recovered populations will often initially over-shoot the biological carrying capacity, something witnessed in Wisconsin with fishers and turkeys. If this is the case, management at the 350 level would be managing near the level of highest sustained harvest – where a very high proportion of the population is removed each year. Although the scientific data is still limited in this area, it is reasonable to assume that the impact of a high removal rate would be more pronounced on wolves – a highly social species – than on a more solitary species. This might produce the unintended effect of increasing wolf depredations, rather than decreasing them, when intact packs are stressed through the removal of one or more animals.

- *Would it be a good idea to update the state management plan?* TWA believes it is critical to update the management plan and the population goal if a hunt is to take place.
- *Could the tribes also hunt wolves?* Those tribes with reserved off-reservation treaty rights would legally be entitled to half of the biologically allowable harvest from the ceded territory – an area that roughly encompasses the northern third of the state. With the exception of those wolves residing in the central sands region, most of Wisconsin's wolves are located within the ceded territory. Individual tribes could also establish wolf harvest seasons for tribal members hunting on-reservation.
- *How do the tribes feel about a wolf season?* It is important to remember that each tribe is an independent, sovereign nation that regulates its own members; different tribes may take different approaches to wolf management both on and off the reservation. However, wolves have tremendous cultural significance to many tribes. The Ojibwe – who retained ceded territory rights in Wisconsin – understand the wolf to be their brother, and a species with whom their fate is intertwined. Those tribes that are a member of the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission – the intertribal organization that assists the tribe in implementing their off-reservation rights - are

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on record opposing the public harvest of wolves. They also oppose the current bills for cultural, biological and procedural reasons; GLIFWC's testimony on the Assembly Bill can be found at www.glifwc.org.

- *So is TWA is opposed to wolf hunting too?* No. TWA neither supports nor opposes hunting. Our goal is to use education to promote healthy, ecologically functional wolf populations in the western Great Lakes region. While hunting is not necessary to reach that goal, a carefully regulated harvest can also be compatible with that goal.
- *Then why is TWA opposed to the proposed hunting bills?* TWA is opposed to the bills that have been introduced for both biological and procedural reasons.

Some of the most significant biological reasons include: the bills restrict DNR management options regarding the use of zones and closed areas; the season begins before pelts are prime, a waste of a natural resources, and closes too late, interfering with the mating season and population monitoring efforts; the bills allows hunting with dogs, which will increase wolf/dog depredation problems; the bills introduce human safety and law enforcement issues related to night hunting and road hunting; and the bills make little effort to direct harvest towards areas with the greatest wolf depredation problems. TWA sees these bills as a serious deviation from the state management plan, and content that the newly implemented management provisions such as lethal depredation control and landowner permits must allowed to work, and their biological impact understood, before it can be determined if harvest management is appropriate.

The process by which these bills were developed is also severely flawed. The Assembly bill was published at the end of the day on Friday January 27, and the public hearing on the bill was held on just the third business day following publication (Wednesday February 1). The bill was placed on a fast track, and only groups that supported the bill (and apparently help write it) were give advanced notification of publication date and hearing date. In fact, TWA only learned of the bill when a council member found the bill and hearing date on the Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association web site, before most members of the DNR were even aware the bill existed. Although the bill's authors testified that they worked closely with the DNR in developing the legislation, there was little evidence that the state's wolf biologists or members of the DNR Wolf Science Committee were ever consulted on the bill. But it is apparent that certain components of the hunting community helped shape it, while many others entities were kept out of the process including environmental organizations (including members of the State's own Wolf Stakeholders Group) tribal governments, concerned citizens, and the larger scientific community. None of the above mentioned entities were provided information about the legislation ahead of the February 1st Assembly hearing. In fact, a DNR press notice released just 3 days before the bill was published clearly states "*There are currently no plans for a hunting season on wolves.*" This approach is clearly flawed, and the Wisconsin public deserves better.