

Don't blame wolves for elk hunting woes

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It's a refrain that shows no sign of abating in Wyoming: Wolves are destroying our elk and moose herds, and if action isn't taken to control the predators, big game hunting as we know it will soon become a thing of the past.

That's the message of a "Wolf Impact Rally" being organized by hunting outfitters Saturday in Jackson.

It's understandable that outfitters would be concerned about the impact of wolves on elk and moose in northwest Wyoming. Their livelihoods depend upon availability of elk hunting licenses in particular, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department has reduced the number of licenses it issues in some areas surrounding Yellowstone National Park. Many resident hunters who don't use outfitters share those concerns.

But research to date has not shown that wolves are the main cause of declines in elk and moose numbers in northwest Wyoming. There's good reason to think wolves are a factor, but the situation is more complex than the wolf blamers portray.

In addition, it's important to note that overall, Wyoming's elk populations are holding up well. There are some herds where declining calf production is raising concern, but the situation isn't nearly as grave as this statement by Jackson-area outfitter B.J. Hill would indicate: "If we don't do something with this wolf in the next year or two or three, sport hunting is going to be gone in the West."

At the same time, the argument by some environmentalists that wolves need no management, that their numbers should be allowed to increase basically unchecked, is faulty. Wolves should be managed just as other wildlife are managed, including the use of controlled hunting.

As has often been the case in the emotional debate over wolves in Wyoming, the rhetoric on both sides of the debate does little to resolve the issue in the best interests of the state's people, wildlife and environment.

Are wolves affecting elk populations in Wyoming? Of course they are. That's one of the reasons they were reintroduced to the region in the '90s: to help control overpopulated elk herds. In addition to outright predation, wolves have changed the behavior of elk, likely leading to reduced birth rates and making it more difficult for elk hunters to find their quarry.

But wolves all too often are the scapegoat for lack of elk hunter success. Even in areas where elk numbers have dropped, wolves are not the only factor – and in most cases they're not the primary factor.

For example, research has shown that drought is likely a cause of declining elk calf survival in the Sunlight-Crandall elk herd near Cody. In addition, study has found that grizzly bears kill up to 60 percent of the elk calves taken by predators, while wolves kill between 14 to 17 percent, and coyotes kill up to 11 percent.

That doesn't mean there's no place for killing wolves to help wildlife in some situations. If wolves were removed from federal protection, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department would have authority to do just that. Unfortunately, wolves have not been delisted in the state because the federal government won't accept Wyoming's wolf plan, which calls for classifying the animals as predators that could be shot on sight in most of the state outside of Yellowstone and the lands immediately around it. The dispute is hung up in the court system, with no hope of resolution anytime soon.

The outfitters would be best advised to rally for the state to change its wolf plan by designating wolves as trophy game statewide. That would pave the way for delisting, allowing the Game and Fish Department to control wolves to help wildlife when justified by scientific research.