

The Huckleberry pack

THE HUCKLEBERRY PACK, located in Washington State, is a family group of wolves that had been living and thriving around livestock for several years without incident. Signals from the collared male showed the pack's territory on and around the Spokane Indian Reservation and trail cameras captured photos of this year's pups.

IT IS WELL KNOWN that wolves are highly intelligent and sentient social beings. A wolf pack is a family, comprised of parents, their offspring, and close relatives. Wolves parent their young with help from all members of the pack and each pack member has a job to do – full

cooperation is needed during pup rearing and hunting. Wolf pups are dependent on their parents

for nearly one-third of their lives – longer than most humans. With their high intelligence, this allows more time for adults to teach and for pups to learn important information about pack territory boundaries and resources, knowledge of prey distribution and migration patterns, and the ability to detect, pursue and subdue prey. The bond between a breeding pair of wolves is strong.

In mid-August of this year, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) contracted with USDA Wildlife Services to kill up to four of this year's pups. Instead, at the expense of thousands of taxpayers' dollars, the breeding (alpha) female was accidentally killed from the air. The loss of a breeding adult in a pack can cause chaos, with results such as wolves abandoning their territory, break-up of social groups within the pack, and smaller pack size. Since

wolves avoid incestuous pairing, if a breeding animal is killed, the lost breeding wolf is usually not simply replaced by another from within the pack.

How could this have happened to an endangered species in the early stages of recovery?

Sheep

According to WDFW staff, this last summer a producer moved 1,800 domestic sheep (lambs and ewes) to summer grazing pasture on leased private timber company property – in the middle of the Huckleberry pack's territory. The land is predominantly managed for timber production and is in various stages of timber harvest and regeneration. The terrain is rugged, with steep canyons, partially forested areas, and brushy draws. Given the rugged terrain, the sheep were not always in a single concentrated group during the night; and sometimes small groups of sheep and stragglers did not come into the bedding area. This was certainly not an ideal location for protecting grazing sheep.

Initially the flock was managed by a shepherd and four livestock guardian dogs. The sheep were allowed to graze over the landscape during the day and were gathered by the shepherd and his dogs each night for safekeeping. The herder managed the flock by moving among the sheep during the day and removing dead sheep from the range when feasible (but the rugged terrain made it difficult) so the dead sheep did not become a further attractant to the wolves. At some point during the summer the herder quit. The owner and his wife tried to maintain a presence with the sheep as much as possible while unsuccessfully searching for a new herder.



FEATURE

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Could conflict have been prevented?

“How could this have happened to an endangered species in the early stages of recovery?”



Sheep grazing in the heart of the Huckleberry pack's territory. PHOTO COURTESY JACOB JONES — THE INLANDER [SPOKANE, WA].

Although there were no confirmed wolf depredations on his sheep during the 2013 grazing season on this allotment, the owner found several dead sheep in late June 2014 but could not determine the cause of death. On August 10, the owner found more dead sheep that he thought were killed by

cougar. He contacted WDFW who sent a hound hunter to the area to deal with the cougar. The hunter found no evidence of cougar but upon investigation discovered the depredations were caused by wolves. By the middle of August the owner had lost 24 sheep to wolves.

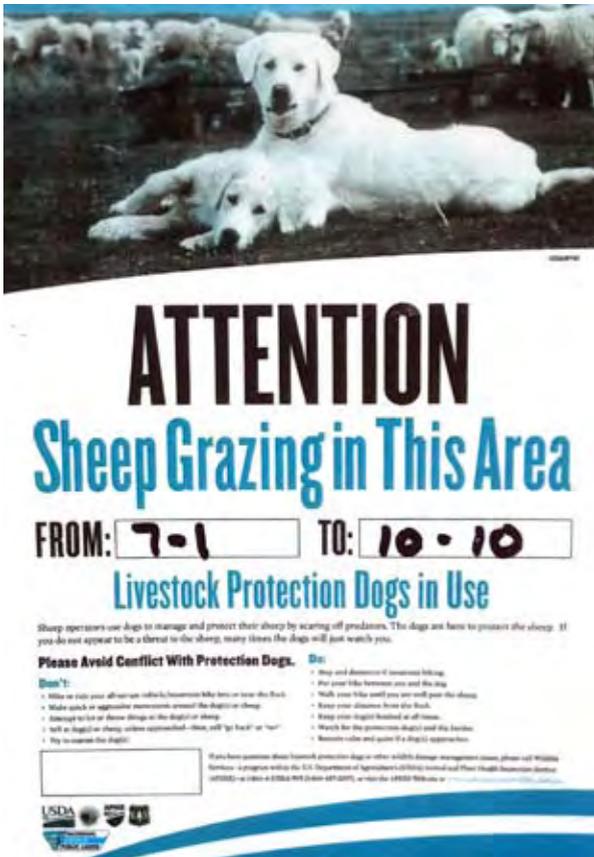
Preventing Conflict

BEFORE THE GRAZING SEASON started, this livestock owner, along with many others in the state, were offered conflict avoidance resources from both WDFW and Washington State University to reduce the risk of predator conflict, but he declined.

As a result, WDFW didn't share the radio collar location of the alpha male with the livestock owner during the early part of the season. Since

wolves are state protected as an endangered species, the sharing of their locations is a sensitive matter. The state generally only shares collar location data with ranchers who have signed a cooperative agreement that guides the use of that information and other aspects of conflict avoidance work.

This livestock owner could have had that location data and



More photos from the Huckleberry pack's territory. PHOTOS COURTESY JACOB JONES – THE INLANDER [SPOKANE, WA].

feeding on sheep – even though there were still sheep and carcasses scattered throughout the area. The sharpshooter mistook the breeding female for a pup and killed her.

The Future

Minimizing the risk of conflict between livestock and wolves, through assistance to ranchers with on the ground resources, was made possible last year due to bipartisan legislation and funding from the sale of personalized license plates. For many complex reasons these resources were not effectively used.

Sheep dropped on top of a wolf pack in difficult terrain without proactive and diligent use of nonlethal deterrents resulted in a conflict that cost taxpayers and the livestock producer thousands of dollars, and cost the endangered female wolf and dozens of sheep their lives. Washington State University lost a valuable research opportunity that could have helped livestock producers in the future. The use of nonlethal deterrents and good communication between all parties is key to the recovery of wolves and the success of livestock owners in Washington State, and certainly should be required before kill orders are issued.



other resources if he, like many other ranchers, had accepted the cooperative agreement offered to him. Once it became clear that wolves were killing his sheep he asked WDFW for assistance. WDFW staff, including a range rider, was sent to the area but only after wolves had been preying on sheep for several weeks. The collar on the adult male wolf has a VHF component that was shut off between 7:00PM to 5:00AM to save battery life, making it useless as a tool during the time when the sheep were most vulnerable. Offers of additional tools that have been found to be successful in other parts of the world were declined. The livestock owner tried to move the sheep, but due to fires earlier in the season, pastureland was at a premium and the owner couldn't find another pasture for the sheep.

A helicopter was brought in to kill up to four of this year's pups, with the rationale that fewer mouths to feed would keep the pack from

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