

Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 10 *Wolves in Utah*

Article 4

2002

Current public attitudes toward wolves in Utah

T. Adam Switalski

Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Utah State University, Logan

Trey Simmons

Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Utah State University, Logan

Shiree L. Duncan

Department of Forest Resources, Utah State University, Logan

Andreas S. Chavez

Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Utah State University, Logan

Robert H. Schmidt

Department of Environment and Society, Utah State University, Logan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei>

Recommended Citation

Switalski, T. Adam; Simmons, Trey; Duncan, Shiree L.; Chavez, Andreas S.; and Schmidt, Robert H. (2002) "Current public attitudes toward wolves in Utah," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 10 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol10/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources and Environmental Issues by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



3. Current Public Attitudes toward Wolves in Utah

A critical aspect of wildlife management is the influence of public opinion on the design and implementation of wildlife policy. Although surveys conducted across the nation tend to reveal strong support for endangered species protection and restoration in general (Duda et al., 1998), as well as support for gray wolf recovery, there is significant variation among different regions and interest groups, including those within Utah (La Vine, 1995).

La Vine (1995) conducted a survey of 707 Utah residents and public land-grazing permittees regarding their attitudes toward wolves. The survey was statistically weighted in order to overrepresent rural residents. According to this survey, the Utah public in general held fairly positive attitudes toward gray wolves (Figure 1). Southern rural residents had the most negative perceptions of wolves, whereas metropolitan residents had the most positive perceptions. Northern rural residents had intermediate attitudes. A study of Colorado residents found responses similar to La Vine's (Pate et al., 1996). Respondents in the Colorado study were divided in opinion depending on place of residence. Those residing east of the Continental Divide were more supportive of reintroduction and felt more positive toward wolves in general. Those residing on the sparsely populated west side of the Continental Divide were less in favor of reintroduction and possessed more negative attitudes toward wolves in general. Such findings suggest that rural and urban residents have differing attitudes toward wolves, regardless of state of residence.

Although a majority of Utah residents held either positive or neutral attitudes toward wolves, those that held permits to graze cattle and sheep on public lands in the state (permittees) expressed negative attitudes toward wolves (64% disliked or strongly disliked). In contrast, big-game hunters were rather evenly divided. Permittees and hunters were more informed about wolves than the general public, although the majority of respondents scored highly on a variety of wolf-related knowledge questions. These differences highlight the difficulties that policy makers and managers are likely to encounter.

Wolves in Utah

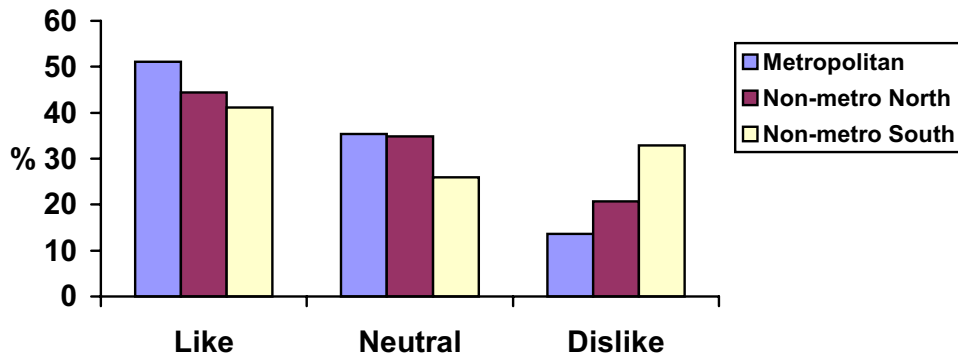


Figure 1. Utah residents' attitudes toward wolves (La Vine 1995).

A comparison between Utah and other states currently involved in wolf restoration can be used to give managers some idea of how the presence of wolves affects attitudes. La Vine compared Utahns' attitudes with the attitudes in other states including Montana, Wyoming and Idaho (Figure 2), using a number of other studies. Utahns held somewhat more polarized views (both positive and negative) toward wolves than residents of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho (La Vine, 1995). In general, however, the attitudes of Utah residents mirrored those of other states, in that they were generally positive.

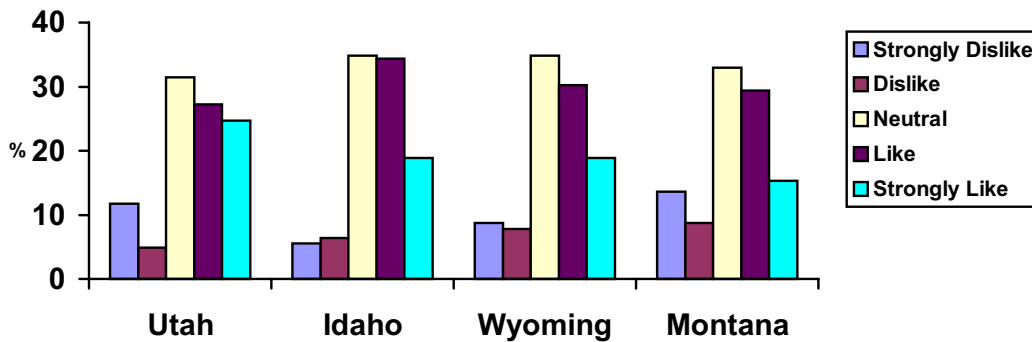


Figure 2. Comparison of attitudes toward wolves by state (La Vine, 1995).

La Vine also specifically compared the attitudes of Utah residents with residents of Montana's North Fork of the Flathead River, where wolves currently live. When asked if a person in wolf country is in danger of being attacked, only 57% of Utahns disagreed, while an overwhelming majority of 80% of North Fork residents disagreed with the statement. This suggests that Utah residents were more fearful of wolves and that Montanans' greater exposure to wolves has made them less fearful.

The most recent wolf-related attitude survey (Decision Research, 2001), conducted in Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona, found very strong support in all three states for

wolf reintroduction in wilderness areas (68% favored reintroduction in Arizona and Colorado, 59% in New Mexico). Fewer than 15% in each state agreed that wolves should be kept out of all public and private lands.

Because wolf restoration is both a biological and sociopolitical issue, attention should be given to the current attitudes of Utah residents. While Utahns as a whole were generally in favor of wolves, with the exception of permittees, approval of wolves differed between nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas. This pattern is consistent with findings in other areas, where those most likely to be directly affected by potential wolf recovery (i.e., rural residents) tend to display the most negative attitudes. Utah has a unique social climate in comparison to the surrounding states, but consideration of other attitude studies hints that as wolves gain a foothold in the state, attitudes may shift. Wolves have been reintroduced in relatively close proximity to Utah since La Vine's survey was initiated in 1995. This may have had a significant effect on the attitudes of Utah residents. In addition, the rapidly changing demographics in the state (e.g., increased urbanization) over the past seven years might be expected to lead to significant changes. For these reasons, we recommend that a reassessment of attitudes toward wolves in Utah be an integral part of any wolf planning and management process.