MORE THAN MERE WOLVES AT THE DOOR:
RECONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY AMIDST
A WILDLIFE CONTROVERSY

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Introduction

When I began my research on the social construction of nature in areas near Yellowstone National Park, my interests had nothing to do with community, only with what I called the “human-wolf interactions” that followed the 1995 reintroduction of wolves to the Park. I was only interested in how humans negotiated their newly-changed relationship with nature – or one part of nature, the wolves – and how, as a result of those negotiations, nature and the wolves were re-made by the residents.

However, in the course of interviews with ranchers who lived near the Park, I found that they were deeply concerned about other forces of change in their lives that predated the wolf reintroduction and were potentially more sweeping. New persons were moving to the Yellowstone area, buying up ranches, changing both the way the land was being used, and fundamentally altering the interactions between neighbors. These shifts in relationships with the land and with the community meant that the wolf reintroduction took place in an already tense climate, one of social upheaval that colored the reintroduction and added a level of complexity to it.

In this chapter I examine social constructions of the wolves and of one Yellowstone-area community by members of that community. I begin by discussing the difficulties that social theorists encounter as they attempt to grasp the meanings of both nature and community. I then present data from my interviews with ranchers living in wolf country. My analysis leads me to conclude that wildlife managers and policy-makers would do well to understand the constructions of both nature and community before embarking on new environmental initiatives in rural areas.
Getting “Nature” Right

One of the striking characteristics of many sociologists’ thinking about the term nature is that, when they undertake the noble endeavor of remaking *nature* into Nature, they still end up with little-n nature. Little-n nature is the standard “received view” of nature, the one that “we all” have in mind whenever we use the word; that nature is facile and comfortable. On the other hand, *Nature* is an uncertain concept that reflects the fact that different social groups impose different meanings on nature. Michael Redclift and Grahame Woodgate (1994:55) penned one particularly hopeful beginning for this discussion when they wrote:

> Nature has become imbued with so many virtues that the term “natural” no longer confers unambiguous meaning.... We have refashioned nature, in our minds, as well as in test tubes and fields, transforming ecological processes into political axioms.... Differences surrounding “nature” and what is “natural” reflect differences between societies.

Redclift and Woodgate’s explanation is helpful to that point. They develop a persuasive, if somewhat abstract, case that there is no one nature. Instead, they imply, there are multiple natures – Nature – each of which is created by certain social groups depending on how those groups are socially and historically situated. Moreover, they seem to be telling us, the dominant Nature handed down to us is one that serves certain political actors and does disservice to others.

Unfortunately, following that passage, Redclift and Woodgate quickly lapse into nature-ism: the unthinking, uncritical use of Nature. In other words, they completely forget the lesson they had just taught their readers, for they wrote, “Each society has developed *together with nature* under specific circumstances. At the same time, however, we also need to understand that all development is constrained by nature...” (Redclift and Woodgate 1994:55; emphasis original). Suddenly, the authors shift from seeing Nature as variable and culturally-dependent to something that all societies co-evolve with and that inevitably limits social behavior.

Similarly, Anthony Giddens, one of the leading sociological theorists of our time, has struggled with Nature. In one apt passage, he first plants the social constructivist’s seed of doubt, writing, “Yet how should we understand the notion of ‘environment’ and more particularly that of ‘nature’? For in any interpretation of ecological think-
ing an enormous amount hangs on these terms” (Giddens 1994:203). Giddens proceeds to discuss Nature’s variety, and he observes, “Most such versions of green theory lack precision exactly because ‘nature’ remains undefined or is understood in a catch-all way” (Giddens 1994:204). Nature, Giddens implies, is a squishy, uncertain concept, but it needs an exacting definition. Here, he, too, slips into nature-ism, as others have done (see, for example, Murphy 1994, 1997).

Giddens’s longing for Natural exactitude leads him to attempt a working definition of the concept. He writes:

> Several main domains or contexts in which “nature” (often also inter-woven with tradition) has disappeared, or is disappearing, can be distinguished. Nature here means what is “natural” or pregiven in our lives; if this is not too paradoxical, a subcategory is nature understood as the non-humanized physical environment (Giddens 1994:207).

Regrettably, when Giddens writes, “Nature here means what is ‘natural’ . . .” he all-but defines the term by invoking that very term. In the process, he tells us nothing about Nature’s constructedness. Instead, he merely demonstrates how thoroughly meaning-laden the concept is. Nature is as we make it.

What is there about Nature that makes it such a seductive notion that even a thinker of Giddens’ reputation may fall into its trap, seeking to define a concept that resists definition as do few others in the English language? C.S. Lewis (1967) said nature is one of the most “dangerous” words we have. Because it is so vague, we risk meaning nothing when we label something nature. Tentativeness and situatedness characterize Nature. That is, what is natural seems to be constantly shifting underfoot and it is dependent upon one’s social outlook. Nature has never been something that all societies emerge with, nor do all societies feel constrained by it. Indeed, Nature simply does not exist in some cultures (Scarce 2000; cf.: Simmons 1993).

I suspect there is another problem with the well-intentioned but stumbling efforts of deductive theorists like Redclift, Woodgate, and Giddens: they spend too little time away from their desks, out of their offices, speaking with and observing people who are actively creating Nature. They seem to have no understanding of the crucial role context plays in creating Nature. Inductivist Jan Dizard (1999:160), who explored in-depth social constructions of Nature by hunters and animal rights activists in Massachusetts, wrote:
Nature might well be thought of as the original Rorschach. Like the suggestive, amorphous ink blots psychologists use to tap our innermost fears and longings, nature presents an open invitation to see what we want or need to see.

Dizard’s hunters actively symbolized Nature based upon their personal experiences and those of others who lived in close proximity to them.

I advocate similar research that takes the would-be theorist of Nature into people’s lives so that we can learn from them what Nature means, for it is in their lives that nature becomes Nature. Deductive theorists gather and systematically analyze little or no data. They read books, work out logical arguments and often produce insightful templates for how society operates. Not so with Nature, however. There is little context in a professor’s office.

Given the growing body of scientific evidence indicating that industrial societies have brought the planet to the brink of multiple ecological catastrophes, deeper exploration of concepts like nature and closely related terms – environment and ecology – is of the utmost importance. What exactly are we seeing the end of when we proclaim that “the end of nature” is nigh (McKibben 1989; cf.: Evernden 1992)? The issue here is a fundamental one. If humans have the power to affect the global climate, pollute every fresh water source on the planet, and destroy dozens of species per day – or, in the case of the example I will use, to completely control the existence of wolves – is it not plain that we make Nature what it is, not just in a conceptual sense, but physically? In the process we give these things new meanings, meanings that both guide and reflect Nature’s reality.

Those reality-embodied meanings are what my research explores, what Gary Alan Fine calls “naturework” (Fine 1998). I have examined salmon biologists’ constructions of salmon (Scarce 1997, 1999, 2000) and the meanings that numerous stakeholders imbue to wolves (Scarce 1998). It is the latter research that I will use here to explore social constructions of nature and their link to constructions of community. First, however, the problematic “community” concept deserves some attention.
Like Nature, community is a rebellious, dangerous term. A.L. Sinikka Dixon (1999:22) wrote, “Community is a difficult concept to deal with. It has become an ‘omnibus’ word, embracing ‘a motley assortment of concepts and qualitatively different phenomena.’” As nature is Nature, so, too, community is Community. In their thoughtful examination of the Community concept and the challenge of theorizing about Community because it is so difficult to demarcate, “The Lumpen Society,” a group of three authors, observed, “Community is everywhere” (Lumpen Society 1997:22). Community, like Nature, can mean anything, any group, any network, any place, whether it exists on the ground or on-line.

The Lumpen Society asserts that Community as actually practiced falls somewhere between the extremes of Tönnies’s (1957) rose-colored pastoralism and more pessimistic, even nihilistic assertions that Community cannot exist. We do, after all, identify with others, communicate with them, live, work, and play with them, and these “others” often have beliefs, attitudes, skin colors, religions, genders, and lives that look very different from our own. “From this morass of difference,” The Lumpen Society (1997:38) writes, “we seek to construct order, distinguishing entities called communities . . . in which we participate. We perceive the existence of community as a means of understanding and organizing experience.” Community is something that is done. It is an accomplishment.

We create things that we call community out of what we are given in life, what we come across, and what we make for and of ourselves. In our daily lives we practice Community, cobbling together disparate things – space, people, outlooks, faiths, lifestyles, leisure activities – to make multiple communities. Our communities are at work, at play, where we worship, where our children attend school, and where we live. When we are participating in each of these communities, we share at least one important social characteristic with the others who are there, even if “there” is cyberspace, but none of our communities are perfect reflections of our social selves: our race, gender, economic class, religion, sexual preferences, recreational pursuits, tastes in food or film. If Community is the warp and woof of our lives, each of us is but one strand in a diverse weave.

This understanding of Community as something that people accomplish to provide their lives with order and stability is reflected in the
work of anthropologist Janet M. Fitchen. After spending years in rural areas of upstate New York conducting ethnographic research, Fitchen (1991:253) concluded:

Social scientists have researched, written, and debated for decades about what the terms “community” and “rural community” mean, but the people who live in rural places have generally not had much trouble understanding that they do in fact live in and belong to a community. If they cannot satisfactorily define what they mean by community, they nonetheless go about their business believing in its existence and certain of their own social existence within it. In a sense, without being told that they should, they do just what the social scientists say they do: “People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, a referent of their identity.”

Too much of the debate over Community, like much of the scholarly struggle over Nature, ignores what people believe, say, and do in their day-to-day lives. Community is real to people. The particular factors that shape it may vary from Community to Community, but for ethnographers the challenge and the goal is to fairly reflect how those people in those communities speak of themselves, their worlds, and their relations with others — human and nonhuman alike — whom they encounter in those lived worlds (Schutz and Luckmann 1973).

Some of the authors mentioned above noted the danger inherent in overlaying researchers’ pre-existing notions of Community onto the communities that social scientists study. However, it is equally dangerous to ignore a concept as important as Community when fellow research participants (“subjects”) invoke it themselves. When participants do speak of Community, researchers need to do the same thing they do when they explore Nature or some component of it: treat that concept as an integral component of participants’ lives.

*Studying Nature and Community*

I was drawn to explore the Nature-Community connection because of my methodology. Ethnographers get to know the people and places that they research in a deep way. We tend to avoid “interviews” preferring to turn our meetings with others into conversations, although for ease of discussion this is the label we use to describe our primary
tool for data gathering. We also recognize that even these conversations, because they take place between strangers and with a tape recorder running, are not normal experiences for those conversing with us. As such, researchers influence what is said by our mere presence, not to mention the ways that we respond to statements and a host of other factors. Thus, ethnographers and the persons sharing their thoughts with us are all research “participants,” working together to create knowledge.

The data below were drawn from approximately fifty-five interviews with persons from a wide range of stakeholder groups in the Yellowstone National Park area. Some of the interviews were as brief as fifteen minutes; others lasted more than two hours. Of particular interest in this chapter are the results of a subset of those interviews with fifteen current or former livestock operators near the Park. The data were analyzed using the “grounded theory” approach, the most popular system among sociologists for evaluating interview data.¹

All of those with whom I spoke were “Oldtimers,” persons who had lived in the area for much of their adult lives, or who had been involved in ranching elsewhere but had moved to the area. The label Oldtimer is not meant to imply that all Oldtimers are aged; few were older than sixty and many of them were younger than fifty. They were all established in the “ranching community,” and nearly all of them were well known in the broader local Community as well, although three of them had recently moved to the area to manage cattle ranches.

It is important to note that I chose to emphasize the Oldtimers, rather than those I term “Newcomers,” recent arrivals to the area, for theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, I wanted to explore exactly what Oldtimers meant by Community change; it was, after all, their concept of Community that was being affected by the upheaval around them. In addition, although they clearly felt they were losing power in their Community, for the most part they remained the dominant group. They owned most of the land and they remained the dominant decision-makers; politically powerful groups are, of course, of special import to wildlife managers when they work with communities.

On the practical side, the Oldtimers were more accessible than were the Newcomers. Many Newcomers spent little time in the area, and often they kept to themselves. For example, when I attempted
to interview one Newcomer family, I was encouraged instead to speak to their ranch/game preserve foreman. Were this broadly an examination of rural Community change, Newcomers’ views might be as indispensable as the Oldtimers.’ However, my concern is with the construction of the Yellowstone wolves and how it is affected by the reconstruction of the Oldtimer Community as the Oldtimers understand it. Powerful, long-term residents tend to show up at public hearings about resource issues, and they are the persons most likely to call upon natural resource managers for assistance. Thus, given the emphasis of this volume, residents like the Oldtimers deserve special attention.

New Neighbors

Longview Valley, a pseudonym, lies on the outskirts of Yellowstone National Park. It runs several tens of miles, and through it flows a large river with its headwaters in the Park. Bounded by two massive mountain ranges that stay snow covered for most of the year, “the Longview,” as residents call it, seems to float near the clouds. The river provides a dependable source of irrigation water, and although winters can get bitterly cold and windy, the Longview is something of a “banana belt” compared to the rest of the region, its unusually warm conditions making it a good place to raise livestock.

Ranches ranging in size from several hundred to several thousands of acres fan out from both sides of the river, and the rounded Black Angus cattle graze silhouetted against snows in the winter and green pastures in the summer. Sheep are also raised in the Longview proper as well as high up in steeply-sloping secondary valleys and wide plateaus, some of which climb away from the river to 10,000 feet. The scene is as perfectly pastoral as any Romantic landscape artist could have desired. All is not well in the Longview, however. Some long-time residents insist the wolves are to blame, but all agree that humans are as well.

Living with Wolves

1. Disaster in the Making
Wolves once inhabited the Valley, but they were cleared out nearly a century ago, and the last wolf in Yellowstone Park was killed in
1926. Not long after, Aldo Leopold, already respected for his wildlife management theories, began arguing that wolves should be put back into the Park (Leopold 1995). That was not to happen for decades, however. Even twenty years after the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), anti-wolf ranchers and their political allies had succeeded in keeping wolves out. Fearing that the vicious predators would leave the Park and ravage livestock up and down the Longview, as the 1990s arrived this group continued to fight what ultimately was a losing battle against the ESA, the wolves, and popular sentiment. In 1995, following the most extensive hearings ever held under the auspices of the ESA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service captured wolves in Canada and brought them to the Park by helicopter, airplane, truck, and snowmobile. The wolves were penned for a month to break them of their homing instinct, and then released.

In its environmental impact statement developed before the wolves were reintroduced to the Park, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (1994) speculated that wolves would leave Yellowstone and kill livestock. This was a virtual certainty because wolves disperse freely because of population pressures, the social structure of wolf packs, and other factors (Mech 1970), and because some wolves seem to have inherited a taste for livestock. This prediction, combined with the savage lore of wolves and the fact that generations earlier wolves were cleared out of the Longview country, led residents of the valley to reason that bringing wolves back likely would be disastrous. One of them told me:

I had some old-timers that I was good friends with that seen ’em back in the turn-of-the-century, and all they could just say that, you know, there was a reason they got rid of them, ’cause they couldn’t live with them. And, of course, times were tougher back then, maybe, but that timber wolf was just a terrible predator. He didn’t care what he killed, when he killed it, so they just got rid of ’em.

It did not make sense to many Longview residents that the government and environmentalists wanted to bring back such a vicious animal. In these comments and others like them, wolves were constructed as a kind of disease not unlike smallpox or polio; once it was eliminated, some ranchers argued, what could possibly be the logic for bringing it back? Wolves spelled disaster to these ranchers who fought hard against the wolf during the reintroduction hearings, but lost.

It did not take long after the reintroduction for wolves to leave
the Park and to kill livestock in the Longview. It mattered little to Oldtimers that the offending wolves killed far fewer head of sheep and cattle than predicted, that the guilty ones were blasted by automatic shotgun-wielding federal animal damage control agents, or that an environmental group had established a fund to compensate ranchers for their losses. The pestilence was loose on the land and damage was being done to ranchers’ psyches, pocketbooks, and their sense of calm and security.

To those who opposed the reintroduction, wolves brought with them a new level of uncertainty for ranchers. I asked one couple about a conclusion that I had come to based on other ranchers’ comments that ranching families would ranch for nothing so long as the essentials were taken care of (Scarce 1998). They responded – him doing most of the talking, her interjecting a word or two here or there:

There’s a lot of people who will carry unbearable debt and do without because (her) it’s a way of life, (him) yeah, and they been in it all their lives. And what might break that camel’s back is the timber wolf.

He spoke the last three words almost in a whisper. “You know, if it really came in and they started finding dead livestock, it can be devastating to some of those kind of people.”

Here, wolves are constructed not merely as an amorphous disease lurking in wait. They are, as well, a force promoting instability, an immediate threat to hearth and home, home wreckers in the sense that wolves possess the power to ruin everything that a ranching family has struggled to create. Oldtimers in the Longview willingly live a tenuous existence because they love the existence itself. They possess an affinity for the place so profound that they are the Longview and the Longview is them. Only the most powerful of forces, a disaster of some sort that exceeds in its enormity the run-of-the-mill drought, flood, or blizzard, could, in combination with the rest, run them off of the land. The wolves, some felt, had the potential for being such a disaster.

2. Bringing Wolves Back – Or Inviting Them Back?
Not all Oldtime ranchers opposed the presence of wolves. Still, some objected to the wolf reintroduction, preferring “restoration,” where the wolves would have been allowed to return on their own. The distinction between, on one hand, reintroducing wolves by forcibly
bringing them down from Canada and, on the other, allowing wolves to restore themselves by making their own way down from Canada may seem like a fine point. For many ranchers it was not:

I certainly am pro-wolf, as far as being pro- any wild animal that’s trying to coexist. And I do understand that we have all kinds of talk and beliefs about wolves. When I was involved with the [state arts board], we’d have programming that dealt with the wolf and myth and folklore. Excellent stuff. From “Little Red Riding Hood” to Tolstoy – wolves were chasing the troikas with the bride and groom and they’d throw the bride out to the wolves and get back into the village. “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?” But even within that, this program has really been botched.

Her concern was that wolf mythology not be propagated through the reintroduction process. The belief among some pro-wolf Oldtimers, as well as some wolf biologists, was that if wolves were allowed to return to Yellowstone on their own – if they were essentially invited to return rather than being forcefully brought back – wolf politics would be considerably changed and the myths would whither in the face of a different reality. Instead of opposing the wolves, the Community might actually embrace them or at least tolerate them.

Another rancher explained this logic, commenting that:

[T]he wolves that find their way down here by themselves, they’re the ones that got this far because they stayed the hell out of the way. And I think that’s a: Whether we could have waited ten years and whether there’d have been enough of them when they did get down here, whether there’d be enough of a population, how long it would take to create a population, you can ask all of those questions. But they sure are questions that need to be looked at.

The right wolves for Yellowstone, these Oldtimers insisted, were those that would have dispersed from the north and eventually found their way to the Park. Such recovered wolves, the argument went, would dispel wolf mythology and be accepted by locals because they would possess the skills to avoid conflicts with humans.

Implicit in the rancher’s observation that recovered wolves would have “stayed the hell out of the way” is that any wolves that caused problems for humans would either be killed by humans – a federal offense under the ESA – or they would be moved to other locations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a regular practice elsewhere in the region. Thus, for some Oldtimers even if they welcomed certain wolves, other wolves – those that were reintroduced – were
troublesome by their very presence. They became political poison to the pro-wolf cause. The biologists and agency personnel with whom I have spoken labeled wolves that came into conflict with humans “bad wolves.” For some ranchers who also are wolf advocates, a bad wolf is one that was brought to Yellowstone by the government.

Other wolf proponents imposed different meanings on the reintroduced wolves. One rancher saw benefits in having wolves around, but his comments led him to discuss the uncertainty of life in the Longview, an uncertainty that wolves contribute to:

When we were young, to see a few elk in the haystacks in the winter was a big thrill. Now we feel like we’re being overrun by the elk. So you might say, I guess, wolves are good – they’ll cut down on the elk numbers. But it’s, it’s a much bigger picture. Many more elk. The wolves now are a part of it. Grizzly bears: they’re coming back, following those elk when they’re having their calves. There’s been more grizzly bears seen on our place in the last couple of years than we saw for years. So you say, “Okay, we live in this very special place, and it’s a wonderful combination to both live there, ranch, and be able to encounter a lot of wildlife.” The balance is changing somewhat, and it’s having an impact on the ranch itself, the ability to run livestock. And I think we accept that as a fair tradeoff, because if we didn’t like that we could move to somewhere else. You take that tradeoff. The uncertainty about things like the security of one’s Forest Service grazing lease, grazing on public land: All of those combine to make a rancher feel a lot less certain about what we may face a few years down the road in just this little livestock unit. I mean, will we really be thinking about bringing the cows into a corral every night? Probably not, but it would never have crossed our mind before. Now it’s a fact.

Uncertainty is a consuming anxiety for ranching families, and this pro-wolf rancher’s comments imply a sympathy with wolf opponents who are unwilling to go to great lengths to address the uncertainties that wolves and grizzly bears introduce to their lives. We all want to live comfortably, yet ranchers have to be on guard against factors as diverse as anti-public lands grazing activists, bitter cold spells, drought, disease, low prices for the animals they produce, and new predators.

Many livestock operators take precautions to address these uncertainties, including adopting new techniques to get along with wolves. Regarding her and her husband’s frequent midnight strolls to the cow pasture during calving season to ward-off wolves, one rancher’s wife commented:
Yeah, you do preventative measures as much as you can. Not fancy technology and all that, but just hard labor. And it’s tedious and it’s exhausting and you lose a lot of weight, but it seemed to work. It seemed to really be a deterrent.

In comments like these, wolves emerge with almost human meanings. They and grizzly bears may be traded with and they behave like hunters, potentially curbing the Yellowstone-area elk irruption and aiding ranchers whose fields, intended for cattle grazing, sometimes are home to more elk than Angus.

Wolves also embody the potential to directly affect daily livestock operations, not unlike the cattle rustlers of old, although pro-wolf Oldtimers said they welcome the “balance” that wolves restore to the land and they are willing to take precautions to reduce conflicts between the wolves, their livestock, and themselves. Despite the hard work, exhaustion, disruption of decades-old management practices, and losses – this couple had had sheep and guard dogs killed by wolves – the wolf newcomers were welcomed. Far from being a pestilence, the wolves were seen as new neighbors that could contribute something of ecological and emotional importance to the Community. Although their presence came at cost, it was a cost these Oldtimers were willing to bear, in contrast to anti-wolf Oldtimers who saw only costs to pocketbooks, traditions, and routines.

The pro-wolf ranchers’ constructions highlight the complexity of wolf-human interactions that emerged around 1990, when plans for the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction were first made public, and that persist to the present. First, there was the issue of whether to accept wolves in the Longview at all. For those who favored wolves in the valley, a second issue confronted them: to support the wolf reintroduction or to oppose it in favor of wolf recovery. Finally, today those who favored reintroduction – and, in practical terms, all ranchers, since the reintroduction is now a matter of historical fact – are confronted by the changes they must make in managing their herds and the corresponding lifestyle changes they undergo, such as purchasing guard dogs, coralling cows about to give birth, or waking up numerous times at night during calving season to check on one’s herd at pasture. In a very real sense, the wolves were unwitting players in their own construction, compelling ranchers to alter their behaviors and their outlooks in light of the reality of dealing with the four-legged newcomers.
1. Gazing at the Big Gates
For at least as long as the wolf controversy has brewed, a human social controversy has been on Oldtimers’ minds as well, so that when the wolves began to roam from their new Yellowstone home, they arrived in the middle of an already evolving human milieu. Newcomers had been coming to Longview Valley since the first white settler homesteaded there in the mid-1800s, and change in the Valley – whether it was a drought or an elk population out of control or a film star moving in – was a fact of life. More recently, however, from the Oldtimers’ perspective the changes have been aimed at the fundamentals of Longview life.

The Valley’s Community concept has always been one where diversity was tolerated, anticipating and reflecting the Lumpen Society scholars’ observations regarding the strengths of Community. That tolerance had its limits, however. The first inkling I had of conflicts between indigenous human social groups – not between locals and outsiders, but between longtime locals and other, newer locals – came when a mention was made of “for-fee” hunting. Fee hunting, paying to hunt on land that someone manages largely, often entirely, to attract large game animals like elk, often takes place on former ranches. The result is considerable tension in the Community based in the fundamental change in land use necessary to accommodate elk or bear instead of cattle. One ranch manager said:

Some people wouldn’t care if we took every cow out of [the Longview]. You know, that might be their answer: “Just move the cows out.” Well, you know, that’s not really the answer, either. It is already happening, but it’s happening through: There’s a transition [to] the investor, out-of-state owner that’s buying up these lands for recreation and they’re not restocking a lot of stock. So there is a trend going right now. And as, say, [our next door neighbors] get frustrated enough, then they’re going to raise their hands and say, “I’ll sell my place and move.” And so you’re forcing these people to go. The people who sold this ranch were very frustrated with all the elk eating all their vegetation. He didn’t get to see the timber wolf, but that would have just been another nail in his coffin.

A dominant Oldtimer construction of the Newcomers is that of tourists or, perhaps more charitably, recreationists. The Newcomers want relaxation when they visit their homes in the Longview. They
work elsewhere; when they come to the Northern Rockies, they want to play. Some, too, want the land to pay, but in new and foreign ways – thus the attraction of fee hunting.

Through the management of their land and the attitudes they share in encounters with Oldtimers, the Newcomers leave long-time residents with the unmistakable impression that they want to create a new Longview Valley. That revamped Valley may be ecologically friendlier and more complex, but that is of little concern to many of the Oldtimers. Implicit in the act of replacing livestock with wild animals is an attitude anathema to the Oldtimers, one that de-emphasizes intensive land management, production values, and an anthropocentric outlook. Ranching gets shoved aside, and with it goes a way of life that emphasizes extensive control of the land and the wildlife on that land.

Moreover, maximizing the land’s potential for recreational purposes was not the only characteristic of the Newcomers that troubled long-term residents. Another rancher, part of a family that had lived on the land for generations and that favored wolf reintroduction, told me:

The “Big Gate Syndrome,” we call it. People come into the country and they need to make a big deal about it, make a statement. Naturally there’s sort of this local provincial resentment against the manifestation of a lot of other things that people bring in with them, rather than people coming in who have a fairly humble approach to try and interact with other people…. When you personalize it, it’s not too difficult to sort of neutralize that sense of style that people bring with them. But when it’s not personalized, it’s pretty easy to look at as just sort of this other culture statement that is hard to relate to.

Later in our conversation when I asked him about the differences between Oldtimers and Newcomers, he responded:

For some reason commitment to this life – not necessarily ranching, but this life – comes to my mind immediately. The focus is a little different. This is, for a lot of people, recreation, and a lot of these people are literally here for two weeks a year. And a lot of the people who I’m talking about are the people who are building that house, the house two houses down.

A monstrous edifice, locally such houses were known as “trophy homes.” “Great folks,” the rancher continued, “but they’re only here two weeks a year with a mega-million dollar home and a piece of land. That’s hard to swallow sometimes.” In these comments we see
the subtleties of the Oldtimers’ constructions of community. The well-settled residents welcome Newcomers to a point, but their tolerance ends when “commitment to this life” – not necessarily ranching, but commitment to the Community – ends.

And so another storm was welling even as the wolf controversy emerged. Newcomers give the Oldtimers, those whose roots in the Longview or in ranching go back generations, much to dislike. They use the land differently and they interact with their neighbors differently as well. The Newcomers build beautiful, lavish homes only to use them as hideaways from their normal lives rather than as doorways to a new life and a new Community. Because they visit the Longview so seldom, Oldtimers insist, the Newcomers fail to develop meaningful relationships with their neighbors. Many of the Newcomers close their “ranches” to cattle, and those who make some use of the land, as for fee hunting, often treat the land in radically different ways than Oldtimers do. They welcome elk, which eat forage once reserved for cattle. Since the elk have found refuge in the Valley, their numbers have increased, attracting the wolves and further compounding the problem in some Oldtimers’ eyes. Regardless of how Oldtimer ranchers feel about the wolf issue, they are disturbed by the changes to the land that Newcomers bring with them.

2. Committing to Community
More importantly, though, the Oldtimers are troubled by the shifting notions of Community emerging around them. One does not have to ranch to be a respected and valued member of the Oldtimers’ community, but to treat the land and the community as places to be briefly visited each year and then forgotten about is a slight to place and people. “Community” and “commitment” share more than just the same etymological root. With the former comes an expectation of the latter.

The Oldtimers, aware because it stares them in the face daily that they lead precipitous lives, are confronted by multiple social forces pushing them off of the land. Even if they are determined to stay, they told me that they increasingly find themselves strangers in their own Community, surrounded by either empty houses or people whom they do not know or recognize. Those people lack a commitment not only to others – how could they be dependable when they are not around fifty weeks of the year? – but to Community in the most
general of senses. They do not understand what really matters, what makes one a part of a place. A woman who runs sheep on her land asked:

What makes a person a part of a community? I think it is being involved in a community in educational aspects and environmental aspects and caring about your neighbors. So I would agree that people, when they’re absentee, can oftentimes lose sight of the immediate: You know, if they don’t give to the library often, but they’ll give to Africa, you know, some relief in Africa, but they don’t give to the local Chamber of Commerce, that sort of thing. . . . But things like a library: for people who come here two or three weeks a year, they’re not giving to things that are community-based, but they are giving in Africa or giving around the world, but not necessarily to the little theater group. That’s not a criticism. It’s an observation. But oftentimes the people with money are the ones who are preserving the land, who are putting the conservation easements on it, versus other developers who are [locals] who may be sub-dividing it and so forth.

She was torn between condemning Newcomers for the social distance they keep from the Oldtimers and the Community and praising them for doing more to conserve the land than do many natives of the area. The Newcomers are so concerned about distant issues and doing what is correct in some universal sense of the term that they fail to see the needs of their new Community. Implicit in this construction is the observation that, when the Newcomers do act in the best interests of Community, as when they permanently protect land from development, they do so almost by accident.

Like the wolves, Newcomers are also constructed by the Oldtimers as powerful forces of change. Both the wolves and the Newcomers may bring ecological change; wolves keep elk herds under control and Newcomers apply conservation easements. And they both bring social change; wolves and Newcomers alike created new tensions in the Community. When I said to one couple, “The theme is not wolf reintroduction anymore for me. The theme has changed in people’s lives.” They interjected, she nodding her head and him saying, “I totally agree with that.” I meant that the focus of my research had changed, but they thought I was putting words into their mouths, and they were telling me that I had gotten the words right. They heard me saying something like, “The theme is change in people’s lives,” I think, and by agreeing with my observation they indicated that the undercurrent in their Community had changed in only a
few years. They found themselves living not in a stable community but in an uncertain Community, a place that they sometimes had difficulty recognizing.

Commitment to Community in the immediate sense, to one’s neighbors, and to Community in the broader sense, to others living similar lives, is slackening in the Longview. This points toward a rending of the general social fabric. It is the little things that transform Community from an abstract and uncertain general concept to a real and vibrant community that is a lived and alive place: talking with neighbors and keeping up one’s property, certainly, but also contributing to bake sales, donating time and money to the local library – in short, treating Community as a cause and sharing the community’s commitment to common political purposes. That unity emerging out of diversity, according to Oldtimers, is increasingly a thing of the past in the Longview.

Conclusion

My underlying purpose in this chapter is simply to argue that wildlife management programs like the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction almost all take place in a rich milieu that needs to be appreciated by policy-makers and wildlife managers. That “richness” has two components. The first is residents’ constructions of the species in question, and these in turn have a great deal to do with their reaction to any given management program: their resistance, acceptance, confusion, or ambivalence.

Second, wildlife managers need to understand that the meanings that residents give to plants, animals, and policies develop against a backdrop of social complexity. In the case of the Longview, that complexity took two forms. To begin with, not all residents share common constructions of the wolves. To some the wolves are a disaster or a pest that has brought another level of uncertainty into their already unpredictable lives, and, when combined with other forces, threatens to run them off of their land; to others, wolves are important players in a new, ecologically tolerant vision of the West – even if that vision is not socially tolerant. All of the Oldtimers with whom I spoke expressed anxiety about their changing Community, identifying the Newcomers as a primary force in shifting forms of land use and a lack of commitment to neighbors and the broader Community.
As managers well know, their work does not occur in a social vacuum. Previously, I wrote that for many wolf supporters and opponents near Yellowstone, wolves were surrogates for a federal government that seemed willing to ignore residents’ concerns about wolves and about Park management in general (Scarce 1998). In that understanding, the major social force impinging upon local residents was a distant government that ignored locals’ existence altogether. I reported that the opposition to the wolf reintroduction was widespread – even residents who liked the notion of having wolves around were troubled by how they were brought back, for they were almost jammed down their throats by what they saw as ruthless federal bureaucrats who cared more for another species and the law than about the humans who would have to change how they lived to accommodate the wolves.

However, I have come to understand that the struggle over wolf reintroduction was made even more difficult for residents in the Longview because wolves were not only a stand-in for government. They were also part of, and perhaps even were stand-ins for, Community change. Wolves are only one of the challenges confronting Longview Valley residents. The Oldtimers there live in a tumultuous world replete with an increasingly uncertain sense of Community that wracks their world – a world that was never idyllic, certainly not tranquil, but at least evolved somewhat manageably. Because of the fundamentals that connected them in the past – above all else an identification with the Longview and its land – individuals and the Community adapted well to changes. Now, however, according to the Oldtimers who remain, almost every ranching family that retires sells their land to someone who not only does not run cattle but will not allow their neighbors graze their land, either. Elk and even wolves seem to have more value to the Newcomers than do cattle and sheep, a fact that disturbs all of the Oldtimers, although some to lesser degrees than others.

What especially pains the Oldtimers, though, is the loss of a sense of connectedness to one another and of obligation and concern for the larger whole. The human Community is changing in fundamental ways, and it is against that backdrop that wolves returned to Longview Valley. According to the Oldtimers’ construction, Newcomers seek bucolic havens for themselves far removed from big-city hustle and bustle. In the process, though, they undermine Community and alter ecology. Their close ties are with persons thousands of miles away,
and the issues that compel them to action are similarly foreign to many in the Valley. At best they run a few head of livestock, but they do so almost for aesthetics; they let the land go to waste, many Oldtimers say, even if they are encouraging game like elk to graze on their land to take advantage of the lucrative market for fee hunting. That the Newcomers lack a fundamental connection to the Longview is evidenced by their rejection of traditional uses of the land, insist the Oldtimers.

Was the reception that the wolves received in the Longview directly affected by the Oldtimer/Newcomer struggle? My data do not directly support that conclusion, but it was implied. The ranching Oldtimers said they depend upon their neighbors for all kinds of support, including keeping an eye out for trouble, such as wolves in one another’s pastures, and conveying the latest news and rumors. If one’s next door neighbor is not out in the pasture working with their livestock because they have none to work with, and if they have no news to share about wolf whereabouts because they are not part of the networks that would convey that information to them, there is no basis for assuming that they will behave rancher-like when wolves are in the area. Those ranchers in the Longview who opposed the wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone Park likely would have opposed it regardless, but the changes that they are witnessing in their Community are also likely to have added to the urgency of their arguments and the extent of their anxiety — thus the sense that wolves may break the camel’s back.

All of this leads me to my concluding observation, one that is tentative but tantalizing: Whenever members of a self-described Community socially construct Nature or a Natural entity like wolves, they also imbue meaning to Community. In saying this, I hark back to one of the earliest sociologists, Emile Durkheim. Durkheim ([1912] 1965) saw that in rituals like religious services, what was identified as sacred or profane was a reflection of society’s ideals, its norms, expectations, and accepted values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. So too, it appears, that Nature reflects Community. When Community members socially construct Nature, they remind themselves of the core of what matters to the social “us” — to us together, to us as community. In the Longview Valley residents gave wolves quite different meanings, but a common thread ran through those meanings: the land and its management matters deeply. This is so not simply because ranchland management is an obvious and integral
part of living on ranches but because of the Oldtimers’ profound connection to the land and the place. Whatever else separated the people of the Longview, that shared connection united them in their community.

Thus, in constructing wolves, whether as lifestyle destroyers or ecosystem saviors, the Oldtimers say a great deal more about what matters to them than the mere value of their livestock that might be lost to the fangs of *Canis lupus* (cf.: Greider and Garkovich 1994). Giddens observed:

> Most of the modes of life we have to deal with, however, are *ecosocial* systems: they concern the socially organized environment... In most environmental areas we couldn’t begin to disentangle what is natural from what is social – more importantly it is usually irrelevant to policy-making endeavors to seek to do so (Giddens 1994:210; emphasis original).

The Longview Valley example supports Giddens’s notion of ecosocial systems. The Oldtimers’ meanings of wolves are social products, not natural entities, for there is none such as nature.

There is, however, Nature, the stuff that we casually call nature, and Longview residents’ constructs of wolves as a “natural” entity hinge not simply on wolves but on issues of lifestyle, values, and traditions. By the same token the wolf is only one player in communities being rended by sweeping human social changes, none of which the Oldtimers feel they can thwart. They have lost the battle over the wolf, as they knew they would. But their biggest foe walks on two legs, not four, and that foe does not wear the khaki and brown of a Park Service biologist.

**Management Recommendations**

Giddens is not correct, however, that distinguishing the social in nature is irrelevant to policy-making. In fact, identifying the Nature that we want to create is of extreme importance at the global level – as we stand on the brink of multiple ecological disasters – and locally as managers consider how to approach the practical problems that confront them, whether the project at-hand involves a species restoration or merely whether to change the dates for a deer hunting season. In the Longview the battle is really over the policies and politics of Community and ecological change. Who gets what, when, and how? Who gets to determine what life is like in the Longview and
how the land will be used? When will the last rancher be run out by self-focused neighbors — and, some would add, marauding wolves? How will Community, in any meaningful sense, be maintained when connection to the land no longer unites those with diverse outlooks?

Perhaps it is a wildlife manager’s dream to manage wolves in a place where there are no humans, although I doubt it. Management, after all, is about controlling nonhuman and human animals for the “benefit and enjoyment” (to borrow words chiseled on the north gate of Yellowstone Park) of both, and no meaningful decisions about the fate of a wildlife population take place in a social vacuum. The challenge, it seems to me as an outsider to wildlife management, is to develop strategies that are as effective for communicating with the public as they are for directing the behavior of wildlife. Notice that I do not recommend “directing the behavior of the public;” to do so is arrogant, undemocratic, and futile. And in order to communicate with the public, one has to understand it. Fundamentally, managers want to encourage the development of new constructions of nature. How can they do these things?

My sense is that on-the-ground research that gives managers an understanding of the public, the meanings that the public creates, and the underlying dynamics of communities is of great potential value. Ideally, no manager would knowingly place a species in an inappropriate ecosystem. If humans are intimately part of the ecosystems around them, to the point that they are the most powerful members of those ecosystems, their Communities must be seen as integral to ecosystems. Thus, managers must gather information about the factors that shape the human social Community’s ability and willingness to listen and to cooperate.

Methodologically, ethnographic research such as I undertook in the Yellowstone area may yield substantial and useful understandings of communities’ social constructions of wildlife and of the communities themselves. So, too, may focus groups. Ethnographers pride themselves on their ability to “get into” people’s lives and reveal their worlds through in-depth interviews and observations. A strength of focus groups is that they bring small numbers of persons together who can respond to one another as the subject matter is discussed, offering supporting and contradictory observations and explanations. The ever-popular social science survey, while appropriate for inquiring about attitudes, values, and to a lesser extent behaviors, lacks the sort of depth of insight that these other methods can provide.
Unlike surveys, ethnographies and focus groups do not readily yield the sorts of quantitative data that many researchers and managers find attractive and persuasive. However, my sense is that qualitative research is the only effective means for plumbing the depths of persons’ lived worlds, and the resulting findings have the potential for contributing significantly to management decisions and managers’ interactions with communities.

References


Note

Grounded theory is a meticulous process of inductive theory construction (Charmaz 2000; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Beginning with a small set of interviews, the researcher identifies key concepts that seem to be the most prominent. In succeeding rounds of interviews, those concepts are explored in more depth with new participants until the researcher identifies a small number of key theoretical notions that appear to explain much of what the researcher has observed. The results are “grounded” in the data because the theory is directly traceable to the words spoken in interviews or to field observations, and in publications the researcher’s theoretical conclusions are supported by presenting exemplary data: excerpts from interviews and field notes.
