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Wolf Conservation and Management Plan Review 2010-11
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To the review team:

First, I wish you good luck in your deliberations as reviewers of the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. As a member of the planning team that originally drafted the Plan, I understand how difficult and contentious wolf issues can be, and how difficult it can be to draft a document that reflects the range of values held by Yukoners.

Having been through this, at times, agonizing process I would like to share some reflections on the original plan and its drafting. I recognize that while the time and context for discussing wolf issues has changed considerably, some reflections about this earlier process may be helpful. I also recognize that I am speaking for myself and not the whole team. I hope that many of the things I say would resonate with the others' memories; however, it is also possible that things I say will be shaped by my own biases. I will try to be fair.

A look at the participants reveals an incredible breadth in the team composition; it's hard to imagine more polarized positions being brought to the table. I admit that at the outset, I was pessimistic about the chances of reaching a compromise and even took the precaution of ensuring that it would be possible to write dissenting opinions (as other public institutions sometimes do) if agreement could not be reached.

Successes

I think that one of the keys to our success in crafting a plan was a focus on the idea of respect for wolves. Of course, everyone had their own interpretation of what respect meant, but it was still a common frame that we could return to when particularly contentious points were debated. I think that it is fair to say that the compromises reached on most of these points were reached with an eye on this idea. This thread was given an important boost by Elder Harry Morris, from Teslin, who spoke at a planning meeting. While reminding us that people hunted and trapped wolves, it was still important that "the wolf not be made a fool of."

Some examples of this process were reflected, for example, in decisions about hunting seasons and bag limits. Recognizing that hunting was pretty universally held as an acceptable activity in the Yukon positions, on bag limits the discussions initially ranged from unlimited to "why would anyone need more than one a year?"

Given such a range, a limit of three was the compromise accepted—the limit, as generous as it might seem to some, did refute the idea that wolves were vermin that could be shot on site in unlimited numbers. Similarly the hunting season was chosen in an attempt to optimize the quality of the pelts. If the wolf is to be respected, why would it be shot at a time when the pelts were in poor shape?

Other provisions were made mindful of the very real possibility that the government of the day would initiate a wolf kill program. The idea here being that if this was done to the wolves then there should be some gestures to give something back to wolves too—a kind of balancing of responses (again to be clear that wolves should not be thought of as vermin). Examples of these were recommendations for education programs and wolf conservation areas.

For me, one of the most important recommendations was 7.1:

Future management of caribou, moose, and sheep and their habitat in the Yukon must have the objective that populations are not allowed to reach levels where wolf reduction might be considered necessary. This management responsibility is considered part of the “public trust” which the Environment Act (Yukon) requires the Government of the Yukon to protect.

I felt, and I think some others did too, that this recommendation strongly urged a precautionary approach to management.

Finally, a number of recommendations for research were made. For now, I'd like to focus on 11.7 about researching the long-term effects of wolf reduction programs. This discussion was not intended to point to a lack of research, and hence a justification for wolf kills. Rather it was made in the context of a pending wolf kill program. It was felt that if the government of the day insisted on conducting the program, a measure of respect for the killed wolves was to ensure that at least something helpful could be learned from this loss. I mention it now for two reasons, first it illustrates one more way that the idea of respect was used to find common ground, and second to commend Bob Hayes's recent book, *Wolves of the Yukon*. His reflections are one of the outcomes of this outlook and the book should provide some useful guidance for your deliberations.

It isn't my intention to itemize all of the key things in the document, I just wish to provide a sense of the discussions and some of the factors that shaped the recommendations. Perhaps some of them will be helpful.

A misconception

I think a common misconception is that implementation of the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan should have been tied to an unproblematic endorsement of the wolf kill program begun in 1992. This is not true. The Plan did not, nor could it ever, give the government of the day permission to go ahead with their preferred

program. All it did was lay out preconditions that would need to be met before a wolf kill could be considered. In the end, the final decision always rests on elected officials to make a judgement based on their perceptions of the social and environmental mores at a given place and time; a policy cannot do this. For this reason, it was never a contradiction for anyone to support the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan and still oppose the wolf kill. (I can explain this in more detail if anyone is interested).

Limitation

I think the biggest limitation to the effectiveness of the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan was in its implementation. Once it was signed and delivered there seemed to be little interest in having the planning team involved in interpreting the intentions of the plan and advising on its implementation. This could have been helpful, as I will describe in what follows.

I would primarily attribute this to a serious misjudgement of public sentiment on the part of the government of the day. It seemed that the first parts of the Plan to be implemented carefully were those that most suited the government's agenda, which certainly included implementing a wolf kill. To understand the problem this created it is worth considering a key point in the letter by the Wolf Conservation Management Team that accompanied the Plan itself.

Unfortunately this letter is not typically reproduced though it was included in the original document submitted to the Minister. A key portion says:

We should make it clear that all of the provisions of the Plan have been the subject of detailed discussions and widespread public input, and there is little or no room left for changes without upsetting the delicate balance which allowed us to reach consensus.

I think this remains true today. For every scenario that could lead to consideration of a wolf kill there were additional recommendations designed to reinforce respect for wolves and their intrinsic value. It is, indeed, a fine balance.

I believe that if the recommendations conveying this respect were implemented at the same time as the wolf kill, and with as much conviction and gusto, some of the criticism of the wolf kill would have been muted. Not to do this lies squarely at the feet of the government of the day.

To be fair, a great many of these recommendations have been implemented over the longer term and I am quite sure that they have contributed to better understanding of wolves and the ecosystems they live in, and to shifting perspectives about wolf values. Many individuals in the Department of Renewable Resources/Environment are to be commended for their persistence.

Conclusion

It hasn't been my intention to discuss the whole plan. I did want to share my impression of the tone and intent of the plan and something about the way compromises were achieved.

I also wanted to underscore the precautionary nature of the plan, and the importance of Recommendation 7.1. I hope that this will remain in tact and that any revisions will be weighted with the same concern for respecting wolves that permeated the work of the original Wolf Conservation and Management Planning Team.

I would be happy to the further discuss the original plan and reasoning behind the decisions if that would be useful.

Yours sincerely,

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