



The fear of

Norway, like most countries in western and northern Europe, exterminated its wolves during the 19th and early 20th centuries using all means possible. Hunting, trapping, poison, and high bounty payments were weapons used in this process. By the time wolves were protected in 1971 they were extinct in Norway, and maybe only a single pack survived in Sweden. With the help of some few immigrants from Finland this pack has grown to the present number of around 120 wolves. Most of these are in southern Sweden, but a few packs are found in southern Norway. These wolves live in forested areas where people also live, farm, hunt and work. Their return has brought about a wide range of conflicts. Much focus has been directed at the human/wolf conflict involving sheep depredation, but it has become obvious that fear is widespread among people. Parents have stopped letting their children walk to school or play in the forest, and this fear has been used as a powerful argument by the anti-carnivore groups. Local people did not believe the scientists, managers and conservationists who tried to allay their fears by saying that wolves were not dangerous. The statement by the famous American wolf expert, David Mech that "there is no documented case of a healthy wolf killing a human being in North America in the 20th century" was often quoted trying to calm people. Instead of helping, this process led to a serious conflict of knowledge - between the "experts" on one side, and local people on the other.

In 2001, the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment commissioned us to write a report about wolf-attacks on people. The idea was to review all the existing information and evaluate the real risks associated with wolves. The hope was that this would once and for all resolve the issue. During 2001, I contacted most of the scientists working with wolves throughout Europe and together we dug through mountains of literature. We combed through the ecological, medical, veterinary and historical literature, and contacted a wide range of knowledgeable people from all walks of life. The result of this years work was a good overview of the situation from North America, Europe and Asia, stretching back almost 500 years.

So, what did we find? We found nothing to contradict the precise wording of the statement by David Mech, however; we found

plenty of cases of wolves, both healthy and non-healthy, having attacked and killed people throughout Europe and Asia, and even cases of people being badly attacked, but not-killed in North America.

The most dramatic cases were those caused by wolves with rabies. While rabid animals, including wolves, may be a familiar thing for people living in eastern Europe, rabies is absent from large areas of western, northern and central Europe today, and we have forgotten about it. The old stories about rabid wolves were quite stunning: a wolf would run into a village attacking and biting anybody or any animal in its way, before running on to the next village, or until it was cornered and killed by villagers. In its wake could be anything up to 30-40 people and the same number of animals, all at risk of developing rabies. Unless treated early rabies is 100% fatal, and those bitten by rabid wolves are at high risk of developing the disease because of the severity of the bites. Many were killed outright by their wounds. What was amazing is that the stories were almost identical from the last 400 years of history, whether they came from Germany in the 16th century, France in the 18th century, or China, Russia, Iran or India in the 20th century. In the days before effective vaccination the idea of a rabid wolf must have indeed been terrifying, and it is easy to see where our cultural fear of wolves comes from. Presently in Europe these attacks are very rare, although some people still get bitten by rabid wolves, including in Latvia where several people have been attacked in recent years. Luckily the treatments are now much more effective.

We also found cases of where people had been attacked, and killed, by wolves that did not have rabies. In many of these cases it appeared that the wolf or wolves regarded people as prey. Many of these cases were clustered in space and time such that there was a sequence of attacks within a small area, indicating that man-eating was a special behaviour that a single wolf, or wolf pack learned. From the 18th and 19th century we found evidence for such attacks from many parts of Europe, including Estonia, Holland, Italy, France, Sweden, Finland and Norway. However; in the 20th century there were very few predatory attacks. The only recent ones that we found evidence for were in Russia after World War II and in Spain in the 1960s.

The howl of the wolf on a cold winters night is a ghostly sound. It invokes different feelings in all those that hear it. For some people it is just a part of the natural background noise from the forest and therefore not deserving of a second thought. For others it is a symbol of wilderness or beauty. And for others it brings the promise of an exciting hunt in the morning. In many areas it also invokes fear. This is especially true in places where the wolf has been absent for long periods. During this absence people have forgotten how to live with wolves, and have lost the experience with them; filling the space with the wildest fantasies.



wolves – is it justified?

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In all these cases the pattern was similar; and very different to that observed for the rabies attacks. The victims were almost entirely children, they were generally killed singly, with several days or weeks between attacks, and in many cases the victims were eaten.

It would be easy to dismiss these controversial cases as being unproven if it had not been for recent studies in India. In the last 20 years there have been several very well studied episodes where wolves have taken to attacking and killing children in central India. The attacks have been investigated by biologists and there is no doubt that wolves were responsible for killing over 100 children. The details of these cases are identical to those from historical sources in Europe. All the cases in present day India and historical Europe have several things in common. Firstly, they occurred in environments where wild prey were almost totally absent, forcing wolves to survive on livestock and garbage. This would bring them into close contact with people, and children were often used as shepherds. Secondly, the environments were those where people lived in relative poverty, which always exposes people to greater risks. Interestingly as wild prey populations have recovered throughout Europe wolf attacks have become a thing of the past.

A final category of attack has appeared in North America in recent years, where wolves in protected areas have become so habituated to humans that they have attacked people. In Algonquin Provincial Park and Vargas Island National Park people have been attacked in recent years.

On the whole it is clear that wolves do not normally attack people. To find the cases that we compiled we have had to search through several hundred years of history. However, it is clear that under some circumstances wolves can attack and kill people. These

circumstances include, wolves with rabies, wolves living in extremely artificial environments with no natural prey, and some extreme cases in protected populations. The general risk in Europe today is so small it is impossible to calculate, although historically it must have been rather different.

So...what effect did this report have in Norway? We released it at a press conference with a huge media presence. They reported many of the gruesome examples and our general conclusions. We expected the results to really whip up a storm of hysteria...but in fact the opposite happened. Everybody calmed down. There was no longer a debate about how dangerous wolves were for people. The public felt that scientists and wildlife managers had understood that wolves could be dangerous. Although the conclusion was not that "wolves were not dangerous" the results were calming because it lessened the gap between the "scientific knowledge" and the beliefs of local people. The previous gap was so large that people had filled it with their worst nightmares. Now, everybody had a "truth" that they could accept. In other words the uncertainty about the danger was far more scary for people than the truth.

This fact is reflected in bears. Everybody knows that bears can attack people if you are unlucky enough to surprise them in the wrong way, or injure them when hunting. The risk is real, but people do not get hysterical about it, they just accept it. There is a lesson here when it comes to the conflicts associated with wolves. Many of these conflicts are not directly about the wolves. They are about the symbol of the wolf. To rural people the wolf has become a symbol of the central government interfering in their lives, a symbol of the conflict over values associated with nature, beliefs and even different types of knowledge. This is very

unfortunate for the wolf. Wolves just want to carry on being wolves, and doing wolf things. This does not make them saints, and it does not make them devils. It just makes them wolves, and like all wolves, they like to howl at the moon sometimes.

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