Call of the wild

After millennia spent exterminating them, humanity is protecting wolves. Numbers have risen again—and so have ancient resentments

IN AUGUST 2011 Desiree Versteeg, a Dutch mortuarist, was driving home in the suburbs of Arnhem in the eastern Netherlands when she saw an animal in the road. "At first I thought it was a dog. Then I thought it was a fox. Then—I couldn't believe my eyes—I saw it was a wolf." She got out of the car to take a picture. "I was seven or eight metres away from him. He couldn't get away because a fence was blocking his path. He turned and stared at me. That was a frightening moment." Both she and the wolf fled.

From Ms Versteeg's photographs, and from the carcass of a deer found nearby—its throat torn out in classic wolf fashion—scientists verified that she was the first person to have seen a wolf in the Netherlands since 1897. Having talked to the experts, she now understands that the wolf was probably more frightened than she was. "But all you know at the time is: it's a wolf, it's a predator and I'm in its way."

Ms Versteeg's experience illustrates a dramatic reversal that has taken place in the West over the past couple of decades. Economic change has led to a fundamental shift in humanity's attitude to wolves. For the first time since man first sharpened a spear, he has stopped trying to exterminate them and taken to protecting them instead. The effort has been so successful that wolves are recolonising areas from which they disappeared as much as a century ago. As they do so, they are forging revealing divisions over whether mankind can live side-by-side with the species it replaced as the Western world's top predator.

State v wolf

Most man-made extinctions have been accidental—the result of over-hunting, or importing predators or diseases. Wolves are different. Through most of human history, killing them has been regarded as a public good. As soon as anything that looked like a state developed, it set about exterminating wolves.

In England King Edgar imposed an annual tribute of 300 wolf skins on Idwal, king of Wales, in 960; monarchs made land grants on condition that the beneficiaries carried out wolf hunts; King Edward I employed a wolf-hunter-in-chief to clear central and western England of wolves. By the end of the 15th century they seem to have disappeared from England, though in Scotland they hung on a little longer: in 1563 Mary Queen of Scots had 2,000 Highlanders drive the woods of Atholl for a hunt that bagged 360 deer and five wolves.

America's original settlers, then, had no previous experience of wolves. The dense lupine population in the forests along the eastern seaboard in the New World, for which the colonists' livestock was a walking buffet, made a tough life harder still. Towns set generous bounties for wolves. In 1643 in Ipswich, Massachusetts, for instance, the reward for killing a wolf in a trap was five shillings; for killing one with a dog, it was 20s. Colonists devised imaginative ways of getting rid of them: John Josselyn, an English traveller, reported that locals would tie two fish-hooks together, dip them in tallow, and leave them out for wolves to swallow.

Boston's last specimen was killed in 1657, but elsewhere on the east coast wolves lived on in enclaves through the 18th century. Farther west they remained a serious threat for much longer. In 1848, shortly after the Mormons arrived in Salt Lake Valley, Thomas Bullock reported that "the wolves made things hideous with their continuous howls"; in 1850, 15% of Utah's budget went on wolf bounties. In the 20th century the federal government took on the job, and by 1970—largely through the use of poison—had wiped wolves out everywhere except Alaska and a pocket of northern Minnesota. ▸▸

In western Europe, being hunted to death was not wolves' only problem: they also suffered from shrinking habitat. As the human population rose, people chopped down the forests for firewood and ate the deer and boar on which the wolves had fed. As they lost out in the tussle with people, wolves were exterminated, progressively, from the Benelux countries, France, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and West Germany. Small numbers survived in Italy and Spain.

Then sometime in the mid-to-late 20th century, things started to change. In Europe urbanisation, industrialisation and rising incomes led peasants to abandon their farms and move to cities. Land that had once been converted from heath or forest to fields reverted to its wild state. In some places—such as Alpine areas, where trees help protect people from avalanches—governments encouraged reforestation. The process is still going on: in the past two decades the forested area of western Europe has increased by around 7%.

Although man domesticated his best friend from the species at least 15,000 years ago, he has long regarded the wolf as his worst enemy

At the same time as habitat suitable for wolves expanded, so did the food supply. These days people eat from supermarket shelves rather than from the land, so deer and wild boar are no longer shot for the pot. Hunters' groups have helped restore the populations of these animals, and more quarry for hunters also means more food for wolves.

It wasn't just the physical environment that was changing. On both sides of the Atlantic, attitudes were shifting too.

The howl of nature

Although man domesticated his best friend from the species at least 15,000 years ago, he has long regarded the wolf as his worst enemy. The wolf prowls through stories—Red Riding Hood, Peter and the Wolf, the Norse myth of the beast that will swallow the sun at Ragnarok—as the embodiment of evil.

In a way, it is odd that the wolf should be mankind's *bête noire.* Bears, which get a far better press, are more dangerous. Disturb a bear and it may turn on you; disturb a wolf and it will run away. Presumably competition explains this ancient hatred. Once people took to raising animals, wolves competed with them more directly than any other creature. A pack of wolves will happily kill hundreds of sheep in an hour. In communities whose livelihood goes about on four legs, wolves and people are not compatible.

This rivalry has spawned awful cruelty. In 1814 John James Audubon, one of America's great naturalists, recorded watching a farmer in Ohio hoist trapped wolves out of a pit he had dug for them and, for his and Audubon's amusement, cut their tendons and set his dogs upon them to see how long they would last. Audubon regarded it as fine entertainment.

Yet around the middle of the 20th century sentiment started to change. First came a shift in conservationist thinking, illustrated by the life and writings of Aldo Leopold, father of the American environmental movement.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries environmentalists believed that because predators killed other animals, conservation was best served by killing them—a view that fit the economic imperative of the times. Leopold, employed by the Forest Service to kill wolves and other predators in New Mexico, was part of that effort.

But he grew concerned about the consequences of this campaign. In "The Sand County Almanac", first published in 1949 and probably the best-selling environmentalist book ever, he wrote, "I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn." The campaign to destroy wolves, he believed, was destroying America's landscape.

Conservationists were not the only ones who began to reconsider. So did the general public. As people moved to towns, attitudes to nature moved from utilitarian to romantic.

In America the idea of manifest destiny—that conquering territory previously controlled by savages and wild beasts was a moral duty—fell out of favour. Growing evidence of environmental damage fuelled the belief that while mankind was busy getting rich, it was ruining its most precious asset. Progress came to seem like the opposite. And as the world turned upside down, so vermin became victim. "Wolves are the antithesis of civilisation," says Doug Smith, head of the wolf programme at Yellowstone National Park. "They represent the wilderness we have lost."

In Europe, according to Marie-Odile Guth, former director of nature conservation at the French environment ministry, wolves arouse feelings not so much of guilt as of longing. "People are tired of urban life. The wolf represents a return to natural life. It's attractive, and at the same time it's a little bit frightening." Thus economic development has both enhanced the wolf's charms and put an end to the competition that once set mankind against it.

Changing public attitudes brought legislation—in America the Endangered Species Act of 1973, in Europe the Bern Convention of 1979 and the Habitats Directive of 1992—designed to prevent the extinction of the many species that were under the cosh. And in America the idea of reintroducing wolves to Yellowstone took hold. Proposed by conservationists, it turned out to have widespread popular support; so in 1995, 14 grey wolves were captured in Canada and released in Yellowstone and nearby Idaho.

In Europe, encouraged by a combination of protection and mankind's retreat to the cities, the wolves returned naturally. They spread across the Alps from Italy into France, where the first was spotted in 1992; from Finland into Sweden, where they were identified in 1977; from Poland to Germany in the 1990s, and thence, in 2011, to the Netherlands and Belgium.

The wolves were not alone in benefiting from the legislation and the landscape changes. Other large predators started to recover too. The lynx, endangered in Europe, is now recovering fast. America's grizzly bear population has grown from 500 in the 1970s to 1,500 now. Brown bears are clinging on in some bits of western Europe, such as the Pyrenees, and flourishing in other parts, such as Sweden, where the population has risen from 370 in 1966 to 3,500 now.

Compared with slow-moving bears, wolves are adaptable, adventurous creatures that breed and spread fast. Their packs operate over a territory of 250-400 square kilometres; fully-grown pups leave the pack and travel up to 1,000km in search of their own territory and a mate. Using their DNA, which can be extracted from their scat, and radio-tracking collars, scientists have logged some extraordinary journeys. A wolf from south-west of Turin lived around Bonn for a year; two Italian wolves were found to be living in the Pyrenees; a Slovenian wolf travelled through Austria and into Italy where he eventually settled down with a mate near Verona. Italians were entranced by the romance of their lupine Romeo and Juliet—which came to a sad end when the female was run over by a car.

Wolf numbers are now growing in most of western Europe. But the population rebound is most dramatic in America, where the combination of protection and a sparse human population suits them perfectly. In the Rocky Mountains, since the wolf's rein-

troduction in 1995, the population has grown to 1,700-2,000; in the Great Lakes, where it never entirely disappeared, it has gone from 750 to 4,000 over the same period.

Some scientists credit the wolf with a dramatic ecological impact. Yellowstone's elk population has fallen from about 20,000 before the wolves arrived to 5,000 now. Bison and beavers are thriving on the resulting vegetation. The grizzly bears that scavenge the wolf kills are having a fine time. Willow and aspen have recovered along the banks of rivers; as the bushes grow into trees, the songbirds that like to live in them are flourishing.

Yet outside nature reserves the wolf's ecological effects are blurred by man, and the case for protecting it must be made on other grounds. "It's a bit like gender equality," says Guillaume Chapron of the Grimso Wildlife Research Station in Sweden. "We support it not because it is economically efficient, but because we are a modern society which believes that women should have the same rights as men. Similarly, we believe that a modern wealthy society can share its landscape with other species."

Not everybody agrees. Where humans were once united in their determination to eradicate the wolf, they are now sharply divided over its return.

The wolf's supporters do not care for the species as much as its opponents hate it

Bobos in love

On both sides of the Atlantic the wolf's supporters are in a majority. They include disproportionate numbers of young people, women and city dwellers. By and large, the farther away people live from wolves, the more they like them. The big exception is Native Americans, who live close to them and respect them. Wolves feature in their mythology as man's creator or brother and, according to Chris McGeshick of the Mole Lake Band of the Chippewa tribe in the Great Lakes area, the Indians see their fate as linked to the wolf's: "We're doing better, we're exercising our rights, we're getting back to where we were before the Europeans arrived. As the wolf gets stronger, so do the tribal people."

Environmental and animal-welfare organisations are leading the fight to keep the wolf protected. They have generous supporters, for whom the wolf is totemic. When Defenders of Wildlife polls its 1m members about the species they care about, the wolf always comes out top, according to Jamie Rappaport Clark, its president and a former director of the federal government's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). That makes lobbying for the wolf a priority: "Our members expect a return on their investment."

But the wolf's supporters do not care for it as much as its opponents hate it, and they have good reason to. In 2009, the worst year for her since the wolf's reintroduction, Kim Baker, a rancher in Montana, suffered seven confirmed wolf kills, 12 head of cattle missing and yearlings that, worn down by harassment, weighed in at an average of 710lb (322kg) instead of the expected 770lb. She calculates the total losses that year at around $42,000. "Sometimes it gets pretty doggone depressing. If you could see what the wolves leave...We don't raise our cattle to be tortured." Photographs show savaged dogs and cattle with their rumps chewed off. Ranchers get compensation for losses; but Ms Baker says that, because of the difficulty of proving that a wolf was to blame, the pay-offs make up for only 10% of her losses.

In Europe conflict between wolves and farmers has been sharpest in France, where heavy subsidies still sustain agriculture in marginal areas. Joseph Jouffrey, president of the shepherds' association in the Hautes-Alpes, says that one of his neighbours recently lost 67 sheep. Around 5,000 were killed by wolves in the whole of France last year, up from around 1,500 five years ago. As in America, farmers say the compensation does not cover their losses. There have been anti-wolf demonstrations and arson attacks in the national park where they first appeared, and death threats against the park's staff.

In the fight against the wolves, hunters tend to side with the ranchers and shepherds (see box on next page). Moose-hunting in Sweden is an important part of rural life, says Gunnar Gloersen, a hunter from Varmland in mid-Sweden. Every year 100,000 moose are shot, partly to protect pine trees, whose young shoots moose eat, and partly for sport. Even the schools and the police stations close on a moose-hunting day. Wolves disrupt shooting by slaughtering around 5,000-10,000 moose a year and, more importantly, by killing hunting dogs. The costs of losing a dog are not just emotional: a well-trained *jamthund* is worth €10,000 ($13,000). The presence of wolves reduces the value of hunting rights and, according to Mr Gloersen, costs landowners in his part of Sweden around €50m a year.

The division between the wolves' opponents and supporters is cultural as well as economic. While supporters regard themselves as caring for the planet, opponents see themselves as in touch with the earth. Pierre de Boisguilbert, the general secretary of France's Société de Vènerie (hunting with hounds), characterises the wolf's supporters as "bobos"—bourgeois-bohemians, a disparaging term for urban left-wingers. "The bobos love the wolf. They'll never see one, but the idea of the wolf is great."

In America, the argument over the wolf's protected status escalated into a full-blown political battle. Wolf numbers swiftly hit ▸▸

the FWS's (modest) target of 100 wolves per state, so in 2002 it started talking about removing their protection. To stop this happening, the environmental and animal-rights organisations took the federal government to court. As judges deliberated, and more cases were brought, the wolf population rocketed, and hunters and ranchers got increasingly angry. In 2011 Congress lost patience and legislated to override the courts and "delist" the wolves. They are now fair game in all the Rocky Mountain and Great Lakes states where they are present.

What will happen to America's wolf population is not clear. The states are trying to cut their numbers to the FWS's original targets. Some conservationists think populations of those sizes are too small to be sustainable, and that the wolf risks being wiped out again; others say the animals are now too numerous to be culled to the target levels. Dave Mech, senior research scientist with the United States Geological Survey, says the wolf population is too large to be controlled by "fair-chase" hunting (without the use of aircraft or poison). What is clearer is the damage that the explosion of wolf numbers has done to conservation, by turning those whose livelihoods have suffered against environmental legislation. "Our biggest enemy", says Ms Baker, the rancher, "has been the Endangered Species Act."

In Europe wolves still receive strict protection from the EU Habitats Directive. The commission took Finland to court in 2005 for allowing too much hunting, and is now pursuing a similar case against Sweden, although there is widespread recognition that the wolf's growing numbers are a problem. Culling is allowed only in tiny numbers: in France, for instance, 11 wolves may be harvested this year. Yet they have spread as far west as the Massif Central, where there are lots of people, and lots of sheep. "If the wolves get there in significant numbers, it will be a nightmare," says Luigi Boitani, head of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's working group on large carnivores in Europe.

Mankind's relationship with the wolf has always been difficult, and lupine politics must be delicately managed. But although this divisive canine still has too many enemies for its survival to be taken for granted, history is on its side. In most of the world, agriculture's share of economic output is shrinking, the rural population is falling and people are drifting ever farther from the soil. These days wolves are little more to most humans than a reminder of a wilder past they have put behind them, but which still tugs at their souls. ■

Wolves and hunters

Killing them softly

Are hunters the problem, or the solution?

WHEN wolf-hunting resumed in Idaho in 2009, Robert Millage, an estate agent, bagged the first wolf killed in the lower 48 states since the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973. The photo he posted on the internet (below) set off a blizzard of hostility. One commenter wrote, "your family and friends will be targeted and eliminated as you killed one of our brothers"; another inquired, "make you feel a little compensated for your small dick, you red-neck punk?"

Among those who want wolves to flourish, such hostility is understandable. Hunting helped drive wolves to the edge of extinction in America and western Europe. Hunters angered by the proliferating wolves' impact on elk and other shootable species were behind the campaign to get them "delisted" in America. "Hunting has declined, and people are really mad," says Doug Smith, head of Yellowstone's wolf project. "It's been a shitstorm." Along with the livestock industry, the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus, supported by the hunters'-rights wing of the National Rifle Association, drove Congress to act.

The idea that hunting and conservation are incompatible is not only widespread among environmentalists: it also influences policy. When the French government decided that wolves should be culled, "the minister wanted it done by technicians not hunters," according to Marie-Odile Guth, formerly of the French environment ministry. "The hunters would have taken a certain pleasure in killing a protected species," she explains. "It didn't conform to the ethics of animal protection."

Hunters regard such talk as plain silly. According to Pierre de Boisguilbert of France's Société de Vènerie (hunting with hounds), "They sent 30 civil servants to kill one wolf. This is an absolutely *idiote* situation." Hunters, he says, would do the job more cheaply and with great enthusiasm. "It is ten times more passionate to kill a wolf than a bear or a boar." American hunters are keen, too. This year, when Wisconsin opened its first wolf-hunting season in decades, 20,272 people applied for 1,160 licences.

Allowing hunters to cull wolves is evidently in the hunters' interest. But it may also, perversely, be in the wolf's—not as an individual, obviously, but as a species.

Without game there is no hunting, so recreational hunters are intrinsically conservationist. The Swedish Hunters' Association, for instance, was founded in 1836 with the aim of building up moose numbers. At the time, there were 300 moose in Sweden. Now there are 200,000-300,000.

Where wolves are fully protected, they are competition for hunters, who therefore have no interest in their survival. But when they become quarry, "hunters have a clear incentive to make the species common," says Angus Middleton of the European Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation.

And letting hunters kill some of them makes the politics of protecting them easier. The anti-wolf camp is made up of livestock farmers and hunters. Hunters tend to be richer than farmers, and greatly outnumber them: in France, there are around 1.25m, in America there are 13.6m and rising. Converting them, by allowing limited amounts of killing, can help protect wolves. The Finnish government tried to do that by issuing hunting licences when its wolf population started to rise in the early 2000s. Then the European Commission took it to court, hunting was banned once more—and poaching rocketed.

Permitting some hunting can also mitigate the sense of powerlessness felt by people told they can do nothing to protect themselves from wild beasts. "It makes them feel they're not passive recipients of whatever wolves and bears do to them," says John Linnell of the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research. "In small populations, hunting is inappropriate, but where there's a big population, you don't need the protection of every individual."

But uniting hunters and greens is tough. The idea that they are on the same side makes sense, but feels wrong. And in man's relations with wolf, feelings matter.