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Education and public involvement for wolves in Utah

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Wolves in Utah

fashion, and involve a concerted effort to involve livestock producers in each step of the process.

7. Education and Public Involvement

7.1. Wolf Education Programs

The goals of a Utah wolf education program should be to provide science-based, factual information about wolf ecology and management. Wolf management issues are likely to be highly publicized and volatile, and it is important that the information being disseminated is accurate and consistent with the goals of the agencies involved. Educational programs should be multifaceted and address all of the relevant issues. We recommend a program that educates the public about wolf-related issues and concerns in Utah in order to compliment viewpoints based on common myths (both pro and con), as well as on personal opinions, experiences, and biases. If such a program is implemented, people should become more knowledgeable and objective about wolves and wolf management in Utah.

We recognize that particular audiences have unique educational needs. For example:

- Campers should know what to do to prevent negative interactions with wolves and how to avoid attracting wolves to their campsites.
- Hikers may want to be able to identify wolf tracks and howls.
- Hunters will need to know what they can do when they encounter a wolf.
- Ranchers will need to know different preventative measures that they could take in order to reduce livestock predation.
- The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources should know the attitudes of Utahns toward wolves.

Education programs should be a collaborative effort between agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders. One of the most important aspects of an education program that is targeted toward a controversial topic is that people agree on the information being taught. An effective education program should consider all sides of the issues involved and include information from the different stakeholders that participate.

Although there are many unique educational needs, there are also educational themes that pertain to many audiences, including:

- **General wolf ecology.** In order to discuss wolf management we believe stakeholders should have fundamental knowledge of wolf foraging habits, social structure, and behavior, as well as their role in Utah's ecosystems.

- **Wolf identification.** Information designed to assist the public in identifying wolves in the wild should be made readily available. Wolves, wolf-dog hybrids, coyotes, and domestic dogs can be similar in appearance; however, they have different levels of legal protection and are managed differently. Although distinguishing wolves from wolf hybrids, and even from some breeds of domestic dogs, is difficult even for experts, we think that an effective education program could at least ensure that people are able to accurately distinguish wolves from coyotes.
- **Wolf management options.** Wolves, like other large carnivores that live in close proximity to humans, are managed. Management actions (e.g., lethal vs. non-lethal control) can be contentious. However, the success of a recolonizing wolf population in Utah may be contingent on certain management actions that are controversial. Therefore, stakeholders should understand all the issues involved with various management options.
- **Perceptions toward wolves.** Many Old World stories and myths have influenced people's perceptions that wolves are a threat to human life. Although there have been occasional wolf attacks on people, the perceived risk is much greater than the actual risk. In fact, there has never been a documented case in North America in which a healthy wolf has killed a human (Carbyn, 1987). An education program should help counter these unfounded myths, while recognizing the potential for dangerous interactions, and providing information on how to minimize the danger.
- **Current legal status.** Currently, wolves in the West are an endangered species and there are a number of legal restrictions that arise from this designation. People should be aware of these restrictions as well as any future changes that may occur.
- **Wolf population size and distribution.** Utahns should be able to access timely and accurate information on wolf population status throughout the state.
- **Ways to reduce potential conflicts with wolves.** Utahns should be able to acquire information on ways to reduce conflicts (e.g., livestock, pets, hunting opportunities) with wolves.
- **Opportunities to obtain information.** If Utahns want or need information concerning wolves, it should be available through a variety of sources, including:
 - Pamphlets
 - Regularly issued publications
 - Public meetings
 - Videos
 - Website
 - Traveling display

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- Education centers
- Toll free hotline

As not all people get information from the same sources, a variety of techniques for providing information need to be incorporated in a comprehensive education program. Sources listed above should be evaluated to determine their success in delivering information.

The purpose of any Utah wolf education program should not be to persuade Utahns to think one way or another, but rather to increase people's knowledge of wolves and wolf management, as well as to eliminate myths and unfounded fears. In order for a management plan to be effective, education needs to be an integral part of that plan. Thus, education programs must be available, of high quality, and objective for Utahns.

7.2. Public Involvement

Part of the resistance to wolf recolonization in Utah, and in much of the West, is due to a deeply ingrained and long-held distrust of the federal government. To overcome this distrust and maintain support for management programs, an extensive public-involvement system will be required. Perhaps more significant in public involvement than the collection of site-specific data and ideas is the perception of fairness it nurtures. This "procedural justice" greatly enhances acceptance of an outcome, because the participants feel that the process used to reach the conclusion was fair (Lawrence et al., 1997). Prior to any natural recolonization on the part of the wolf, state agencies should conduct an extensive public input solicitation program, and integrate the results into a region-specific planning process. Furthermore, public input should be solicited on a regular, ongoing basis in the future to identify emerging issues and opportunities for conflict resolution once wolves are established.

Utah's existing wildlife management institutions, especially the Wildlife Board and Regional Advisory Councils, remain largely invisible to the general public and are weighted heavily in favor of hunting and agricultural interests (Krannich and Teel, 1999). Whatever mechanism is established to provide public input regarding wolf management, efforts should be made to eliminate real and perceived institutional biases. Given the controversial nature of the wolf debate, we recommend that the Division of Wildlife Resources develop a philosophically and politically balanced Wolf Advisory Committee that would solicit input from scientists, managers, ranchers, hunters, wolf advocates, and other interested parties. Although wolf management involves economics, politics, and sociological issues, its core must be based on biology. Therefore, we recommend that the committee include an adequate number of wildlife biologists as members (at least 25%). The primary functions of the Wolf Advisory Committee should be to develop both short and long-term management objectives and goals to be considered by the Division of Wildlife Resources, the Regional Advisory Councils, and the Wildlife Board.

For the Wolf Advisory Committee to be successful, it should be independent, have a clearly articulated mission, and sufficient support from the Division of Wildlife

Resources. In terms of soliciting public input, we further recommend the following guidelines:

- **Clearly defined scope.** The purpose of this process should not be to debate whether wolves should be in Utah, but rather to determine how best to manage wolves for the citizens of Utah. Although various stakeholders may hold differing opinions on whether the presence of wolves in Utah is desirable, our recommendations are targeted at the development of a management plan.
- **Early and often.** A major complaint regarding the public participation policies of government agencies is that the public is invited after the decision has, in reality if not officially, already been made. Since wolf recolonization is imminent, it is imperative that this process begins now to guarantee that public input is included in all stages of the development of any management plan.
- **Multiple methods.** A passive, open-door approach to public participation may result in a self-selecting process that tends to skew the input toward those having the time, strong interest, and ability to respond (Decker and Chase, 1997). To reach the greatest possible cross-section of interests, and to avoid possible response biases associated with a particular format (e.g., open houses, surveys), a combination of methods should be used.
- **Addressing issues.** A legitimate public participation process requires that a sincere effort be made to address all of the issues raised.