

# Wolves Remain at Risk as Hunters and Their State-Level Allies Call the Shots

<https://truthout.org/articles/wolves-remain-at-risk-as-hunters-and-their-state-level-allies-call-the-shots/>

In case you missed it, in February, hunters killed more than 200 wolves in Wisconsin in three days. When the smoke cleared, at least 20 percent of the state's wolves were dead.

It started when the Trump administration removed federal protections for wolves in January, triggering a Wisconsin law which *requires* that a wolf hunt be held beginning in November and running through February, or until the quota of killed wolves is reached. Wildlife managers dutifully began planning a hunt for the fall, but a hunting group sued and a judge said that the killing needed to get started immediately.

More than 27,000 people jumped at the chance to get one of roughly 2,400 available permits. The hunt was supposed to last a week but the wolves didn't stand a chance. A reported 216 wolves were killed, blowing past the quota by 82 percent. Most of the wolves were killed by hunters patrolling roads looking for wolf tracks in the snow, and then releasing radio-collared dogs to run them down. It was wolf mating season, so it's a safe assumption that many of the wolves killed were pregnant or caring for pups already born.

Let's call this "hunt" what it was — a slaughter. Ethical hunters eat what they kill. Nobody eats wolves. Maybe some pelts were kept as trophies or rugs. The fact is, most of these smart animals were killed simply because a lot of people want to put a bullet in a wolf, and states like Wisconsin are happy to accommodate them.

Of course, the usual justifications for the hunt were put forth. Wolves, it was said, needed to be killed to reduce attacks on livestock, or to increase deer populations, or simply to keep them from running amok. None of these reasons is supported by modern science.

The number of wolf attacks on livestock and pets in 2020 in Wisconsin was miniscule — [less than 100](#). Even if that number were higher, [studies](#) show that killing wolves randomly wherever hunters can find them is not an ineffective way to reduce conflicts with livestock. As for Wisconsin's [1 million plus](#) deer, predation by wolves is insignificant compared to the more than 300,000 deer [taken](#) by hunters each year. The idea that wolves need to be killed by humans to keep their numbers from growing out of control is one of the big lies in wildlife management today. [Research](#) shows that top carnivores like wolves regulate their own numbers through actions, such as defending territories and restricting breeding to the alpha pair.

There are plenty of reasons *not* to kill wolves. They keep game populations healthy by preying on the sick and infirm. They can [reduce](#) the prevalence of Lyme disease and other diseases. They shape ecosystems in ways that [benefit](#) a host of species, from songbirds to beavers. They are intelligent, [family-oriented](#) creatures.

But even if none of these things were true, there is another reason: it is wrong. Wolves have a right to live, and don't deserve to die because some people, whether out of fear, hatred, sadism or misplaced anger at urban elites, want to kill them.

The Wisconsin wolf debacle reveals the ugly nature of wildlife management in the U.S. today. It was an act of extreme injustice sanctioned by a system in which such acts have long been the norm. The system is controlled by the tiny minority ([4 percent](#)) of Americans who hunt, a group that [tends](#) to be older white men with conservative values that skew toward a view of wild animals as resources to be dominated and exploited rather than sentient beings with intrinsic rights to exist. Not all hunters hold these views, of course, but certainly many wolf shooters do.

Hunters have long had a stranglehold on wildlife governance. In every state, wildlife policy is shaped by appointed commissions populated mostly by hunters. Wildlife agency staff are often hunters themselves who

have been steeped in the “hook and bullet” dogma that wild animals cannot be left to their own devices, but must instead be “managed” (i.e., controlled), usually through the violence of hunting and trapping.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of Americans who do not hunt, and the values they [tend](#) to hold of coexistence and respect for animals, are excluded when it comes to making decisions about how wild animals ought to be treated.

One would think that bringing more compassion and democracy to our dealings with wild animals would be higher on the progressive agenda, but that is not the case. For whatever reason, perhaps out of fear of rural voters, or the NRA, or the ordinary speciesism that is so rampant in our society, Democrats have ceded control of wildlife issues to conservatives.

This is evident in the membership of the Congressional Sportsmen’s Caucus (CSC), a pro-hunting, pro-gun group whose positions on a wide range of issues are difficult to square with a broader justice agenda. CSC [supports](#) a slew of controversial practices that the public finds objectionable, such as trapping, using dogs to hunt bears, and wildlife killing contests, which the CSC describes as “[time-honored traditions](#).”

CSC is unabashedly anti-democratic. It labels anyone who questions the status quo in wildlife management as “[anti-hunting](#)” and opposes the appointment of nonhunters to wildlife commissions. It promotes “right to hunt” laws that enshrine hunting as the preferred way to manage wildlife. It applauded the Wisconsin wolf hunt as “[successful](#),” and reaffirmed its support for state control of wildlife management.

One would not expect progressives to be part of such a group, yet they comprise a fifth of the CSC’s [membership](#), including such prominent leaders as Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) and Bennie Thompson (D-Mississippi).

It’s time for progressives to embrace the fight for wildlife and recognize the systemic inequities in wildlife management in the U.S. In what other social justice arenas would they stand with the group that seeks to retain its privilege through policies intended to marginalize and brutalize? It is wolves that need our protection, not the people who shoot them. Justice for all means justice for all.

There is hope that the Biden administration will reinstate federal protection for wolves under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) before more wolves die in Wisconsin and other states like [Michigan](#), where (mostly) Republicans are pushing for hunts. Wolf delisting is one of many Trump environmental rollbacks currently under review. Meanwhile, wildlife advocates are [challenging](#) the delisting in court.

But the on-again, off-again protection of the ESA is not a long-term solution. Wolves will never be safe as long as hunters and their allies at the state level call the shots.

Grassroots activists in a growing number of states are agitating for reforms that would give nonhunters a greater voice in wildlife decisions. Federal action could give these efforts a tremendous boost. One possibility is using federal funds to incentivize change through vehicles like the [Recovering America’s Wildlife Act](#) which, if passed, would flood states with new money for wildlife conservation. That money should come with strings tied to reforms, such as guaranteeing nonhunters greater representation on state wildlife commissions and expanding the legal authority of state wildlife agencies to manage all species, not just game animals. Another possibility is for the Biden administration to break tradition and assert jurisdiction over wildlife on federal public lands to end controversial practices like wolf hunting on those properties.

The first step, however, is for progressives to understand that wildlife issues are part of the larger struggle for justice, and to figure out which side of the fight they are on.