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PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF

WOLF REINTRODUCTION:

A Preliminary Study

Population Studied:	Individuals impacted by wolf reintroduction
Dates of Interviews:	May and July 2006
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PURPOSE OF STUDY

A preliminary study of the psychological impact of wolf reintroduction was requested in order to assess the social and emotional impact on referred individuals.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Each individual who was interviewed was identified as a result of suspected psychological trauma resulting from one or more encounters with wolves in the re-introduction areas. Interviews were conducted by this evaluator, in private, at locations which included a school, a community center, and at several ranch locations. Interviewees were seen as individuals, couples, or in family groups of three to five persons. One individual, who was unavailable for a face-to-face interview, was interviewed by telephone. Interviewees were assured of anonymity.

This exploratory study was not intended to be scientifically rigorous but rather, clinical in nature. The approach employed was intended to make observations, develop hypothesis, and generate ideas for further study and/or immediate intervention. An attempt was made to follow standard crisis interviewing and "triage" techniques, though no attempt was made to employ random sampling techniques or empirical testing.

Approximately 35 individuals were seen ranging in age from four years of age to 60 years of age. Most individuals interviewed were reporting ongoing encounters with wolves in reintroduction areas (though some resided in towns or communities rather than on ranches in remote locations). However, one group of individuals reported no encounters with wolves for several months because the wolf pack had been relocated to another area. About half of the interviewees were ranchers or members of ranching families.

FINDINGS

Many, but not all, of the individuals interviewed described varying degrees of emotional distress resulting from near encounters with wolves in the effected areas. In some cases, the individuals interviewed had been significantly traumatized by what they reported as wolf attacks on their pets and livestock.

In almost all cases, the interviewees reported some degree of insomnia along with continuing vigilance and anxiety about their own welfare, the welfare of their children and/or spouses, and the welfare and safety of their animals. Among the children in the groups interviewed, bedwetting, sleeplessness, fearfulness, and nightmares were evident (though not in all of the children). The worst impacts appeared to be in two instances in which family pets or small livestock were killed by wolf attacks.

It appeared that in all cases, the impacted individuals had made moderate to significant changes in their daily activities as a result of the reintroduction of the wolves in their respective areas. For example, mothers reported that younger children are more closely supervised and no longer permitted to play alone outside, particularly at some distance from their homes and ranch houses. Most individuals reported carrying a weapon because of their perception of a threat by the wolves, relative to an attack on them, their family members, or their animals.

An additional lifestyle modification reported by many impacted individuals included hiking, walking, or riding only with companions and never alone. Although, at least one individual reported no personal fear of attack, but rather a concern regarding continued attacks on pets and livestock.

Other safety accommodations included keeping pets and farm or ranch animals penned for safe keeping. Nonetheless, nearly all individuals interviewed reported chronic fear for the welfare of family members, neighbors, and their animals. The reported level of fear ranged in severity from mild to moderately severe. In the case of two children in two different locations, moderate to severe levels of fear were reported by their mothers.

Other concerns and stressors of impacted individuals seemed to relate to broader, more global concerns which, in turn, appeared to have induced chronic feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in afflicted individuals. Several adults reported fears of losing a cherished way of life (i.e., ranching) and an accompanying diminishing of the quality of their lives. Similarly, several of the adults verbalized opinions that they are helpless to do anything about the threat that they believe the reintroduced wolves present to them, their families, and their animals.

Most adults interviewed appeared to have adopted a “siege mentality,” believing that things would only get worse and that no one in any official capacity is listening to them. During many of the interviews, impacted individuals voiced concerns that government officials have been dishonest and misleading. Some expressed fears that significantly higher numbers of wolves will be released in their areas and that other now-vanished predators will also be reintroduced in their area (e.g., grizzly bears and jaguars) leading to increased worrying about the threats that those predators would present.

Many of the adults interviewed appeared to be quite demoralized and, perhaps, clinically depressed. Symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder were apparent (in both adults and children), though some individuals reported that symptoms such as nightmares have diminished over time with the removal of wolves from their immediate area.

It is clear that the individuals involved fear a loss of income and serious damage to their way of life. Overall, however, the greatest fear focused around what most individuals believe to be a very real and present threat of a wolf attack on a human, most especially on a young child.

PROPOSED REMEDIES AND INTERVENTIONS

In view of the above findings of moderate to severe stress evident in those interviewed, the followings measures are recommended:

Mental Health Outreach

Community counseling services should be made available to children and adults most afflicted with apparent stress-related disorders (i.e., chronic anxiety, tension, depression, insomnia, nightmares, etc.). It is estimated that about 24% of those interviewed might fall into this category. Due to the remote locations of many of the individuals in need of psychological interventions, it is probably most realistic to adopt a service delivery model of in-home or on-site counseling in which a field based mental health professional could visit afflicted individuals.

Psychiatric Services

Some individuals interviewed for this preliminary study appeared to warrant psychiatric care, relative to antidepressants, antianxiety, or other appropriate psychoactive medications. Those individuals will necessarily need to be seen at mental health centers in their respective areas.

Further Study Needed

The mental health of many of the individuals who were interviewed for this study appears to have declined in demonstrable ways. Further investigations would be helpful in defining the scope of the problem. Formal psychological measures could be administered to participants to provide more precise diagnostic data regarding depression, anxiety, anger and other clinical syndromes. Rating forms for children can be completed by their parents or teachers to provide additional objective information about a given child's adjustment. Use of anonymous (adult and adolescent) self-report surveys, specifically designed for the populations to be studied should be employed as well.

Some important areas of inquiry (e.g., the occurrence of increased domestic violence, substance abuse, etc.) were not addressed in this current study and certainly warrant closer investigation. The literature strongly suggests that stressors such as those impacting individuals in the wolf reintroduction areas (i.e., economic losses, family disruptions, etc.) are often accompanied by increases in family violence, failing grades in school, drug/alcohol abuse, and suicide attempts/completions.

Decision makers are encouraged to use the research capabilities of the psychology departments of the state universities in New Mexico and Arizona to explore these social and psychological issues more fully.

Policy Review

Clearly, some form of policy relief seems to be in order. Virtually all adults interviewed feel that significant wolf reintroduction planning is in need of important review and revisions. It is especially important that communication between policy makers and impacted individuals be clear, reliable, and unambiguous. Nearly all adults interviewed for this study expressed a high degree of distrust of information provided by involved government entities.

Financial Advisement

Practical financial advisement would likely benefit several of the more severely impacted individuals such as ranch owners and managers who were interviewed for this study. Most are reporting significant economic losses which they believe could render their ranching operations unsustainable. Some ranchers interviewed expressed urgent concerns about the immediate viability of their livestock operations with at least one individual reporting the impending sale of their ranching operation. Financial resource consultants might help these individuals marshal their personal resources and those available in their regions.

Implementation of Protective Technologies

Almost all individuals interviewed expressed some level of fear regarding the threat presented by the wolves which have been reintroduced into their respective areas. It appeared that a significant need exists for safety planning for families and use of better protective technologies which could assist the impacted individuals in safeguarding themselves, their children, and their animals. Virtually all individuals reported a moderate to severe feelings of vulnerability to attack.

Special Duty to Safeguard Children

Parents, community leaders, and reintroduction managers have a special duty to safeguard the children impacted by the changes in their lives. At minimum, children need to be shielded from the heated rhetoric of their elders who are embroiled in the controversy surrounding the reintroduction of the wolves. The “worst case” scenario, as reported by many of the individuals, especially parents, interviewed is clearly that of a wolf attack on a child. If such a tragedy were to occur, it is impossible to predict the full extent of the community’s response. It seems likely, however, that the basic goal of reintroducing a wild population of wolves would be significantly jeopardized by the backlash that could develop. Great care needs to be exercised to ensure that an attack on a child does not occur since that potentially catastrophic event could precipitate a major crisis for the communities involved and could result in violence toward those perceived as responsible for planning and promoting the reintroduction of wolves in the effected areas.


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