

REINTEGRATING WILDNESS:

From the Northern to the Southern Rockies across the heart of the West

— By Matt Barnes, NRCC Research Associate

When Aldo Leopold concluded in “Thinking Like a Mountain” that perhaps the hidden meaning in the howl of a wolf, echoing from the rimrock, is the same as in Thoreau’s dictum, “in wildness is the preservation of the world,” he hinted at an important point: wildness is inherent in all of us. For literary purposes, Leopold condensed his realization into a moment of watching the green fire die on the riverbank, but the truth is this was the decades-long unfolding of an ever broader, more inclusive, more integrated view of apex carnivores, land, and people.

Here at NRCC, we’ve been carrying that fire, working on land and wildlife restoration and coexistence. We are drawn to grizzly bears or wolves because they are the species most like us and yet the most relegated to Other status, and as such they raise subtle questions about our relationship to the more-than-human world. NRCC’s co-founder, Susan Clark, uses the integrative policy sciences framework to promote a coexistence paradigm to deal with complex environmental challenges. Research Associates like Douglas Clark and Dave Mattson apply this coexistence paradigm to large carnivores like grizzlies and cougars. Steve Primm, Seth Wilson, Hannah Jaicks, Timmothy Kaminski and others have applied it in collaborative conservation projects with rural communities in the Northern Rockies.

My own work involves reintegration of wildness in the ecological sense, as exemplified by coexistence with wolves, bears, cougars, as well as with fires and floods — as well as in the cultural sense, here in the mountain West.

We’ve inherited cultural ideas about the land, especially this land. Clashes over values about the West are often framed as a clash between the Frontier Myth and the Wilderness Myth.

Both may be projections of even deeper ideas about Paradise, Fall, and Redemption. It’s not simply a dichotomy of Old and New West, right and left, utilitarian and mutualistic values — but an evolution of partial perspectives. Properly understood, the Wilderness Myth is more inclusive and transcends the Frontier Myth; yet beyond both we may find a coexistence where mutualistic values inevitably include a degree of use of the land. But who, exactly, is the we? That leads us to the subtle, mostly unanswered questions about the basic and foundational nature of nature.

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We inevitably work closely with people who hold competing values and visions. If indeed the health of the entire spiral of human development underlies all progress, I contend that promoting growth among all will get us to a future of coexistence faster than oppositional strategies.

As a rangeland scientist and former ranch manager, I work to promote the evolution of western ranching into a way of living on the land that can coexist with carnivores. The Frontier Myth is strong, yet there are progressive trends: from self-identifying as cattle producers to grass farmers to land health stewards; from continuous grazing to rotational grazing to strategic grazing management; from feedlot finishing to grass-fed; and from conventional livestock handling to low-stress livestock handling. I actively promote strategic grazing management and low-stress herding both in the rangeland management profession and on the ground, from Montana to Arizona. For example, I spent a few years partnering with livestock permittees on the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming, who then used those methods to prevent conflicts with grizzly bears and wolves. Those ideas are now increasingly being adopted and promoted in the rangeland profession and among carnivore coexistence practitioners.

Matt Barnes demonstrating low-stress herding. Photo Credit: Matt Barnes





Matt Barnes on the Upper Green River at the start of his 700-mile expedition to investigate wildlife corridors between the Northern and Southern Rockies. Photo Credit: Matt Barnes



A wolf near the border of Yellowstone National Park. Photo Credit: Kate Ochsman

se. Known as “impact-based management,” we are recommending that there be no population target, and that conflicts be dealt with on a case-by-case basis with non-lethal methods being prioritized over lethal control.

Last year I paddled the length of the Green River across the arid “Heart of the West,” to the Colorado River, exploring potential connectivity for wolves, wolverines, and grizzly bears from the Northern Rockies to the Central and Southern Rockies. A journalist joined me across Wyoming’s notorious “predator zone” and into Colorado, covering the expedition in a story published in *High Country News*. I documented the expedition with photos and videos, and I am now working to tell the story through a film.

On the riverbank, contemplating my own myths of frontier, wilderness, and the redemption I see in the unfolding of coexistence, both as a paradigm and as the on-the-ground efforts of many of us at NRCC, I am reminded that wildness and garden, predator and prey dance as opposites in the human mind. I work for the restoration of the full predator guild up and down the Rockies, and for a human culture capable of that dance. The river seems to flow from Old West to New West and beyond; yet the river cannot be traced to a single source, and merging with innumerable tributaries without ending, grows ever wider and deeper.

Most recently, I’ve brought this message to the Southern Rockies, promoting scientific and integrative understanding of carnivore restoration and coexistence. In 2020, Colorado passed a ballot proposition to reintroduce wolves — the first use of direct democracy to restore an endangered species. I’m now working as an advisor to the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project and as a member of Colorado Parks and Wildlife’s Stakeholder Advisory Group to promote coexistence during the reintroduction planning phase. The SAG is developing a new framework to manage the (positive and negative) impacts of wolves, rather than manage wolves per