

# COMMENTARY

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## Wolves resuming their rightful place in our ecosystem

First we heard them howl, in the cold, early morning, in the valley north. We hurried to an overlook a quarter mile away to search the Slough Creek drainage. Yes, there was one — black, headed downhill. No, more — look below, two on a carcass. They've made a kill. The howl is to gather others. This is the Rose Creek Pack.

Wolves! The howl was spine-tingling. The sight raised goose pimples, as the reality mixed with the symbolism, and the human love-hate relationship with this majestic animal. These packs, released last year, are the first here in 60 years.

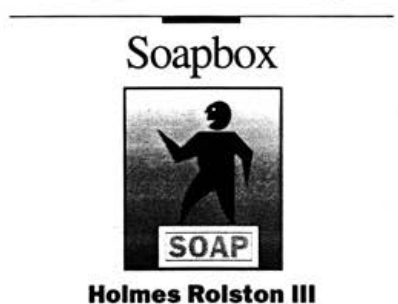
The wolves retreated to lie on a hill, guarding the carcass. Coyotes came in, wary, and the wolves returned to chase them off. Ravens waited. An adult bald eagle perched in a tree watching for its chance. In my spotting scope, I had America's national emblem, this symbol of commanding power, freedom, and majesty, and four big bad wolves, blood-

thirsty killers! The reality intensified the ambivalence.

The wolves climbed the farthest hill, breaking a new track in deep snow, a single line led by the alpha male, and disappeared over the skyline. I had sensed the wild and the sublime.

Wolves were in Yellowstone 10,000 years ago, when the ice sheets retreated, long before this was America. They roamed the land a million years ago when the continent was being formed. But Yellowstone has been missing its top predator for most of this century and without a healthy population for 120 years. Ruthlessly exterminated, the last pups were trapped in 1926. Transient wolves were spotted rarely afterward, but no breeding packs.

Now there came a sense of human folly. The wolf became the symbol of a technological attack on the ecology of a continent — our manifest destiny to tame the new world. Once coast to coast, north



and south, here and in Eurasia the wolf had the widest geographic range of any mammal, except *Homo sapiens*. But we, in our wisdom, judged it evil, played God, and did it in.

Remember little Red Riding Hood, the three little pigs, wolves in sheep's clothing, the little boy who cried wolf. In fables and mythology, we projected our faults and fears onto this animal, rather like we

project our national hopes onto the eagle, celebrating the one, maligning the other.

Like people and eagles, wolves sacrifice other creatures in order to survive. Here we face the mystery of predation, of life depending on life. Friends and foe alike admire the wolf's strength, skills, intellect, endurance. Its nose is a hundred times more keen than ours; a wolf can smell a moose a mile-and-a-half upwind. The wolf forms strong emotional bonding, a trait that, descended in the dog, has made the dog "man's best friend."

We have been rethinking our relation to nature. The debate over restoring wolves raged 10 years, nor is it over. More than 160,000 people commented on the issue, more than on any other opened for public comment. President Clinton visited this pack after the mother and her pups were brought back to the pens, the father shot illegally by a man now in prison.

We have repented — at least 80 per-

cent of Americans want the wolf back. Seeing wolves, I was seeing human moral progress. We have gained a less exalted view of ourselves and more appreciation for this wildest of animals. Paul Errington wrote: "Of all the native biological constituents of a northern wilderness scene, I should say that the wolves present the greatest test of human wisdom and good intentions."

Aldo Leopold in his youth shot a wolf and reached the dying wolf to see in its eyes "the green fire" going out. He, too, repented and resolved to learn to "think like a mountain." Late the following day, the last I saw the pack, two were chasing a bull elk. They disappeared into the mountain woods, the outcome unknown. But I had known what David Mech calls "a love for the whole of nature, for the unspoiled wilderness, and for the wolf as a beautiful, interesting, and integral part of both."

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