The Big Bad Journey: Exploring Intersections of Myth and Policy for Oregon’s Wolves

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My goal of the summer was to delve into the controversial reintroduction of the gray wolf to Oregon, trying to understand the issue from the disparate viewpoints of ranchers, environmentalists, government officials, and other citizens living in “wolf territory.” I approached the project with a vested interest to marry my studies in both Environmental Studies and English (specifically, creative nonfiction), and thus much of my time was spent thinking about techniques and methods for telling this story in a long-form narrative. After eight weeks of research, I’ve come to see the debate over the wolves as a lens to reveal those broader fault-lines and biases within the contemporary American West. Though I grew up in liberal, urban Portland, I spent frequent childhood days on the Western Oregon sheep farm where my father grew up and on the countless mountain acres of wolf-tracked land in Western Montana where my mother grew up. My interest in the issue stems from my exposure to various sides of this polarized urban-rural West, and much of my reading of wider creative nonfiction this summer has centered on studying how various authors portray their own experiences and narrative self to tell stories about wider environmental, historical, scientific, political, and cultural issues.

The foundation of my research was a week in June I spent in Oregon’s Wallowa County, based in the scenic valley-and-mountain-flanked town of Joseph. Surrounded by agriculture and ranchland yet with a large population of artists, seasonal tourists, and telecommuting exurbanites, Joseph is at the center of both the wolf reintroduction controversy and widespread land-use and cultural clashes in the West. I attended the ‘Wild Wolf Rendezvous,’ a four-day ecotourism trip hosted by the Portland-based environmental nonprofit Oregon Wild. At the conference, I listened to and interviewed a number of experts from the area, including pro-wolf activists, a Forest Service cultural naturalist who spoke to the ecology and history of the region, a Native American starting a wildlife-tracking tourist outfitter, and Oregon’s Fish and Wildlife Department wolf coordinator. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to hike into the heart of wolf country—less than a mile from the pack’s den—and see firsthand the land at the center of debates about public rangeland for cattle versus habitat for the reintroduced wolves. After my days with Oregon Wild, I spent a few days crossing over to the other side of the divide and speaking with cattle ranchers whose families have lived in the Wallowa Valley for generations and stand at the fringes of the anti-wolf camp. Listening to their stories I grew to see the wolf controversy as far from black-and-white—it is a tragedy of the rifts between classes, cultures, and American dreams, the endgame of a century of homesteading and industrialization through the state. It is not really about wolves—about the canis lupis—at all.

When I returned back in Maine from Oregon, I compiled and sorted the countless hours of tape and notes I had accumulated, and focused my reading and writing in three distinct veins. On the one hand, I studied wolves, from their biology to their place in our national mindset—from Pacific Northwest focused books like David Moskowitz’ Wolves in the Land of Salmon, to Barry Lopez’ classic Of Wolves and Men, to literary analysis like S.K. Robisch’s Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature. Much of how the average American perceives wolves—and its often mythically, either as free lone wolf or a loyal member of the pack, often as fierce hunter and human antithesis—has its roots in art and literary traditions from Western Europe, where, during the plague, wolves were often rabid, charging through towns and dragging the many bodies through the streets. The rhetoric of pioneers often found parallels in the dangers of wolves and Native Americans, identifying both as roaming hunters who threatened their homesteading
fenced-in lifestyle. Through the last hundred years of American wolf legislation, these stories have pervaded not only our mindsets but also our policies.

I also built a contextual platform for thinking about Oregon as a state—while Joseph may be a microcosm of larger trends in the contemporary West, it is also the product of a unique history, not the least of which is in its name as the birthplace of Nez Perce Chief Joseph and the genesis of the Nez Perce War. I read environmental histories of the state, like William G. Robbins’ *Landscapes of Promise*, more general overviews of character over time like Gordon Dodds’ *Oregon: A Bicentennial History*, and books specifically chronicling the folklore and outlaw-tales of both Wallowa County and the state. While I have often considered wider Oregon to be a sort of agrarian-halo around the radically liberal heart of Portland, I learned that until the last few decades, the norm of Oregonian was one who fits a bill much like the ranchers in Wallowa County: conservative, family-oriented, traditional. Whereas California’s pioneers were gold-searching romantics and runaways, Oregon appealed primarily to nuclear midwestern families who sought to reinvent the familiarity of their old life out West. Like much of the West, the state was heralded to Oregon Trailers as a dream of bounty, freedom, and productivity—a promise of a dream that still shakily reverberates today.

Finally, I also spent a significant amount of my time studying the craft of long-form creative nonfiction, reading Bruce Chatwin, Peter Matthiessen, John McPhee, and Joan Didion. I wrote Professor Walton letter-essay responses about my responses to the texts: how did the writer tie in interviews, history, politics, themselves? How did each book grow, chapter after chapter? What was each book trying to do? Texts by the first three authors (*In Patagonia, The Songlines, The Snow Leopard, Coming into the Country*) all dealt with outsiders going into a new place and searching for something, much akin to my journey into Wallowa County, and were immensely helpful in envisioning possible frameworks for my story.

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