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Wolves Don't Change Rivers

By **J.D. King**

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Yes, you heard that right. The wolves that were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 have not restored the landscape. They have not brought back the aspens and willows. They have not brought back the beavers or the songbirds. And no, the rivers have not changed, either.

Then why does “[How Wolves Change Rivers](#)¹” (HWCR) claim otherwise? Because the creators of the four-minute long viral video (now approaching 20 million hits just via YouTube) “are adherents to romance biology,” according to former USFWS biologist Jim Beers. Plus, the whole notion of Yellowstone as *wilderness* is “inherently racist,” argues wildlife biologist Dr. Charles Kay. I spoke with both Jim Beers and Dr. Kay in preparing this article. Dr. Kay was especially put out by the video’s claims.

HWCR Lie: Wolves' presence has improved the landscape in Yellowstone

“Funny that you should ask,” replied Dr. Kay. “I just returned from Yellowstone National Park where I revisited many of my old research sites. Willows and aspen have grown taller at a few locations but there has not been any far reaching trophic cascade. The Lamar River and other streams have not recovered — in fact, the Lamar River in the Lamar Valley is worse than ever.”

The Lamar Valley was once famous for abundant elk herds which (over) grazed there prior to the reintroduction of wolves and has subsequently been the premiere location inside of Yellowstone for wolf enthusiasts to catch a glimpse of their wilderness idol. But today, you most likely won't see *any* elk in the Lamar. And you won't see as many wolf-watchers, either. That's because wolves have killed the majority of the elk — and deer and moose — and most wolves have since migrated out of Yellowstone in search of territory and food sources.

HWCR Lie: Wolves killed only a few of the animals in Yellowstone

Prior to the reintroduction of wolves there were close to 20,000 elk in the northern elk herd. It didn't take long for wolves to reduce that number to less than 4,500. Today the few elk, deer, and moose that still draw breath cluster on private property outside of the park or in the small towns inside the park. Why? Because the animals are seeking sanctuary from the wolf! By the way, according to Dr. Kay, moose numbers have dropped from around 1,000 to almost zero.

HWCR Lie: Wolves have created widespread “trophic cascading”

You'll still see plenty of buffalo roaming in the Lamar Valley. That's because wolves have not changed the habits of the number one species that's wreaking havoc on the valley's meadows and riparian areas — the American bison. “The Lamar valley is worse than a cattle feedlot. There are 3,500 bison in the Lamar pounding things into oblivion,” said Dr. Kay. He also mentioned humorously that the bison are now wrecking some of the aspens and willows too.

There's been plenty of controversy about how to handle the growing bison problem, but the video ignored this. It's not just because of their increasing numbers but also because of disease that can spread to the nearby cattle herds. In fact, last winter the Park Service culled 900 bison. It wasn't the first time this happened and it won't be the last.

HWCR Lie: Wolves are the keystone predator

As should be evident by the fact that *it was people* who eliminated the wolf from the lower 48 in the early 20th century in the first place and then *it was people* who brought the wolf back to Yellowstone in the mid '90s, it is not wolves but *it is people* who are *the* keystone predators. This has been the case in America for thousands of years.

“Native people determine the distribution and abundance of elk, deer, and other ungulates — not carnivores. To call wolves, grizzly bears, and other carnivores keystone predators is white racist [theology](#)²,” says Dr. Kay. He demonstrates this in his [breakdown](#)³ of the Lewis and Clark expedition where he charts how the hunting pressure from the native tribes determined both the location and the quantity of wildlife.

According to Dr. Kay, “If everything was a wilderness untouched by the hand of man, than Whites could not have stolen indigenous lands nor committed genocide. If I could ban one word from the English language, it would be, 'wilderness' as wilderness is a thousand times worse than slavery. Slaves, after all, were bred and kept alive. No such kindness was shown to Native Americans. In addition, freed slaves

became citizens of the United States 70 years before the federal government "granted" U.S. citizenship to indigenous people. Moreover, freed slaves joined the Union Army to hunt down and kill aboriginal [peoples](#)⁴.“

In conclusion, any natural benefit that "How Wolves Change Rivers" claims the reintroduction of wolves brought to Yellowstone could have been easily mimicked by mankind. Plus people could have achieved results far better and more consistently. Presenting Yellowstone — or any “natural” area — as a self-optimizing, ideally and originally man-free paradise, is misleading at best.

JD King is a contributing writer for The Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation. He is also a filmmaker and has two documentaries on environmental subjects, Crying Wolf, and BLUE.

Links

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>
2. <http://www.onlinedigitalpublishing.com/publication/index.php?p=38&i=180226&ver=swf&pp=1&zoom=40.71661237785>
3. <http://canadianfieldnaturalist.ca/index.php/cfn/article/view/386>
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