A CONVERSATION WITH/Douglas Smith
Following the Wolves, Number by Number

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For much of the 1980's, Dr. Douglas W. Smith, a wildlife biologist and an expert on wolves, spent his time researching the habits and behavior of the North American beaver. It was a matter of necessity: few wolves lived in the Lower 48 states, and jobs studying them were harder to find than the creatures themselves.

Then, in 1994, word went out that the United States Park Service was looking for a biologist to coordinate the reintroduction of gray wolves into Yellowstone, where wild wolves had not been seen since the 1920's, when they were eradicated by the government.

Dr. Smith, a gangly outdoorsman with a Jimmy Stewart manner, got the job. And it was he who helped trap the wolves in Canada, shipped them to Yellowstone and released them into the freedom of the park's hills.

Today, Dr. Smith leads the Yellowstone Wolf Project, managing and studying the 14 wolf packs prowling the park.

In an effort to keep track of the wolves individually, Dr. Smith has assigned a number to each one, and he referred to them by their numbers throughout the interview.

Q. When your team released the first Canadian gray wolves in 1995, did you think the reintroduction would succeed?

A. No. The plan involved going to Canada to capture new wolves to release every year, and we were going to do that for three to five years. We thought there'd be much more mortality, that 80 percent would be killed the first year. But the wolves adapted so well and 80 percent survived. We needed only to do the first wolf release in 1995 and then another one in 1996. Two of the 1996 wolves are still alive.

Q. Have you seen any signs of culture among the wolves?

A. Absolutely. They pass things on to each other. Two and 7 were the first leaders of the Leopold pack. They're both dead now, but the pack uses the exact same area of the park. They use the exact same den sites, the same travel route. That's one sign.

Now, Prof. Rolf Peterson of Michigan Technological University studied the wolves on Isle Royale, in a remote part of Michigan. Wolves settled on the island in 1948, trying to escape the frenzy of hunting at that time, on the mainland. In 50 years, nobody has shot at those wolves.

Still, when they see humans, they run. I've asked Rolf why, and he says it's culturally transmitted fear of humans. Every generation has passed it on to the next. Yellowstone is different. The wolves here learned right away that people aren't bad. They're bathed in humans, marinated in them. And so, there's a difference that's site-specific.

Q. The wolves here have thrived and multiplied to such an extent that some have formed new packs in territory outside Yellowstone. Do you worry about their fate?

A. Oh yeah. We know that the packs outside of the park are much smaller than those inside. That's because they sometimes prey on livestock, and they are killed. There are some areas where wolves shouldn't be, places where they cause prob-
lems for people. If these people have a problem with an individual wolf, they call for all wolves to be killed. That's why I sometimes say to environmentalists that if all wolf lives are to be saved, they have to think about this.

Q. Is there a program to compensate ranchers for any losses they might suffer from wolves?

A. Yeah, but it's a privately funded and imperfect. The rancher has to show evidence that the dead cow or sheep was killed by wolves. Sometimes, you can't do that.

Q. Hunters complain that the Yellowstone wolves are causing the elk population to decline. Is that true?

A. Elk are declining. It appears to be due to many factors, of which wolves are one. Elk were at their all-time historic high eight years ago. There was nothing else they could do but decline.

In Montana the elk have a lot of predators: human hunters, wolves, black bears, grizzlies, cougars, coyotes. We have a drought, which is decreasing the quality of the habitat. We have elk living at very high densities, the maximum of what the habitat can support. All of that is playing into the natural decline.

Another thing, wolves are the universal scapegoat. Some people even blame their personal problems on wolves. An outfitter - - that is, a person who takes hunters into the wild -- once told me that before the wolves came to Yellowstone, there were "good outfitters" and "bad outfitters." Now, when one comes back and he hasn't gotten an elk for his client, he'll complain that it's the "wolves getting all the elk."

Q. As the person who brought these creatures here, do you have an emotional involvement with them?

A. Obviously, bringing them here myself, seeing them mate, dig dens, have pups and live, you get emotionally involved in wanting them to flourish. But in documenting their lives, I can be perfectly objective. One of the wolves, 2, was killed by other wolves. I wasn't going to stop those other wolves from killing him; that would be too involved.

Q. You and your wife, Christine, just had a baby. What have you learned about child-rearing from the wolves?

A. Patience and tolerance. Wolves are able to give discipline and structure to the pups without punishment. When a male wolf comes in after hunting all night, he is mobbed by the pups. And he tolerates their mobbing, and lets them crawl on top of him. Me, I'm always stressed, in a hurry. When I see the wolves and the way they have all the time in the world for the pups, I think that's the most important thing I can do.

Q. With the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction a success, do you think it will be duplicated elsewhere?

A. Many environmental groups are advocating that. There's disagreement on the place where it should first happen. But the places that are on the table now in the Lower 48 are Northern Maine, the Adirondacks, the southern Rockies, and the Olympic Peninsula. I'm cautious because I think if you put wolves in areas where it is difficult, the public resentment against all wolves grows.

I personally think northern Maine is the next best spot. And one reason is that a lot of northern Maine is owned by paper companies. Wolves can deal with roads and logging very easily.

Q. Why is there such a loathing of wolves in our culture?

A. The aboriginal people of North America did not have the mindset to eradicate every wolf. So the loathing came with the arrival of Europeans and their ideas of manifest destiny and "civilizing" the continent. The Europeans wanted to rid the area of wolves to civilize it. Wolves are the antithesis of civilization.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Leader of the pack: Dr. Douglas W. Smith, chief of the Yellowstone Wolf Project at the park, checking the radio collar of one of his charges. (William Campbell)