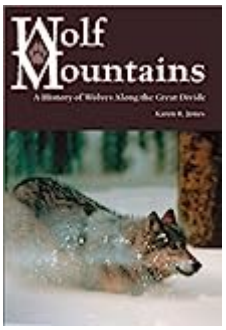
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Karen R. Jones. *Wolf Mountains: A History of Wolves along the Great Divide.* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002. x + 336 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55238-072-7.

Reviewed by Tim Lehman (Department of History, Rocky Mountain College)

Published on H-Environment (May, 2004)

Lupocentric History

The reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park has sparked a renewal of interest among historians in the history of wolves. This book makes a worthwhile contribution to a growing body of scholarship on wolves, wildlife policy, and national parks. In *Wolf Mountains*, Karen Jones advances a "lupocentric" history of wolves in four parks along the Rocky Mountains: Yellowstone and Glacier in Montana, and Banff and Jasper farther north in Alberta. Jones is to be commended for doing as the wolves have done–crossing national boundaries in search of comparative insight.

The four case studies tell a similar story. The Native Americans in each of the park regions, Jones explains, viewed wolves with sacred respect yet still hunted their "lupine brethren" for both ceremonial and practical uses (p. 61). As Euro-American explorers reached the Rocky Mountains, they found wolves, along with many other species, in great abundance. Jones notes that Lewis and Clark in Montana and Alexander Mackenzie in Alberta commented on the continuous presence of wolves among the enormous herds of buffalo and elk, and although neither expedition thought of wolves as a menace (in contrast to grizzly bears, which did threaten both expeditions), both report an instance in which a wolf appeared to threaten expedition members. Fur trappers followed fast after exploration and began hunting wolves along with other (usually more lucrative) species. Traps and strychnine poison were the favored method of these "wolfers," but the goal was commercial exploitation of furs, not personal protection. As one trapper noted, wolves frequently lurked around camp but "they do not meddle with any person: We cannot afford to expend our ammunition on them" (p. 101).

Wolf Mountains makes clear that the establishment of national parks in these four cases did not bring protection for wolves. Rather, each park implemented a predator control policy that eliminated predators in favor of preferred animals such as deer, elk, and bison. The goal of the parks in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Jones writes, was less to preserve wild nature and more to "propagate an idyllic scene for consumption by nature hungry tourists" (p. 28). Predators were also persecuted in parks, Jones points out, because the new public lands were under political pressure from re-

gional livestock interests, who saw the parks as "breeding grounds" for an unholy trio of livestock killers–wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes. The predator control campaigns eliminated wolves in all of the parks except Jasper, where wolves survived not for lack of killing campaigns but because large size and remoteness of the park made extermination difficult.

National differences between Canada and the United States made little difference in the parks' treatment of predators, according to Jones. Both sides of the 49th parallel shared "congruent notions of carnivorous animals as noxious vermin" (p. 207), and park rangers in both countries were instructed to shoot wolves on sight and evaluated ranger performance by their skill in killing predators. A slight difference, Jones notes, was that American parks were more zealous in their anti-predator campaign (Jones calls it "genocide") and consequently preferred poisoning wolves (and other animals) with strychnine, while the Canadian parks advocated a more moderate policy of "reasonable control" with rangers preferring the targeted lethality of rifles (p. 123).

In all of the parks, policies and practices shifted sometime between the 1930s and the 1960s towards a more favorable opinion of the wolf. Environmental historians familiar with the thinking of Aldo Leopold or the histories of Donald Worster, Thomas Dunlap, or James Pritchard will recognize the broader context of this reevaluation of the role of predators in ecosystems. Jones's contribution focuses more specifically on scientists and managers in each of the parks who began to be influenced by the research of Aldo Leopold, Adolph Murie, and Ian McTaggart Cowan. Jones also chronicles the rise of a romantic vision of wolves in writers as diverse as Ernest Thompson Seton and Farly Mowatt. These "alternative authorities" (p. 209) helped to change popular opinion from entrenched folk hostility towards the wolf into what Jones considers a more enlightened appreciation of the role of wolves in the "balance of nature."

By the 1960s, predator control had ended in all four parks and, Jones writes, support for predators grew stronger in scientific, popular, and policy circles. Thousands of people traveled to Banff to listen to wolf howls while environmental movements in both countries loudly criticized the use of lethal tactics such as hunting wolves from airplanes. As national environmental concerns trumped regional livestock interests, wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone as "an act of redemption by contrite human stewards" (p. 203). Jones writes, "By admitting the depths of depravity to which humans had sunk in their treatment of wolves, Americans showed that they had changed" (p. 56). Meanwhile, wolves relocated naturally into the other three parks and were subsequently welcomed there.

For all of its thorough research into these four parks, *Wolf Mountains* remains frustrating in some ways. Based on Jones's dissertation at the University of Bristol, the book sometimes uses labored academic language that will limit its usefulness in classroom settings and its appeal to popular audiences. Jones clearly sides with the wolves and against anyone who kills wolves, but her tendency towards hyperbole, for example when she labels the anti-wolf sentiments of ranchers the "vocal rantings of a few frantic individuals," is more akin to name-calling than serious analysis (p. 91). To call predator control "genocide" will be offensive to many (p. 30). While Jones narrates many details of wolf policy in these parks, it is often difficult to sort out what it all means. She identifies two sources of ideas that influenced wolf policy in these parks: science and popular opinion. Both changed dramatically during the last century and popular opinion, if not science, remains deeply divided. Jones reports these changing and sometimes divided opinions about wolves, but does not explore the complexity of these different positions. The reader is left too often with polarized stereotypes–rabid anti-wolf ranchers and Greenpeace activists parachuting into Banff to stop aerial killing–but without the sort of analysis that might explain why these positions were held and what difference they made.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

Citation: Tim Lehman. Review of Jones, Karen R., *Wolf Mountains: A History of Wolves along the Great Divide.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9299

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.