

# Parr and Genovali: Alberta must call a truce in war on wolves

SADIE PARR AND CHRIS GENOVALI  
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Wolf experts say Alberta must stop poisoning its wolf population. DAWN VILLELLA / AP

**By Sadie Parr and Chris Genovali**

Wolf Awareness has erected a double-sided billboard along Highway 2 between Calgary and Red Deer alerting visitors and residents to the province's misguided war on grey wolves.

The billboard highlights the dire situation wolves are facing and heightens awareness about preserving this ecologically influential species as an important part of Alberta's intact environments.

Grey wolves in Alberta are exposed to lethal threats from every angle, including aerial gunning from helicopters, choking neck snares, and poison-baits that lure wolves and many other species to excruciating deaths. Alberta's liberal hunting and trapping regulations, as well as unregulated private bounties, assure that the devastation of wolf families occurs nearly year-round.

Under the pretext of protecting caribou in habitat that is 95 per cent disturbed by oil and gas development, more than 800 wolves in the Little Smoky area were strangled by snares, gunned down from helicopters, and poisoned with strychnine over seven years. Many biologists and wildlife experts consider these killing methods inhumane and unethical. Caribou are endangered not because of wolves, but because the province has knowingly allowed industry to destroy essential caribou habitat for decades.

Snares intended for wolves "accidentally" killed at least 676 other animals, including two caribou. In a recent review of trapping as a wildlife management technique in the *Journal of Canadian Wildlife Management and Biology*, Gilbert Proulx and his co-authors reveal that Canadian snares are considered inefficient at killing and can cause tremendous pain and enduring suffering to animals.

Big Lakes is one example of numerous bounty programs hosted across the province, providing \$300 for evidence of each dead wolf since 2010. Other bounties offer \$500. Dwight Rodtka, a retired problem wildlife specialist with Alberta Agriculture, reported: "The

municipal district of Big Lakes has claimed 647 wolves in their bounty program in less than five years. During the previous winter, 62 wolves were registered through Alberta Fish and Wildlife by registered trappers in the Sundre and Rocky districts alone. Another 19 wolves were registered as killed by hunters in these areas. These are bare minimums."

In those districts alone, the combined mortalities are equivalent to 10 or more wolf packs being destroyed or facing the trauma of having individual wolves taken from their families and purposeful way of living.

Alberta is the only province that still uses strychnine to kill wolves and coyotes. It is past time to ban these dangerous toxins, as others have done. Knowing how many animals in addition to wolves died because of strychnine poisoning in the Little Smoky area is impossible because the victims' bodies could not be accounted for.

Strychnine has long been judged by the Canadian Council on Animal Care as an inhumane way to kill animals and therefore inappropriate for euthanasia. Animals poisoned with strychnine die traumatically from asphyxiation caused by paralysis of the respiratory muscles. Considering that euthanasia implies death without signs of panic, pain or distress, minimum time to loss of consciousness, and minimal undesirable physiological and psychological effects on the animal, death through poisoning with strychnine does not comply with CCAC guidelines.

Raincoast Conservation Foundation large-carnivore experts Heather Bryan and Paul Paquet, along with colleagues at the University of Calgary and Israel's Bar-Ilan University have authored a seminal scientific paper, published in the British journal Functional Ecology, which suggests wolves that are heavily hunted or subjected to intensive lethal control experience significant social and physiological stress. The scientists used tufts of hair to measure hormone levels in wolves subject to different hunting pressures in Canada.

Although the long-term effects of chronically elevated stress and reproductive hormones are unknown, there are potential implications for wildlife health, welfare, long-term survival and behaviour. The effects of stress are often subtle, but the ensuing harm can be acute, chronic and permanent, sometimes spanning generations.

Ignored in all the killing is the evidence that exploited wolf populations lead to smaller and unstable packs, smaller territories, and potentially more prey killed per capita by these inexperienced wolf packs. All of this increases conflicts with humans, who see wolves as competitors for livestock as well as wild game.

Wolves are recognized globally as predators playing a key role in the top-down regulation of ecosystems, yet they still struggle to find safety in Alberta. Will the province's new leaders have the vision to right the wrongs being done to this highly persecuted species? The opportunity to do things differently remains.

*Sadie Parr is executive director of Wolf Awareness Inc. and Chris Genovali is executive director of Raincoast Conservation Foundation.*