

Westerners are changing the way they see animals, study shows

CSU study indicates many cherish game as 'extended family'

By Gary Gerhardt, Rocky Mountain News

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Elk bask in the morning light at Moraine Park in Rocky Mountain National Park on Thursday. A CSU study of 12,673 Westerners indicates a shift in the way they view animals - not as food but as "part of our extended family." About 35 percent of the 641 Coloradans polled are animal lovers who don't condone hunting or fishing.

More and more Westerners are seeing the fish, fowl and wild animals around them as something to cherish rather than something to eat.

A Colorado State University study of values concerning wildlife in 19 western states indicates a major shift from traditional beliefs that "wildlife is mainly for human use" toward one in which animals should be protected as "part of our extended family."

The 12,673 people who answered the poll shed light on why wildlife issues are so controversial and why wildlife agencies are struggling to accommodate so many different views.

Just how polarized the debate has become is seen in the 641 responses from Colorado.

- 34 percent believe wildlife exists for personal or economic uses, such as hunting or fishing.
- 35 percent are animal lovers, ranging from wildlife watchers to animal rights advocates, who don't condone hunting or fishing.
- 22 percent don't hunt or fish, but they don't object to people who do.
- 9 percent didn't show much interest in wildlife at all.

CSU professor Mike Manfredo, who headed the study, said 50 years ago when there were a higher number of people living in rural areas, the majority probably believed in hunting wild animals.

But as more people moved into the state, often from large U.S. cities, the number holding those beliefs began to change.

Television shows that foster concern and even familiarity with wildlife by those who may never go into the country contribute to the trend, Manfredo said.

The study even found some people who said if there was an accident involving a human and an animal, they would help the animal first.

The reason for the change in attitude, Manfredo said, is the people moving into western states come from highly urbanized areas, usually with higher personal incomes, and have attitudes more opposed to the traditional values of hunting and fishing.

How much traditional values are shrinking, he said, can be seen in a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study on hunting trends in the mountain states between 1960 and 2001 in which the

number of hunters in the population dropped from 21 percent to 8 percent.

The shift in attitude is yet to be reflected in the makeup of the Colorado Wildlife Commission, which oversees the state's policy on game animals and non-game wildlife.

"I moved here from California to take advantage of the hunting and fishing opportunities, and I think it's still one of the major reasons people move to Colorado," said Commission Chairman Jeff Crawford. "While I can't look into a crystal ball, I don't envision a member of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) ever sitting on the wildlife commission because the dollars that run this agency come from sportsmen and the money should be spent on their needs."

Seventy-three percent of the Division of Wildlife's \$100 million budget comes from game license fees.

No state tax dollars fund the division, although around \$10 million a year from the state lottery is pumped into non-game wildlife programs the division administers.

In the past, the Division of Wildlife has made concessions to include non-sportsmen in the decision-making process.

One example is the state's Wolf Management Working Group made up of ranchers, sportsmen, biologists, government officials and environmentalists.

Rob Edward of Sinapu, a Boulder-based group that advocates reintroduction of wolves, is a member of the working group, which eventually advocated allowing wolves to stay if they wandered into the state on their own.

"Colorado is a leader by reflecting an attitude toward all wildlife rather than, like other states, having to be forced screaming and kicking to accept wolves," he said. "But we still have a long ways to go, and the wildlife commission still represents hunting, fishing, outfitting and ranching interests almost exclusively."

He said the commission should have an equal balance of game and nongame enthusiasts as well as a couple of non-division biologists to represent biological management.

"When you have so many of the wildlife commissioners with direct ties to agriculture, you know change is going to be a long time coming," he said.

Still, there are those who believe outsiders have adequate forums to be heard by the commission, including Russ George, executive director of the state Department of Natural Resources, the department that includes the Division of Wildlife.

"The division has an environmental round table and many non-game groups attend it to give input," he said. "My impression is we offer every opportunity for anyone to express himself, although I can't say if any of them have a strong advocate on the commission."

In the CSU study, Manfredo said, the states with the largest percentage of hunters and anglers are Alaska and South Dakota, where half the people hunt or fish or both.

In California and Hawaii the number is about one in four.

With urbanization today, children go to school with students who don't hunt, he said.

Unless someone in their family hunts, most believe meat comes from the supermarket, not the hoof.

"Hunting requires equipment, a place to go and a social support system," Manfredo said. "Many who were hunters in other states don't find friends here, where it's socially acceptable, and so they quit."

To realize how much of a shift Colorado has made, Manfredo says, look at the size and average income here since the 1940s. Colorado has become urbanized and the lifestyle has changed dramatically, he said.

"If you want to see Colorado 50 or 75 years ago, look at the Dakotas today," he said.

gerhardtq@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-5202