

Natural. Valued. Protected.



Strategy for Wolf Conservation in Ontario

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Government has made a commitment to enhance wolf management in Ontario:

“We will implement a proper wildlife management program for Ontario’s wolves. We will ensure that Ontario gets the vital scientific information it needs to protect and manage wolves “.

Wolves are fascinating and unique members of Ontario's wildlife heritage, symbols of wilderness, an integral part of a functioning ecosystem, and often seen as competitors for human interests.

Changing land use, resource management practices, and climatic factors have resulted in changes in the distribution and status of wildlife populations over time. Wolves provide a barometer of both biodiversity and a functioning ecosystem.

This document provides a framework for decision-making about wolf conservation in Ontario. It includes the goal for wolf conservation, a set of guiding principles, and objectives and key strategies for wolf conservation developed to better understand and conserve wolves. The components outlined in the strategy will guide the longer term development and refinement of the wolf conservation program.

The *Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario* (June 2005) provides more detailed information on the current legislation, scientific knowledge and understanding about gray and eastern wolves.

2.0 SCOPE

Recognizing the challenge associated with managing the complex ecosystems in Ontario and the need to consider and integrate conservation strategies for different species, species groupings, their habitats and human activities, this strategy focuses on the information and tools needed to conserve wolves, and raises associated management challenges and opportunities.

3.0 WOLF CONSERVATION GOAL

The conservation goal for wolves in Ontario is:

To ensure ecologically sustainable wolf populations and the ecosystems on which they rely for the continuous ecological, social, cultural and economic benefit of the people of Ontario.

4.0 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

OMNR's mission is to manage natural resources in an ecologically sustainable way to ensure they are available for the enjoyment and use of future generations. The following guiding principles for wolf conservation were developed in the context of the resource stewardship principles and overall long-term strategic directions in the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR)'s *Our Sustainable Future* (2005) and *Statement of Environmental Values* (1995).

1. Wolves have intrinsic value for the people of Ontario.
2. Wolf conservation will consider the best available ecological knowledge, as well as social, cultural and economic values. Conservation actions are expected to evolve over time as understanding improves.
3. Our understanding is often incomplete, and caution must be exercised in the face of uncertainty when considering wolf conservation measures.
4. Ecological, social and economic benefits for the people of Ontario will continue to accrue from a variety of consumptive and non-consumptive uses.
5. Human life and property will be protected.

5.0 CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges in developing an enhanced program for wolves. They include:

1. Difficulty in estimating the number and distribution of the different species of wolves at various geographical scales.
2. Identifying appropriate scale and quantity of information needed to support decision-making to ensure the conservation of wolves.
3. Managing a top predator that may be seen as a competitor with humans for some wild prey species.
4. Understanding the cumulative effects of other conservation actions in relation to achieving wolf conservation objectives.
5. The considerable range in understanding about wolves and their role in the ecosystem, as well as an apparent diversity of interests in wolf conservation.

6.0 OBJECTIVES AND KEY CONSERVATION STRATEGIES

Objectives have been identified that will contribute to meeting the goal for wolf conservation. Key strategies work together in an integrated manner to help meet these objectives, and often provide alternative and complementary approaches that could be initiated.

The key strategies are listed under each of the wolf program objectives.

6.1. WOLF CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

The following objectives for wolf conservation are listed in order of priority:

1. **Ensure ecologically sustainable wolf populations.**
2. **Provide for social, cultural and economic benefits based on ecologically sustainable wolf populations.**
3. **Increase public awareness and understanding about the role of wolves in natural functioning ecosystems and their conservation in Ontario.**

OBJECTIVE 1: Ensure ecologically sustainable wolf populations.

Legislation and Policy

The *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act* contains the regulatory tools to conserve wolves and manage hunting, trapping, and chasing activities. Regulatory and policy changes can be made to reflect changes in direction over time (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Conservation Approaches, Legislation and Policy Affecting Wolves*).

- Strategy 1) Develop and maintain adequate policy and legislation/regulation support for wolf conservation by:**
- Reviewing legislation, regulations and policy direction periodically in light of new information from research and monitoring activities and in consideration of stakeholder and public consultation.
 - Revising conservation approaches as new knowledge and information becomes available.

Population Assessment

Conserving wolves requires an understanding of the current population abundance, distribution and trend relative to the ecological carrying capacity and social and economic needs of society. Ongoing monitoring, assessment and research are critical for informed decision-making, sound policy development and the adaptive management of wolves. Research will continue to fill critical knowledge gaps, as well as evaluate the effects of specific conservation actions on wolves, their habitat and prey species (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Biology and Ecology*).

Strategy 2) Assess, monitor and report on the status and trends in wolf populations to determine if provincial, and where applicable wolf zone level, objectives are being met by:

- Determining the distribution of gray and eastern wolves and estimating their abundance and density, including consideration of mandatory collection of biological samples, using preliminary wolf ecological zones based on currently known wolf distribution, prey species composition and abundance, topography and climate.
- Gaining insight into the health of wolf populations including the distribution and prevalence of disease.

Strategy 3) Enhance wolf population research to improve understanding of wolves at various management scales by:

- Developing methods to estimate population abundance and distribution.
- Developing predictive population and habitat models.
- Investigating the significance of major limiting factors (sources of mortality) in populations.
- Determining productivity and population thresholds of wolves across their range.
- Evaluating the significance of geographic areas where wolves are subject only to natural mortality factors.

Habitat Management

Wolf habitat is largely defined by the diversity and distribution of prey as well as habitat connectivity. Accordingly, landscape level habitat planning that operates under the premise of providing for the spatially explicit habitat needs of resident ungulate and beaver populations and considers road densities, may provide an adequate supply of quality wolf habitat (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Biology and Ecology, Wolf Habitat Requirements*).

Strategy 4) Continue to manage wolf habitat through the application of existing resource management policies, legislation, regulatory manuals and guidelines. Provide input for wolf habitat considerations in the development of new or revised guides.

Strategy 5) Assess effectiveness of species and landscape management guidelines that may support the management of wolves and, where necessary, enhance wolf habitat research to improve understanding of wolves at various management scales by:

- Understanding wolf prey/habitat needs and evaluating habitat guidelines
- Identifying areas of Ontario's landscape important in maintaining population connectivity and genetic diversity.

Strategy 6) Evaluate the role of protected areas on sustaining populations of wolves and their prey, and explore future requirements by:

- Establishing appropriate zoning or other mechanisms to recognize life history needs of wolves, such as habitat and prey requirements, and considering the role of protected areas in conserving wolf populations in the broader landscape through protected area management planning processes.
- Conducting inventory, monitoring and research activities in protected areas to enhance their value as benchmarks for assessing and reporting on ecological conditions and change.

Information Management

Sustainable resource management requires long-term data management to support monitoring and informed decision-making. Wolf data and information are obtained from a variety of wildlife programs such as moose, deer and fur management, research and monitoring initiatives, and other programs such as forest resource inventory and hunter/trapper surveys.

Strategy 7) Collect, manage, and share data and information needed to assess wolf population status and understand the role of wolves in Ontario's ecosystems by:

- Ensuring that data and information required by the wolf program will be properly managed, including the planning, organization, storage, security, access and integration of the data from many sources.

OBJECTIVE 2: Provide for social, cultural and economic benefits from ecologically sustainable wolf populations.

It is important to define ecologically sustainable harvest levels and opportunities. There is a need to more accurately determine the degree of human-caused mortality impacting populations of wolves. Caution must be applied in management, with implementation of early and incremental steps toward controls on harvest to ensure that wolf population sustainability is not at risk. The application of an adaptive management approach will require evaluation and revision of conservation actions where warranted as knowledge is accumulated (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Conservation Approaches, Legislation and Policy Affecting Wolves, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, and Wolf Biology and Ecology, Mortality*).

Harvest Mortality

Strategy 8) Assess and manage harvest mortality through the implementation of regulatory measures that will enable the control and assessment of wolf harvest such as closed seasons, harvest limits, requirement for additional seals or licences, and mandatory reporting (more detailed information is available in the *Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Conservation Approaches*).

Consideration should be given to applying wolf harvest controls to coyotes where their ranges overlap with wolves due to the difficulty in distinguishing wolves from coyotes in the field (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Biology and Ecology, Physical Description*). Consideration should be given to other strategies that may be required to enhance the enforceability of conservation measures.

Strategy 9) Determine sustainable harvest levels and evaluate the need for an allocation system that includes all user groups (non-consumptive users, aboriginal persons, resident hunters, trappers and non-resident hunters).

Strategy 10) Determine and manage the number of wolves taken in protection of property by:

- Considering conservation measures that will enable obtaining estimates on the number of wolves killed in protection of property.
- Exploring with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food the potential for effective and low cost options to reduce livestock losses to predation by wolves.
- Monitoring trends in compensation claims as they relate to wolf abundance in order to better understand the dynamics of wolf/human interactions.

Public safety and the protection of private property are important factors to consider in designing a wolf conservation program. Provisions regarding protection of private property exist in legislation (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Conservation Approaches, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act*), and government programs have been developed for compensation for loss or injury to livestock by wolves (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Wolf Conservation Approaches, Livestock, Poultry and Honey Bee Protection Act*).

Non-consumptive Use

As stated in the guiding principles, “ecological, social and economic benefits for the people of Ontario will continue to accrue from a variety of consumptive and non-consumptive uses”.

Strategy 11) Maintain and, where appropriate, increase opportunities for people to experience wolves in the wild by;

- Promoting initiatives such as wolf howls at Provincial Parks.
- Promoting partnerships with the tourism sector and local organizations to develop and promote the opportunities.

OBJECTIVE 3: *Increase public awareness and understanding about the role of wolves in natural functioning ecosystems and wolf conservation in Ontario.*

An informed and educated public and partners provide the basis for sound policy development and successful program delivery. This involves enhancing hunter, trapper and landowner education as to their role in wolf conservation, informing the public of the value of wolves in the ecosystem and educating school children, tourists and resource users regarding viewing opportunities and interpretive programs within the province (*more detailed information is available in the Backgrounder on Wolf Conservation in Ontario – Education*).

Decisions will be made in an open and transparent manner, which considers all available ecological, social and economic information. Citizen engagement in wolf conservation will clarify the various needs and values of society.

Strategy 12) Increase the public awareness and understanding of (1) the role of the wolf in the ecosystem and (2) the conservation of wolves, their prey and habitat by:

- Developing information products such as pamphlets, fact sheets, CD ROM presentations for use in OMNR’s outreach programs (Stewardship, CFWIP, etc.), in communications with local trappers’ councils, local citizens’ advisory committees, etc.
- Enhancing the Ontario Parks’ interpretive program.
- Developing partnerships with First Nations, tourist industry, educators, and conservation organizations to deliver information on wolves.

Strategy 13) Continue to develop the wolf conservation program in an open and transparent manner based on the best available ecological, social and economic information by:

- Involving the public in the review of the wolf conservation program and recommending changes or improvements as needed (e.g., through the *Environmental Registry*, focused consultation, etc.).
- Working with other provincial program areas involved in the conservation of wolf prey species/habitats (e.g., forest management).
- Reporting on the results of the wolf conservation measures and research including information on the status, population trends and use of wolves.
- Contributing to national and international wolf conservation initiatives through partnerships with other jurisdictions, and participation in national and international wolf forums.