

What Happened to the Wolves?

Adapted from:

John E. Becker, *Gray Wolves* (NY: KidHaven Press, 2004), 15-22.

Jill Bailey, *Gray Wolf* (Chicago: Heinemann Library, 2005), 26-27.

Each year new wolf pups are born, and each year wolves die from natural causes. Some get diseases. Others die from injuries received in physical struggles with mountain lions, bison, elk, or other wolves. The natural cycle of birth and death kept wolf populations about the same size for centuries. But when Europeans arrived in North America they declared war on wolves, and the wolf populations declined to dangerously low levels.

Europeans believed that wolves were evil, bloodthirsty creatures. Stories of wolves attacking people and their livestock were common in European countries. Therefore, the early European settlers in North America were convinced that the wolves in this new land were also a threat to themselves and their animals. It did not take long before the settlers' fears for their livestock were realized.

While clearing the land of trees, establishing farms, and building settlements, the Europeans killed deer, elk, bison, and other animals that wolves preyed upon. Without their natural prey, the wolves turned to the settlers' cows, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens to survive. To protect their livestock, settlers used every method available to kill wolves. Wolves were shot and trapped. And when the settlers discovered that wolves return to a partially-eaten kill, they used poison to kill the wolves. Poisoning the remains of partially-eaten kills was so effective that it became the preferred way to "deal with the wolf problem."

Governments and private citizens encouraged the killing of wolves by paying bounties (rewards of money), to anyone who killed a wolf. In the United States bounty hunting led to the slaughter of wolves on a huge scale. The first American bounty was offered by the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Between 1850 and 1900, more than one million wolves were killed in the United States. Good money was paid for skins.

In 1915 the U.S. government increased its efforts to destroy wolves when Congress approved funding for a predator control program known as Animal Damage Control. ADC's goal was to eliminate large predators from the United States, including wolves, grizzly bears, mountain lions, and coyotes. The government hired bounty hunters and sent them out to kill any wolves they could find.

The program was successful. By 1926 gray wolves no longer roamed the Great Plains. In 1940 the last wolf was killed in the state of Washington. A few wolves managed to survive in remote areas of northern Minnesota and the southwestern United States near the Mexican border in Texas and Arizona. But gray wolves had been eliminated from every other part of the country.

From the beginning of the ADC program until 1970, government-funded hunters killed approximately 70,000 wolves, and the wolf population in the lower 48 states had been reduced to only a few hundred individuals. By the 1970's, however, attitudes toward wildlife in general (and wolves in particular) were changing, and many people across the country were determined to restore America's wolf population.

Name: _____

Reading Comprehension Quiz: What Happened to the Wolves?

Answer all questions using the information presented in the text. Be sure to write your responses in your own words.

1. During the colonial period in American history, what did the colonists think about wolves?

2. Why did wolves prey upon the settlers' farm animals instead of wildlife?

3. What action did the early settlers take in response to the loss of their livestock?

4. How did the United States Congress deal with “the wolf problem?”

5. Did Congress’s plan work? Explain.
