

**Humans, Carnivores, and Nature:  
A Study of Public Perceptions of Large Carnivores and Nature  
in the United States and Canada**

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**Executive Summary**

The overall purpose of this study was to collect and examine public perceptions of large carnivores (i.e. wolves, bears, and cougars) and Nature among adults in the United States and Canada. This was done as a quantitative/qualitative study using an internet-based survey with 4,500 participants. The survey was built around three subjects: public perceptions of large carnivores, public perceptions of Nature, and demographics. Within these subject groups participants were asked to respond to a range of photographs, questions, and statements.

Participation in the survey was limited to individuals with internet access and knowledge of the survey's URL. The instrument was opportunist and self-selecting in its recruitment and its ability to filter individuals was based on participant willingness. Participants were asked to complete the survey only if they were an adult currently residing in the United States or Canada. The participants were recruited through organizational membership, university affiliation, and personal contacts. Individuals at approximately 150 universities, colleges, and community colleges were contacted regarding survey participation, as well as, individuals in approximately 500 organizations from across North America. Participants ranging in age from approximately 18 to 80 with a wide variety of educational and occupational backgrounds were reached in all fifty of the United States, all of the Canadian provinces, and two of the Canadian territories.

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- ◆ Some historians such as Keith Thomas have suggested that changes in humans' responses to animals, in this case specifically large carnivores, have been part of a larger Moral Revolution taking place in society. The responses of participants in this study support the idea that at least in part people have changed their patterns of carnivore extermination to patterns of carnivore conservation due to changing moral sensibilities. The responses also suggest that the influence of changing conceptualizations of Nature is also related to the phenomena. **The participants' responses connect into a continuing pattern of change in morals and concepts regarding Nature and animals.**
  
- ◆ Of the 4,495 participants examined in this study 77% agreed with the statement, 'Nature includes people.' Further analysis revealed that, though they might agree with this statement, this is not how the participants actually responded to evidence of humans and human influence in what they consider to be Nature. When identifying Nature in photographs participants differentiated themselves by their willingness to tolerate differing levels and kinds of human influence and human presence in photographs. In the same way, the themes underlying the variation in participants' responses to identifying Nature in photographs are **Purity** (from human influence), appearance of **Wilderness**, and a sense of **Wildness** in photographs. Likewise, the factors that appear to be the basis for participants characterizations of Nature relate to whether **Nature is Utilitarian**, the **Level of Human Influence on Nature**, whether **Human Dominance over Nature** exists, and whether **Nature Exists as an Independent Entity or has Characteristics of Being**.

- ◆ Participants' self-identification as either Environmentalists or Conservationists has nominal predictive power regarding their perceptions of large carnivores or Nature. The attitudes of some participants who self-identified with either or both of these labels suggest a wide range of conceptions regarding the meanings of these words. **Within this sample population the labels Environmentalist and Conservationist both appear to be meaningless.** In the same way, group affiliation (e.g. hunting organization, property rights organization) seems to have only nominal value for identifying perceptions.
- ◆ **Gender; whether one is raised in an urban, suburban or rural area; and whether one currently resides in an urban, suburban, or rural area are three variables that suggest tendencies regarding certain attitudes towards large carnivores,** but within this sample population these variables are not predictive of perceptions.
- ◆ Three themes appear to underlie participants' responses to statements regarding large carnivores: 1) **Control**, 2) **Fear**, and 3) **Respect**. These relate to the degree to which we can or should control carnivores; the degree to which we do or should fear them; and whether and in what way we should respect them.
- ◆ **Blood is an important factor in responses to images of carnivores.** Of course, many participants were distressed at the sight of blood. Some participants who were upset at the presence of blood in the photographs of the carnivores did not express distress at the blood itself, but instead they expressed concern regarding how others would respond to the blood and how such photographs might be used. It appears that a portion of the hunters in this sample have become sensitized to the use of blood in advertisements sponsored by anti-hunting organizations. Some expressed suspicion as to why bloody photographs had been used in the study, and some expressed anger at their fellow hunters for apparently not showing the deceased animal a measure of respect by cleaning its wounds before photographing it.
- ◆ **Why? What is the context? Tell me what happened before I make a decision.** These are the questions that participants ask and the demands they make in response to questions regarding photographs of dead large carnivores. The participants exhibited a range of willingness to accept the death of these animals depending on the circumstances of their death. This was also true of photographs of living carnivores. A portion of the participants wanted to know the full context of the situation before they were willing to provide an opinion on the contents of the photograph.