

Differing Viewpoints: Cultural Perspectives on *Canis lupus*

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for instructor Robert Bandringa's Indigenous Studies 333 course *Indigenous Ethnozoology*. The assignment asked students to explore the zoology and ethnozoology of a chosen animal. The paper uses APA citation style.

Analyzing the presence of wolves and dogs in both Indigenous communities and Western society leads to a discussion about the purpose and role which wolves play, and how they are understood. Indigenous knowledges and Western world views are often in contrast to one another, and this is just another example of that, which this paper will explore further.

In Squamish teachings, the wolf is a symbol of “leadership, loyalty & independence,” and serves as an important leader in Indigenous communities (Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, 2019). This analysis will be specific to *Canis lupus* commonly known in English as the grey wolf, or in the Gitksan language as *gibuu* (Pine, 2021). The relationship between *Canis lupus* and *Homo sapiens* has varied over time and is contingent on cultural norms. Exploring the opposing views of Western perspectives and Indigenous oral histories will reflect the purpose, significance and understanding of *Canis lupus* across Turtle Island—a term for North America which comes from Anishinaabe creation story. Primarily focusing on the relationship between wolves and Indigenous Peoples recognizes the changes over time and differences based on which community they are from. This analysis explores a further discussion of *Canis lupus familiaris* known as the dog or in the Gitksan language as *us* (Pine, 2021). Therefore, this paper will examine *Canis lupus* as well as its subspecies, *Canis lupus familiaris*, how their species is viewed in Western society, interacted with and continue to interact with Indigenous Peoples, and their purpose within Indigenous societies.

Positionality Statement

I would like to begin by positioning myself as a researcher: recognizing my privileges and lived experiences, and how that provides personal insight into my work. My name is Audrey Heath and my family comes from the Gitksan Nation, as well as having various European roots. I recognize that growing up in Canada—an inherently colonial society—has had a large influence on my life and views, inclusive of both the people I am surrounded by, and the ideals I was brought up with at home and was taught in school. I have been fortunate to live as an uninvited guest on the unceded and traditional territories of the *kʷikʷáłəm*, *səlilwətaʔl təməxw*, *S'ólh Téméxw*, *Qayqayt*, and *Stz'uminus* Peoples. Currently, I am a student in the Simon Fraser University (SFU) School of Communication and Indigenous Studies Department; as well as a staff member at the SFU Indigenous Student Centre.

Indigenous Studies is more than just learning about the First Peoples on this land. As someone who grew up removed from my culture, it is fascinating to be able to read these narratives and feel connected to the story, and for myself to learn about my family and where I come from in order to support me in reconnecting with my culture. As my family comes from the Gitksan Nation in Northern BC, and we are a part of the *Lax Gibuu* or Wolf Clan, I have always held the symbol of the wolf close to my heart but did not know much about them or the history of their relationship with Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, I chose the topic of *Canis lupus* and identifying the importance of wolves in Indigenous cultures as teachers and hunters. I look forward to learning more and recognize that as a researcher it is important to acknowledge my own influences, as well as show respect for the knowledge and culture being shared. All these aspects contribute to the person I am today and influences my personal views and values on the topic.

Zoology

Native to North America, the grey wolf—*Canis lupus*—is a vertebrate species from the Canidae family and Carnivora order. As of April 2016, the global conservation status of *Canis lupus* is G5, which means it is “Demonstrably widespread, abundant and secure” (Hammerson, 2005; Province of British Columbia, 2022). The grey wolf is the largest of the Canidae family, with the average size of a grey wolf being 37kg for females, and 45kg for males. It is a social animal who forms packs similar to a nuclear family. These packs are led by the alpha male and beta

female, which lead about nine other wolves, as packs greater in size than this number have the potential to put a large strain on resources. As the alpha and beta are the only ones allowed to mate in the pack, they produce a litter of one to fourteen pups every year. After two months these pups start to learn how to become a wolf, at eight months they are able to join the hunt, and in two to three years become adults. Once matured, they will leave their pack and either become a lone wolf, join another pack, or even start their own pack (Reimer, 2022b). As explained by Dr. Reimer (2022b) the wolf is a slender animal, but strong and powerfully built with a bite of 1,500psi. With a high endurance and large lung capacity, they are great runners who can masterfully navigate varied terrain. Their habitats may include open tundra, deep forests or prairies, as they are very adaptable to their environment. Wolves' diets can vary depending on their habitat and the season, for example grey wolves living on the coast have been found to eat salmon (Darimont et al., 2003). Nevertheless, wolves need to consume three to ten pounds of meat daily to maintain a healthy diet, and are found to only hunt humans for survival if they are starving (Reimer, 2022b). Wolves do not have the instinct to hunt humans, and this is a fact that settlers were not and still do not seem to fully understand.

Western Perspectives

Since colonization the wolf population has varied due to human involvement, and also differs by location. When colonization began, colonizers viewed wolves as a threat due to their lack of knowledge, and therefore, systematically eradicated the wolf. In actuality, it is rare for a wolf to be a threat to humans, but can sometimes threaten livestock populations. Wolves are a keystone species which support the continuance of an ecosystem, but today their population has been reduced by 80% to 70,000 across Northern Turtle Island. There is a very inconsistent wildlife management structure put in place, because in some states wolves are being reintroduced to the land, and in others they are being hunted. These changes not only impact the wolf, but affect all other species present in their ecosystem. The first example that demonstrates this is the Fish and Game Department in Idaho which holds secret wolf hunts every year, recently shooting and killing 23 wolves by helicopter. This hunt is conducted due to the idea that wolves are killing livestock and the elk population. However, it is shown that the elk population is declining just as much as the wolf population, suggesting that the wolf presence is not the primary reason for the decline in the number of elk (Reimer, 2022b). On the other hand, between 1995 and 1996 Yellowstone National Park reintroduced

31 grey wolves, which led to the repopulation of the 8991km² area. This greatly supported wildlife conservation efforts and continues to enhance the revitalization of the surrounding ecosystem (Smith et al., 2003, p. 330). These two contrasting scenarios perpetuate the notion that there is an inconsistent wildlife management structure in place, which needs to be rectified.

Domestication

Canis lupus familiaris are derived from *Canis lupus*, and were the first species to be domesticated around 15,000 years ago (Kuhnlein & Humphries, 2017a; Reimer, 2022a). Domestication is defined by Fogg et al. (2015) as “an evolutionary process, rather than a definable state or endpoint” (p. 265). Within Indigenous oral histories, wolves and dogs are sometimes seen as interchangeable due to their similarities, however, over time and within various cultures, these animals have evolved, and seemingly identifiable traits have shifted. There are only slight differences between wolves, socialized wolves and domestic dogs, and *Canis lupus* has now become “the most diverse [mammal] within a single taxonomic unit on the planet” (Fogg et al., 2015, p.266). Dog breeds today vary considerably in size, shape, colour, behaviour, ability and more, and for the most part these breeds are only 300 to 500 years old (Reimer, 2022a). Moreover, Morey (1992) explains that the wide variation of dog breeds recognized today are a result of selective breeding (p.198). Dogs are more than just pets, they take on tasks including; helping with hunting, work, herding and protection. The following oral histories provide context to how wolves and subsequently dogs support their communities in these ways.

Relationship with Indigenous Peoples

There are numerous accounts in Indigenous oral histories across Turtle Island, which present wolves as respected, knowledgeable members of society. These histories oppose the European’s understanding and attitude that treats wolves with “hostility and hatred” (Fogg et al. 2015, p.280). The following examples represent the importance of wolves and dogs in various Indigenous cultures including those of the Tsitsista and Tseil-Waututh Peoples.

Tsitsista Tribe

Another story is shared by the Tsitsista Peoples—often known as the Cheyenne peoples—who hold wolves in high regard. Their oral history shares how they were taught to hunt by two wolves, or in their language, *maiyn*. One is the

protector spirit, and the other its female companion. They worked together to teach the Tsitsista people essential survival skills of hunting on the grasslands. By sharing their knowledge, they earned the respect of the Tsitsista People. This respect is shown through actions, in which the Tsitsista Peoples share their kills with the wolves and set aside meat for them (Fogg et al. 2015, p.267).

Furthermore, the importance of the dog in the Tsitsista community is shared in how they name their cultural history in four parts. Fogg et al. (2015) discuss three of these time periods in order to draw parallels about the importance of dogs to the Tsitsista Peoples. The second time period—pre-European contact—is known as “time of the ‘dogs.’” The third and fourth time periods—post-European contact—were represented by the buffalo and horse respectively (p.267). Due to the crucial nature of the horse and buffalo to their society post-European contact, therefore, demonstrates the importance of dog’s pre-European contact. This is representation of how dogs are held in high regard in Tsitsista oral histories, and through these two stories it shows the important role of both wolves and dogs.

Tsleil-Waututh Nation

Gabriel George shares how important the wolf is to his Tsleil-Waututh family in an episode of Wolf School. He starts by telling the origin story of how his family descended from a wolf—the first grandfather who transformed from a wolf into a young boy. He journeyed throughout the land and learned from it, he considered the plants and animals his teachers (Raincoast Conservation Foundation, 2020, 15:10). This is only the first story of significance to the Tsleil-Waututh Peoples, another story includes the almost extinction of their Peoples due to disease. There was one baby in their community fortunately not affected by this disease. He was wrapped in a blanket and left on a trail, only to be discovered by a pack of 10 ***takaya***—wolves. The mother wolf was curious yet nervous around what she had found, but soon realized its helplessness. She picked the baby up and brought it back to her den where she fed him, looked after him and took care of him within the wolf pack. Overtime he grew to be strong like the wolves. Finally going out to explore, he came across the empty village of Tum-tumay-whueton filled with tools. He taught himself how to use these tools and started hunting deer to provide for his wolf pack. Eventually he realized he was missing something and despite upsetting his wolf pack, he left them to set out on a journey. On his journey over the mountain, it is believed he was taken in by another wolf pack who taught him how to be human. Eventually he met another clan, got married,

and returned to the village of Tum-tumay-whueton in order to revitalize his Nation and Peoples. In their Nation they hold great respect for the wolf and are grateful for how they have helped their community to survive (Raincoast Conservation Foundation, 2020, 16:48).

Conclusion

Indigenous stories and perspectives are valuable to the historical context and current understanding of wolves in society, and how that influences today's views on both wolves and dogs throughout the domestication process. Today, *Canis lupus* are viewed in society in two opposing perspectives. Western society considers the grey wolf a dangerous animal, which the government is not always willing to protect, despite Indigenous histories and knowledges advocating for this keystone species. The discussed oral histories from the Tsitsista and Tsleil-Waututh Peoples characterize wolves as tough, resilient, teachers, role models, and protectors, teaching Indigenous Peoples how to hunt, live on the land and protect them from dangers in the wild, which highlights their importance to society.

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