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Author: Favilli, Filippo

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Wolves, Courts, and Public Policy: The Children of the Night Return to the Northern Rocky Mountains

By Edward A. Fitzgerald. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. xvi + 223 pp. Hardcover: US$ 99.00, ISBN 978-1-4985-0267-2. Paperback: US$ 44.99, ISBN 978-1-4985-0269-6. E-book: US$ 42.50, 978-1-4985-0268-9.

The return of the "Children of the Night" to the Northern Rocky Mountains is a fascinating and controversial story. The author enables the reader to understand the many steps that were needed to reintroduce wolves into one of their natural environments, as well as the reactions this prompted in US society. The book provides an incisive analysis of the efficacy and impact of public law litigation, in a way that could be used by anyone working within the public law sector, and it has the power to show the great use (or abuse) of public law litigation in the United States, even for issues relating to the presence of wildlife. The book also offers an opportunity for people in other countries to examine the role of US courts in resolving public policy issues, highlighting the bonds among science, policy, and politics that enabled the gray wolf to recover. In particular, the book shows the limits of, and the opportunities provided by, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), especially through the different interpretations of successive presidential administrations. It also explains how it is possible for politics to prevail over science through public law litigation, as seen in the 2011 delisting of the wolf in the states hosting the nation's vast majority of wolf populations. A clear overall message is that the use of public law litigation can, in some cases, enable a response based not on scientific evidence but on political issues and economic interests.

It was very interesting to see how the different actors were involved in the reintroduction process. Hunters, farmers, ranchers, environmental groups, and policymakers were invited to take part in a process that involved not only the status of wolf populations in the Northern Rocky Mountains, but also the general social acceptance of this species, due to its impacts and the fear it creates. The same is happening in Europe: The natural return of wolves and the reintroduction of brown bears in the Alps have created—and are creating—issues because of these species' impacts on human activities, the rare encounters between people and these species, and a general fear and ignorance towards these species. The presence of these animals in the Alps has given rise to discussions about the possibility of coexistence of humans and large carnivores, considering not only possible impacts on human economic activities, but also society's knowledge and general acceptance of the animals. Responses to the presence of large carnivores and their impacts on human activities should be based on scientific evidence, although politics and the economic interests of lobbies (eg hunting) may greatly influence the final decisions taken. Public law litigation to solve wildlife-related issues is not common in Europe, where human–wildlife conflicts are addressed through a series of public participation meetings that involve policymakers and allow the arguments of the different economic groups and of the general public to be heard. Decisions have to be agreed among all interested actors living and working in the area of relevance for a particular species. In the United States, the return of wolves had the great power to generate responses based more on emotions and economic interests than on science. This confirms that all interested actors have to be involved in order to achieve comprehensive management and raise knowledge and acceptance among the general public.

The book describes very well the management issues related to the return of wolves to the Northern Rocky Mountains, showing the points of view of the livestock and hunting industries and of environmental groups, as well as the intermediate role played by federal courts in deciding whether the Department of the Interior complied with the law. Public law litigation provides the opportunity to examine different positions in a neutral way, and the book clearly shows that wolf recovery in the Northern Rocky Mountains was successful in large part because of public law litigation and specifically because it allowed the different voices and interests to be heard. The reintroduction of wolves has been highly beneficial to the region's ecosystems, and this has brought recognition of the species' role as a regulator of ecological processes that helps to increase overall biodiversity. Fitzgerald's book enables a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing this species in the coming years—such as its delisting on political rather than scientific grounds, the efforts of Republicans to amend the ESA, and the need for increasing the general social acceptance of wolves in the United States and worldwide. This book is an essential read not only for researchers and technicians, but for all who care for wildlife and work to promote harmonious coexistence between people and nature.

AUTHOR

Filippo Favilli
filippo.favilli@eurac.edu
Eurac Research, Viale Druso 1, 39100 Bolzano, Italy

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