

Show Yourself, and Others Will: Connecting Art and Politics in *Comeback Wolves*

Gary Wockner

“We will champion what is beautiful, and so finally make our opponents irrelevant.”

— from *Resistance*, by Barry Lopez

I had a sinking feeling, not really anger, but more of disgust and confusion. The TV commercial faded away, and I sat with my mouth agape. I finally said, “Oh for god’s sakes. I can’t believe it.”

I had just watched President Bush’s “wolves TV commercial” a few weeks before the 2004 election. It hit home in an unusually strong way—I was in the



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midst of formally representing “wildlife advocates” as one of fourteen members of the Colorado Wolf Working Group, and I was also co-editing a book of original writing that celebrated wolf restoration in Colorado titled *Comeback Wolves: Western Writers Welcome the Wolf Home*.

I knew wolves were a big deal and highly symbolic, but I didn’t know their potential influence reached so high. A few days later—out of a growing anger—I composed an editorial for the *Denver Post*. The *Post* printed it, and within forty eight hours the editorial was circulated virus-like around the internet on all sorts of environmental and progressive-minded websites. I received over two hundred emails. About ninety percent of those emails were supporting, ten percent not.

I chose the words in the editorial carefully. I feverishly worked the piece’s timing and pace. I dove in for the punch line. The response amazed me.

To be honest, I did not initially jump up and volunteer to be on the Colorado Wolf Working Group. Wolves are extremely political, and I knew the Group’s deliberations would be intense. I’d spent most of the last ten years doing either academic work or creative writing—in fact, I believe I gravitated to

those endeavors precisely because they are so inconsequential. The Working Group, on the other hand, would be consequential politics and policy making—nitty-gritty stakeholders meetings with important and vocal people from “the other side.” Yet I did jump in, inspired by a number of factors—friends who were entering politics, a desire to make a difference, and an aspiration to help an endangered species.

The idea for *Comeback Wolves* arose a few weeks after the Working Group had formed in May of 2004. I had coincidentally been reading a book titled *What’s Nature Worth*, edited by academic eco-critics, Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic. *What’s Nature Worth* interviews twelve well known environmental writers, including William Kittredge, Terry Tempest Williams, Gregory McNamee, and Stephen Trimble. While this book mostly tries to develop an academic thesis, the interviewees, on the other hand, spewed forth about their attempts to write meaningful prose that had a political effect. They wanted to be read; they wanted to sway public opinion towards preserving nature.

Several of the interviewees had participated in previous books that had gathered freshly written essays to support an environmental issue. The first was edited by Terry Tempest Williams and Stephen Trimble in 1996 and titled *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of the Utah Wilderness*. Since 1996, about five more of these books have been created, the most recent about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The seed was planted.

Why a Wolf Book?

The idea for a wolf anthology has a lot going for it. The biggest piece, of course, is that wolves are very provocative and political animals. This was nowhere more apparent than in the President’s TV commercial which equated wolves with terrorists. Throughout their history, wolves have been alternately reviled and worshipped—they carry extraordinary symbolism on their backs and four paws. Like no other species, wolves, in this regard, are part animal and part human cultural phenomenon.

Second, the wolf issue is very timely. Wolves were reintroduced to Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Arizona, and New Mexico in the 1990s. Wolves are migrating

all over the West in small numbers and (prior to a recent lawsuit) were set to be delisted from the Endangered Species Act. As a result, each state needs to come up with its own management plan, which means Working Groups and multiple-year long federal and state processes and press coverage. Here in Colorado, the State Division of Wildlife, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Rocky Mountain National Park are all involved. The issue generates its own publicity; a wolf book could piggy-back along.

Finally, my position on the Working Group provides a direct link between politics and art. I suspect many of the contributors to *Comeback Wolves* eventually jumped on board with that belief, too. I'm hoping I can help enable a literary/political process—an unusual kind of hope, but one that had antecedents and promise. The idea of creating a space for writers to speak out on an environmental issue has inertia behind it from those previous efforts. Ultimately, that Congressman Mark Udall chose to write a foreword for the book speaks to the issue's prominence. A wolf book is a good bet for advocates, artists, and even politicians.

Responses From The Writers

Rather than a book, my initial thought was to put together a letter-to-the-editor campaign in the Colorado media. The first few email invitations I sent to writers were tentative and revolved around generating editorials to the Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News to support wolf reintroduction. The responses from those invitations, however, were anything but tentative—I was bombarded with enthusiastic replies, and with the idea of an anthology.

The first three emails I sent out were to Hal Clifford (executive editor at Orion), Gregory McNamee (writer, editor, and contributor to past *Testimony*-like books), and Stephen Trimble (writer and photographer, and co-editor of *Testimony*). All three came back with some version of the email I received from Gregory McNamee, which said, "Thanks so much for your kind invitation. I'd be glad to do anything I can to help, and I'm honored." Throughout the next couple months, in fact, the word "honored" was repeated dozens of times.

Stephen Trimble took it a bit farther, and asked that I call him, which I did. His experience with *Testimony*—and the advice he gave—proved invaluable in the early going. Further, part of the post-*Testimony* discussion with all the book's contributors was about how to propagate these types of books to other places and issues.

I then sent out about ten more emails to writers whom I had either known a bit or was familiar with their work from *Orion*, *High Country News*, or

Mountain Gazette. I picked writers from *Orion* and HCN specifically because those are the most well-known environmental-writing publications in the West, and I picked *Mountain Gazette* because it is both entertaining and widely available. The point from the get-go was to inform, to entertain, and to sway public policy. When Joe Public wants to know about wolves, he picks a Rick Bass book, not a "state management plan." If we want the public on our side, I figured, we have to address the public on its terms and passionately articulate our message.

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A few weeks into the inviting, a core of writers formed an email discussion about the potential and direction of the project. We agreed on a general outline, and then we had considerable discussion about the style, length, and message of the contributions. We pondered questions such as "What was best for political impact?" and "How best to articulate this need to writers?" As the emails piled up, I invited seasoned editors Gregory McNamee and SueEllen Campbell to co-edit. Both eagerly jumped on board, and both had numerous additional connections that generated another flock of invitations.

After more email discussions, a longer and final invitation letter went out to dozens of writers. Our resolution to the length, style, and message questions are all apparent in the ending paragraphs of this invitation, as is our cumulative enthusiasm:

Please send personal, unique stories of experiences seeing wolves, not seeing wolves, reflection on wolves/predators, travel in wolf territory, travel in soon-to-be wolf territory in Colorado and the South-west, wonder, beauty, hope, wildness, etc. Suggested length is between 750-3,000 words, or two-to-three pages of poetry. Let your passion guide you rather than a word count.

Finally, consider this: Colorado is home to 350,000 dues-paying environmentalists whose parent organizations officially support wolf reintroduction. Public opinion polls show that 70% of Colorado's 4.5 million citizens support wolf reintroduction. Both the Rocky Mountain News and the Denver Post have officially editorialized in favor of wolves. Other unnamed, powerful people and groups support wolf reintroduction. Other Colorado recovery efforts cur-

rently in the works by the USFWS and RMNP are cause for optimism.

So, the wind is at your back. Energy, enthusiasm, and optimism are on your side. We are a powerful, eloquent group united with a common goal. The day will come, perhaps soon, where the first wolf will be hauled in a huge crate up the last dirt road into the Weminuche Wilderness in the San Juan Mountains. A human hand will reach down and release the latch. The door will open.

Writers: you, too, are unleashed. The door is open. Free. Let your fingers dance on the keyboard. Enjoy every minute. Start howling!

“Show yourself, and others will.”

This invitation, and all the before-and-after exchanges, were meant to inspire and excite the contributors. They responded amazingly. Several months later—and after thousands of hours and emails among SueEllen, Gregory, me, and all the contributors—almost every invitee was included in the book.

The response from publishers was equally strong. Every publisher I contacted—which included four in Colorado and two national out-of-state houses—was very interested. It helped that some well-known writers had jumped on board, including Pam Houston, John Nichols, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and Rick Bass. Then at the end, Congressman Udall’s stamp added commercial heft. We eventually chose a regional publisher, Johnson Books in Boulder, because they had the quickest turnaround, had good regional distribution, and, like the writers, showed great enthusiasm for the project.

The Writer/Stakeholder Intersection

From July through December of 2004, I was ensconced in all things wolf. First, the Colorado Wolf Working Group was meeting monthly, and I was in constant communication with the stakeholders and my “wildlife advocate” colleagues. The Group’s deliberations were an intense, political, and stimulating experience in which I learned a great deal about wolves, wolf policy, wolf lovers, wolf haters, and how state and federal agencies approach these controversial issues.

Second, during the same period, my email inbox was absolutely flooded with the passionate stories and poems from the forty-nine other contributors to *Comeback Wolves*. The editing process in all those stories, and the exchanges with the writers and my co-editors, was incredible. I learned a tremendous amount about different but related *artful* twists on the subject of wolves.

At times, these two worlds collided, in that I would be feverishly editing and emailing to *Comeback Wolves* contributors all week and on the weekend, and then the very next Monday, I’d be at a Wolf Working Group meeting. On a few occasions during Working Group meetings, the *Comeback Wolves* stories bled into my comments with the Group. I became more articulate and empowered from all those stories, and I sometimes felt I had forty-nine eloquent and passionate friends sitting beside me at the stakeholder table. In this respect, these writers had a voice in the debate even before the book was published.

The main objective, though, was to create a book-space for these writers to speak out and have a voice in the political-wolf debate. As the 2004 election season was proceeding, I was ever-more convinced of the need for this space and the ability of writers to articulate the message. Much of that election was about “messaging” and its effect on voters, and likewise, so much of this wolf issue is about how the various stakeholders articulate their concerns. Bush’s TV commercial was one end of the spectrum while *Comeback Wolves* was perhaps at the other.

The quality and intensity of the essays and poems we received for *Comeback Wolves* absolutely floored me. The book is a celebration, first and foremost, and is only partially about wolves. Wolves, it turns out, are mere vessels and symbols of wildness in the West, of redemption for our society’s past mistakes, of the idea that we humans might be able to restore something rather than continue our doomsday destruction. Finally, *Comeback Wolves* is ultimately about hope, and, on rereading, I see that word hope sprinkled throughout. Some writers even took it a bit further and used words like resurrection and rebirth—all very powerful metaphors to insert into a political process at an opportune time.

And the book—essays and poems; pure artistic expression—will directly connect to the political sphere. All royalties will be donated to the environmental group, Defenders of Wildlife, specifically to their Proactive Carnivore Conservation Fund which works throughout the West to prevent conflict between imperiled predators and humans (mainly ranchers) before it occurs. We will also distribute free copies to a couple hundred people—county commissioners, state legislators, state and federal wildlife agency managers, and the members of the Colorado Wolf Working Group. And finally, we will submit the book during “public comment periods” during the state and federal deliberations that will play out in the next few years throughout the intermountain West.

The Bigger Message

Fifty writers and poets wanted to be involved in a timely political-environmental process, and will be. *Comeback Wolves* will hang in the public's eye as a book-bound connection between art and politics, and with the high profile of wolf issues, this book has a unique opportunity to have an effect.

Writers, of course, are an independent bunch, but I hope all of these writers continue to be involved in political-environmental writing. One of the great lessons of the Bush Presidency is the importance of "messaging," and it is in this realm where writers and poets can have the most influence. The public appreciates and responds to well-articulated messages, and writers and poets are masters at the craft. I see all sorts of potential with this. We could create a "Western Writers Action Network," or "Center for Environmental Writing," with workshops and retreats where writers could learn about important issues, and then spring into action—as poets, editorialists, essayists—at opportune times. Perhaps, with some direction and encouragement, that independence can be organized to have more influence.

For my own part, I hope to get involved in similar kinds of writing with a host of environmental issues—we could have a *Comeback Grizzlies* and a *Comeback Colorado River*. One of the wolf book contributors, Laura Pritchett, and I have begun a smaller and more local effort here in Northern Colorado to celebrate the threatened Cache La Poudre River. Over

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the past two years, I've been relentlessly writing and submitting all kinds of political-environmental editorials and magazine pieces. In other words, it's gotten in my blood.

Comeback Wolves will be published in August of 2005, and it remains to be seen if the book sells well and will truly matter. But for me, it has already mattered. Whereas I was once disgusted, confused, and angry, I've now chosen a different path. If we choose our words carefully, feverishly work the piece's timing and pace, and then dive in for the punch line, the response can be amazing.