

Coyotes in The Modern America  
and Their Relationships with the People that Live There

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Coyotes in the Modern America

During my internship at Dionondehowa, Bonnie-- the caretaker-- had been having trouble with quarrelsome neighbors. Said neighbors are owners of a kennel primarily used to breed hunting dogs which pollute the peaceful atmosphere of the sanctuary with the disheartening baying which seems to go on without cease. This neighbors also have violated the no hunting policy on Dionondehowa as well.

Bonnie is concerned for the local coyote population that fill the night with their intelligent howls and chirps. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has been involved on numerous accounts.

Coyotes, or *Canis latrans*, are biologically survivors. Having had co-existed alongside the grey wolf, *Canis lupus*, their larger and more fearsome cousin, coyotes have adapted to a very cautious and intellectual lifestyle. Coyotes are, like humans, one of the animals capable of fission-fusion. This means they can shift from pack life when there is a need to take down large prey or go a solitary lifestyle. This trait becomes extremely advantageous when equilibrium is thrown off kilter. Coyotes, unlike most other larger North American mammals, have survived the onslaught of humans since the pioneering Americans started to settle the frontier. Coyotes' evolution and development alongside wolves pushed them to become more intelligent, cunning, and resourceful than almost any other mammal. Native Americans, for millennia before the Europeans came across the sea, and even after, revered the coyote as something comparable to Jesus Christ. The coyote was looked upon as a creator, teacher, and even as a mirror to humankind. Old Man Coyote, as the deity is oft referred to, is one of the oldest examples of godlike beings portrayed by people, and like most deities from other religions, Old Man Coyote was used to explain the unexplainable (i.e. Death, natural disaster, war, etc.). Coyotes now however, and for the past century, have been assailed by the populus of America. Soon after the near annihilation of wolves from the entirety of the continental U.S., the agricultural government needed someone else to paint as an enemy. Who better than the wolf's smaller cousin?

To better understand the coyote, knowing its significance in nature and place in the North American ecosystem is crucial. The ancestor, *Prohesperocyon wilsoni*, to the modern coyote and all canidae of today emerged in the South-Western region of North America in what now known as Arizona, New Mexico, and Northern Mexico approximately 40 million years ago. These ancestors soon spanned the globe because of the landbridge that stretched from what is now modern day Alaska to Siberia settling all over to later birth many species such as: Jackals, African Wild Dogs, Wolves, Foxes, Dingoes, and Coyotes. The immediate predecessor of coyotes was the *Canis lepophagus*. It was of a more slender build than that of the coyote, having a more narrow jaw, but it shares almost everything else. Coyotes themselves are a relatively new development in the ecosystem of North America in the terms of evolution having popped up about one million years ago. Ancient coyotes were of a larger and more robust builds, generally averaging between

39-46 lbs, having to compete with the huge Dire Wolf *Canis dirus* and other mammoth pleistocene era predators. Yet, when the Clovis people came and wiped the landscape of North America clean of its pleistocene herbivorous behemoths, the apex predators of the time (American lions, Smilodons, Short-faced bears, Dire Wolves, etc) began to follow suit due to starvation and competition with the early humans. Coyotes on the other hand adapted. They became smaller (now only averaging 16- 25 lbs) in order to survive and thrive off of small game. Their diets broadened dramatically, even encompassing some plant matter. Although originating in the Midwest, coyotes soon expanded their domain as modern humans did;



stretching from Alaska to Mexico, Pacific to Atlantic.



The word “coyote” is the Spanish interpretation of the Aztec word “coyotl”. It is not hard to understand why coyotes were so accepted in ancient Mesoamerican culture. Coyotes then had a diet which consisted mostly of what we would consider pests. So a city with many coyotes around were often cleaner than those without. Another toast to coyotes was the Aztec city Coyoacán, or “PLace of Coyotes” in English. The Aztecs had not one but numerous gods (Coyotlinauatl, Nezahualcoyotl, Coyotlinahual to name a few) that were represented as coyotes which goes to show he deep reverence that Aztecs had for the old canid. Huehuecoyotl or Old Coyote was one of the most prominent gods that the Aztecs worshipped. “Huehue” is a prefix that was assigned to gods that were depicted as being very old and wise. The Aztecs were not the only natives in North America that held coyotes sacred in there religion. In fact, the entirety of the tribes on the continent held the coyote in high regard, specifically in the Southwest. Coyotes were of a similar place in lore as the fox was in Europe, but the coyote was more than a mere trickster. Coyotes were used to mirror humans because of their innate ability to overcome any hardship.



Coyotes were first documented by Europeans in 1804 by one Joseph Whitehouse who noted them in his journal as “Prairi Wolves”. Coyotes were originally mistaken for some variety of larger fox. Their discovery baffled scientists for most of the 19th century since they could not decide how to categorize the small canid. At first, the incoming settlers had little to no opinion on the coyote for it did little to be hated or beloved. This sadly began to shift towards the turn of the 20th century when the wolves of North America were becoming more scarce from hunting bounties and poisoned bait traps. The war of predators was headed by what is now known as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Unlike their wolveish counterparts, coyotes were not so easily squashed by human efforts. In fact, coyote populations remained consistent no matter how much was spent on their eradication. A whopping 10 million dollars was used

for the budget of eradication over a 10 year span from around 1929 until 1940 and coyotes were virtually unaffected.

Attitudes towards coyotes in the present have since mellowed but there are still enmities between hunters and the small canid. Hunters will often get frustrated when they can't find the body of the game they shot because the coyotes will eat the carcass before the morrow comes. Though there is no longer a bounty on coyotes, there are no real regulations on how many a hunter can take as long as it isn't in the spring---the usual time for mating for this species. Here is the most interesting part, in my opinion. From the three interviews conducted to gather local information on the population of coyotes and how they should be managed, all three vary drastically. The first interview was over the phone with Steve Hall, the owner of the non-profit Adirondack Wildlife Refuge. He indicated that the population of coyote in the region are not true coyotes, but hybrids. The terms he used to describe these hybrids were coydog and coywolf. Which as the names suggest are mixes of coyotes and dogs and coyotes and wolves. The mix of coyotes and wolves were more commonly known as Algonquin wolves. Algonquin wolves range from 30-40% coyote. The most interesting information he gave was that these three genotypes travel together in integrated packs. He also was proponent of the idea that we should not bother regulating nature since it does that on its own. Marcia, the DEC officer, had a completely contrary account of the coyote population and its make up. From her account there are no hybrids in the area nor have there been. She was a strong support of the argument that without people, nature wouldn't be able to balance itself. She stated that it was our job to maintain the populations as humans. These two interviews being so adverse to each brought insight of the national dilemma still faced today on the subject of coyotes and conservation. Dan Flores describes a scene in the introduction to *Coyote America* where he was invited to speak in Nebraska in the honor for a renown woman writer in 2013. A board member from the Nebraska society asked Flores what he was to speak about and he replied "something about coyotes". This caused a bit of an altercation in the sense the board had to converse on the topic and eventually denied the request. Coyotes are too hot a topic it would seem. And not to forget about Bonnie, she seems to hold the same reverence for coyotes as the Native Americans. She finds comfort in the songs that coyotes sing in the middle of the night. The hunt of coyotes is comparable to the hunt of her happiness and beliefs. Her stance changes the problem significantly because it makes it not just a matter of science but of spirit and conscience.

In Summary coyotes are a remarkable species that have faced the trials of the ages. They are comparable to humans in their intellect and resourcefulness. Coyotes are uncanny in their ability to cause both awe and loathing over an entire continent. One might never think that the phrase “the original bolshevik” and “Old Man America” would be referring to the same creature. The conservation nor the eradication is necessary for said animals. They have shown over the centuries that they can appropriately manage their own species. It is unjust for humans to assume to try to control the system that nature has been using for millennia. Ecosystems maintained balances long before humans were even mastering fire. In fact most of the issues that cause equilibrium to be thrown off are human caused. In any case, humans need to first manage their own population (though it is far too late to make any difference without radical action) before playing warden of the forest.

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