

Inherent Potential for PTSD Among Children Living in the Mexican Gray Wolf Reintroduction Area

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Introduction

In the spring of 1998 the Mexican gray wolf, on a list of endangered species, was reintroduced into ranching country in west-central New Mexico and east-central Arizona. The wolves in question had been primarily bred and hand raised in captivity.

The species was most probably endangered because the wolves had been systematically eliminated over a period of 150 years by ranchers who were settling the area and developing herds of beef cattle to support themselves and their families. The cattle industry in the west had become big business in the mid 1800s when, during the Civil War, the governments of both the North and the South were buying beef to feed their armies.

It was very apparent to the ranchers that wolves and cattle are not gregarious companions. It was also very apparent that wolves were also not compatible with the normal activities of family life within the ranching areas.

Ranching continued to be both a way of life and a profitable business in the areas above-described until the concept of “turning back the clock” became popular.

Americans are proud of their heritage. It is admirable to want to remember the past and preserve species that played a role in our lives. However, reintroducing wolves in the Southwest is about as intelligent as it would be to reintroduce smallpox.

Within a few years of the release of the initial wolves, it became apparent to the inhabitants of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico that the reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf was contributing to the demise of their lifestyles and their communities.

Of paramount concern to the population was the effect of the wolf reintroduction on the children in the region.

Study overview

As a medical doctor with a background in both pediatrics and child psychiatry, I was asked to meet with ranching children and their families within the reintroduction area to ascertain the psychological effects of the wolf program upon the children.

I was able to compare the results of the parent questionnaire which I had constructed for parents in the wolf reintroduction area with questionnaires circulated to ranching families in New Mexico and Arizona who do not reside in wolf country. This was made possible through the efforts of the Cattle Growers Associations in New Mexico and Arizona, thus obtaining a control group for evaluating my findings.

In my study group each child was seen face to face and personally interviewed by me between February 1 and March 15, 2007. Children were seen either in the schools which they attended or in their homes. Questionnaires were completed by the parents.

Weaknesses in this study include:

1. The lack of random selection of subjects from the wolf reintroduction area. (All the ranches in this area had been visited by wolves.)
2. Possibility of prejudice on the part of the author, relative to her residence on a ranch within the reintroduction area.
3. The relatively small numbers in each group. It should be noted that because the study involves ranching, the total population interviewed within the reintroduction area included at least 90% of all families with children living on actual working ranches within the area.

Results of the study:

To date questionnaires have been obtained from equal numbers of children living on ranches in both the wolf reintroduction area and the ranching areas of Arizona and New Mexico where the Mexican gray wolf has not been reintroduced. Several returns were not calibrated because of technical concerns (e.g. reports about children three years of age or less).

Within the reintroduction area parents report that:

93% of their children startle more easily (than prior to the wolves arriving).

87% of the children believe that the wolves are presenting a danger to themselves or family member. (Due to depredation of livestock and family pets, this IS a VERY REALISTIC concern).

80% of the children realize that they are HELPLESS to control or stop the events they see occurring around them because of wolves in proximity to their homes. One child watched her horse attacked and killed in the barnyard. She then ran up to the ranch house with one of the wolves in hot pursuit.

80% of children in the reintroduction area who previously slept in their own beds/bedrooms through the night now frequently get out of their beds during the night and come into their parents' rooms, wanting to get in bed with their parents.

73% of the children awaken in the night crying or screaming because of nightmares (not present prior to the wolf reintroduction).

73% of parents state that they believe that the wolf events which have occurred involving their children have been very traumatic for the children.

67% of parents whose children have been involved in wolf events report that their children have "become more clinging". Note: Among the children who have not been exposed to

wolves (control group) 40% are reported to have experienced recent traumatic events. None of these children are reported to have become more clinging.

53% of the children who have experienced traumatic events involving wolves now appear to be unable to remain focused during activities which they participated in for age appropriate lengths of time prior to their exposure to wolves.

None of the youngsters exposed to wolves are reputed to have exhibited any of the symptoms described above prior to their exposures to the Mexican gray wolf.

It is definitely noteworthy that the behaviors/symptoms described above constitute the major symptoms involved in the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Questionnaires returned from ranches outside of the wolf reintroduction area indicate that 40% of these youngsters have experienced one or more recent traumatic events not involving wolves. 20% of these children have recently developed a fear of snakes. 10% are having trouble staying focused on the events they were usually able to stick with for age appropriate periods.

Summary

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a major psychiatric illness. While it may exist short term, and dissipate when precipitating factors (e.g. wolves) are removed, the disorder frequently becomes permanent. Occurring in childhood it may impede the child's normal psychological development. Certainly ongoing exposure to the events which led to the original symptoms can be expected to interfere with development of a stable psychological outlook.

The serious psychological problems currently being expressed by children in the wolf reintroduction areas of Arizona and New Mexico can best be addressed by the immediate relocation of the offending wolf population.

In researching the reintroduction project it is apparent that the ranching families within the area were not consulted prior to reintroduction of the wolves.

As a physician who has dealt with children now for 50 years, I am convinced that concerns for the welfare of the children involved must take precedence over any and all concerns for the wolf project.

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