

# Wolves vital for environment, economy of the north

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A sculpture of wolves howling at the moon and northern lights, carved into limestone, on a granite rock face in Thompson.

Although he has studied wolves (among other creatures) in the wild for many years now, wildlife biologist Dr. Gilbert Proulx is still in awe of those iconic and elusive apex predators.

He refers to the wolf as a "spirit animal."

Proulx, the director of science at Alpa Wildlife and Research Management Ltd. in Sherwood Park, Alta., is a self-described "field-oriented scientist" with an interest in wildlife ecology and management. He was one of four keynote speakers at the Second International Wolf and Carnivore Conference, held Oct. 18-19 in Thompson. The first such conference was held in 2012.

About 50 people from Canada, the U.S. and Russia attended the conference, which was organized by Spirit Way Inc., a non-profit community-based organization whose mandate is to develop Thompson tourist initiatives and community-pride projects (including a scenic 2.5-kilometre walking and biking pathway from the Heritage North Museum to the Miles Hart Bridge).

The conference was opened with a blessing by Cree Elder Jack Robinson, who said Thompson is a "truly wonderful" community and a perfect place to set up a Wolf Centre. "If you learn about wolves, you learn about yourself," said Proulx, whose address at the conference was titled, "Are wolves responsible for moose and caribou decline?"

By chance, the conference took place during Wolf Awareness Week, a time set aside "to celebrate these important animals, highlight the threats to their survival, and spread the word about what you can do to help wolves stay protected and help humans learn to live alongside them," according to online information from the U.S.-based organization Defenders of Wildlife.

"We knew that there was a wolf awareness week, but it was purely by coincidence that the conference was held at the same time," said Volker Beckmann, the event's manager and a volunteer project director with Spirit Way since its inception in 2004. "We wanted to give people the option to go to Churchill to see polar bears beforehand and to see the Northern Lights."

He noted that Thompson is starting to become recognized as a centre for wolf and carnivore expertise, and added that Spirit Way is currently working on a strategic plan for a Wolf Centre of Excellence.

An information sheet that was included in the fact-filled folder handed out to all conference participants listed 11 reasons why Thompson and region is now known as the "Wolf Capital of the World."

Among those facts are that thousands of wolves roam in the wilderness of northern Manitoba, the public wolf art on display in Thompson (specifically the 10-storey Robert Bateman wolf mural), dozens of beautifully painted wolf statues and a large rock-face wolf sculpture that reflect the interest, support and respect for this animal species.

Aboriginal peoples have "a strong history, respect and connection" for the wolf in their creation stories, and the construction of a world-class wolf exhibit at the new Boreal Discovery Centre will let people see and learn about live wolves year-round.

"We want to create a wolf economy to capture the tourists going to and from Churchill," Beckmann explained.

All the speakers at the conference, including several graduate students and wildlife managers, gave concise PowerPoint presentations.

Besides Dr. Proulx, the other keynote presenters were Russian polar-bear specialist Dr. Nikita Ovsyanikov, who spoke on "Polar Bears and Climate Change," Erin McCloskey, a biologist and the author of the 2011 book *Wolves in Canada*, and U.S. wildlife biologist Dr. David Mech, whose presentation was titled "Are wolves responsible for moose and caribou decline?"

Sadie Parr, executive director of Wolf Awareness, gave a terse Skype report on western Canada's "mismanagement" of wolves.

She noted that wolf-reduction experiments in Alberta and British Columbia authorized the shooting of wolves from helicopters "in failing experiments" to increase declining caribou numbers under the guise of conservation.

"Beginning in 2005, around Alberta's Little Smoky caribou herd range, more than 1,000 wolves have been killed in strangling snares, gunned down from helicopters and poisoned using elk and moose meat laced with strychnine," Parr said.

Marion Morberg, the marketing and advertising president of Spirit Way, emphasized that the conference renewed her passion for Thompson as the Wolf Capital of the World.

"Because we all live here, we're all very naive to the issues about wolves and the environment," Morberg said. "How fortunate our community is to have a virgin, intact boreal forest. So, it's vital that we pay attention, otherwise it will disappear on us. This is one of the last places on Earth for wolves to roam wild. For me, personally, it's all about keeping our forest intact and healthy."

She also believes that not only would jobs be created for the North, but wildlife tourists and researchers would be attracted from around the world.

One came away from the conference impressed with the vision, energy and commitment of those involved with Spirit Way. They are playing to their strengths as a community set within the boreal forest. It could be a model for 21st-century ecotourism development in other parts of Manitoba.

*Martin Zeilig is a Winnipeg writer.*

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