

# Rejoinder to “Discernment and Precaution: A Response to Cochrane and Mech”

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THE 2012 ARTICLE BY VUCETICH ET AL. in *The George Wright Forum*, which launched the discussion in this journal about the future of wolves in Isle Royale National Park, declares that an “appropriate approach is to acknowledge and understand all the values at stake and then develop a perspective or position that would least infringe upon that set of values.” Earlier they warn of a common mistake of “having a dismissive attitude about others’ [ethics]...” (Vucetich et al. 2012: 127). And yet, in their response to my contribution to the discussion (Cochrane 2013), they are dismissive, asserting that I would “celebrate the extinction of wolves and moose from Isle Royale,” or that I am “perverse” to (supposedly) opt for extinction, or that my attitude is “misanthropic” (Vucetich et al. 2013: 333, 334). Vucetich et al. routinely mischaracterize my perspective, often extrapolating questions into a position I did not state, nor have. Clearly this is not an exercise in “understanding all values.”

To paraphrase Shakespeare, perhaps they doth protest too much. In the public debate about what should be done at Isle Royale much has been said and contemplated. The single most important point that has not yet been included is a consideration of the substantial vested interests of the principal authors and institutions involved. This is a surprising lacuna, especially since two of the authors are environmental ethicists.

Vested interest in science is not necessarily bad. However, when scientists choose also to adopt an advocacy role, as Vucetich et al. have, then the question becomes how such interests are handled and whether they rise to the level of bias within that advocacy role. Two of the authors have profound professional vested interests (career advancement, reputation, meeting large research funding expectations) that align with their professed stance of genetic rescue of wolves and the continuation of the long-term wolf-moose study. Genetic rescue would generate further public interest, expanded research opportunities, and even the personal reward of living part of the year in the national park. Two of the authors are employed by Michigan Technological University, which “celebrates” this study in press releases and websites, making the wolf-moose study perhaps the most important public research symbol for the university. The park and the National Park Service have been extolling this study and the animals involved for decades, generating another vested interest. While I am not sug-

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gesting that any of this has biased the science behind the wolf–moose study, it does raise the question of whether it may have affected how the authors have advocated for their position.

So is there evidence that these vested interests might create a bias in this policy debate? There are word choices that tend to the dramatic (“extinction” versus “extirpation”), claims of global lessons to be learned, and an alarmist tradition detailed by Mech (2013: 327). There are forays of the authors into disciplines for which they are untrained. For example, one of the authors, a wildlife biologist, made a social science instrument that was given to park visitors who visited the study’s research station in the park. None of the authors are historians, yet they are comfortable suggesting that latter-day accounts of moose swimming near the main island is a more historically compelling explanation than an eyewitness oral history account. Ironically, the discipline in which I am most active, ethnohistory, routinely addresses observer bias. To draw a comparison with another field, scientists doing research in medicine are very sophisticated in how bias and a conflict of interest might affect research results.

The debate about what should be done at Isle Royale National Park is both a policy and scientific debate. Or, as Vucetich et al. rightly say, the decision will “involve values that compete in complex ways” (Vucetich et al. 2012: 137). That is why vested interests, and the possibility of a conflict of interest, needs to be effectively addressed. So far, the authors have forced the discussion to focus on others’ supposed ethical issues and not their own. The position they advocate would be more persuasive and believable if they would thoroughly address these vested interests that directly align with their policy choice. Further, the authors cannot convincingly wear the mantle of scientific objectivity while at the same time adopting advocacy roles in which they would be the beneficiaries. Even the more esoteric questions of whether one scientific discipline should be privileged (population genetics versus island biogeography) is an exercise, in part, about values. In policy and values discussions, the authors are advocating a perspective that is more likely to be deeply predisposed than those who have “no canid in the fight.”

## References

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