Why Wolves?

In North America, Indigenous people have a long history with wolves, first as friends, then as teachers. The wolves are great teachers and protectors. Other cultures, however, have different perspectives. Although wolves were seldom seen, their howls were enough to remind the newly settled farmers that packs of wolves were nearby, and they perceived the wolves as a threat to their livelihoods. As these communities pushed into the forests and meadows, livestock brought to provide food and transportation became available prey for wolves. Farmers trapped and hunted wolves to eliminate the threat of predation on their livestock. During this time, coyote populations were limited to the western interior of the country. They were unknown to the communities of the eastern United States.

As the population of the United States grew and the westward expansion pushed more settlers into the Great Plains and the West, conflicts with wolves intensified. Farmers and ranchers demanded the government provide assistance in eliminating the predation on their animals. By the late 1800s, the wolf's primary food sources—elk, deer, and bison—were being reduced by hunters and settlers across the West. Cattle, horses, and other livestock now became even more attractive as food for wolves. The government offered bounties on wolves and stepped up their organized predator eradication efforts. Even in Yellowstone National Park, poisoned elk carcasses set out were effective at killing multiple wolves while trapping and hunting also reduced the population.

By 1926, the last wolf was killed in Yellowstone. Only a small number of wolves were found in the northern Great Lakes region. Even with the local extinction of wolves, some bounties existed until the 1960s. However, as the science of ecology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, land managers began to see the value of predators in systems, and efforts to save and restore wolves began.

1. Use the information from Student Sheet 4.3.A: *Comparing Canids* to create an explanation about why wolves were the target of predator control efforts to the point of near extinction in the lower 48 states while coyotes did not see a similar fate.