The landscapes of the Northern Rockies are vast and seemingly boundless. These landscapes, and the wildlife that inhabit them, have been honored and held sacred by native peoples for millennia. During Lewis and Clark’s epic journey through the region, they were both humbled by the scale of the natural features and enthralled by what Lewis referred to as “scenes of visionary enchantment” (Duncan, 2004). Those of us who live, work and recreate here today are united over a similarly shared appreciation of these wildlands, though we at times clash over differing perspectives when it comes to managing the land.

Wildlife conservation and management, especially concerning large carnivores like wolves and bears, has been one area of notable divisiveness in the region. While many people value the place of large carnivores in the Northern Rockies, these predators can be a threat to rural livelihoods when they attack or kill domestic livestock. This type of human-carnivore conflict often leads to bitter disputes between groups like ranchers, landowners, government agencies and conservation organizations.

Yet in November 2018, in a small conference room in Eureka, Montana, the discussion moved from conflict to collaboration as representatives from these groups gathered to consider a space where their goals could be met by working together. As the room filled and additional chairs were added to an expanding circle, seats were taken by individuals whose attire spoke to their diverse interests and affiliations: from cowboy hats to camouflage to agency uniforms to outdoor-apparel.

Attendees traveled from many parts of the state to discuss the outcome of a pilot project aimed at preventing livestock-carnivore conflicts by employing a USDA Wildlife Services range rider, who patrolled cattle grazing allotments from May through September 2018 in an effort to monitor and deter carnivore activity around livestock. The positive results and feedback shared among the group of partners suggested that the project has benefited all of those involved, including longtime ranchers, their domestic animals and native wildlife.

The handshakes, encouraging updates and friendly jokes that filled the two-hour meeting in Eureka were a (perhaps unapparent) product of many years of “holding space” — a term used to indicate a willingness to share a journey without judgment or a pre-defined destination — between unexpected allies. In this article we describe the process that allowed us — USDA Wildlife Services, Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders) and Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) — to form a non-traditional partnership in the name of reducing conflicts between livestock and predators.

How it began
The collaborative efforts began in 2015 when Wildlife Services Montana State Director John Steuber implemented the state’s first ever “integrated predator damage management workshop,” bringing producers, agencies and conservation organizations into the same room for presentations and discussions about nonlethal methods in the toolbox for livestock and wildlife conflict mitigation. These workshops have continued annually and are now regular events in other states. It was only a few months later in 2015 when Steuber and NRDC staff attorney Zack Strong shook hands with a cautious optimism and agreed to try an experimental project working with each other and with ranchers to install turbo fladry — an electrified wire strung with flags that flap in the wind — around livestock.
pastures throughout western Montana. Turbo fladry has been an increasingly popular tool to deter wolves from vulnerable livestock — especially calving pastures (Lance et al. 2010, Wilson et al. 2017, Young et al. 2018). Conversations later evolved with Russell Talmo from Defenders around their ongoing and extensive use of electric fencing to secure grizzly bear attractants, which brought additional tools and another partner into the fold.

Our collaboration has flourished since that first project in 2015, growing in the number of participating groups and individuals and in the diversity of projects. Wildlife Services, Defenders of Wildlife and NRDC have partnered to complete 54 projects in Montana since 2016. In February 2018, we formalized our collaboration by participating in a cost-sharing agreement to hire a Wildlife Services conflict prevention specialist. Funded by NRDC, Defenders and Wildlife Services, this newly created position, aimed solely at implementing nonlethal tools on the ground, was precedent setting.

Over the first year, the specialist successfully completed 29 projects that include individual enclosures, such as turbo fladry, to protect calving pastures and electric fences to protect livestock, chicken coops and bee yards. Many of these projects included Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks wolf and bear specialists, who frequently partner with Wildlife Services on depredation investigations as well as other nongovernmental organizations. A few months after hiring this specialist, we added Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Vital Ground — a foundation focused on grizzly bear conservation — to our partnership. Together, we pooled resources to hire a second Wildlife Services employee also focused on conflict prevention — the range rider position described earlier in this article.

Through the funding of these new Wildlife Services conflict prevention positions in Montana, our collaboration put forth intentional effort to move toward a more cohesive and institutionalized approach for reducing conflicts on the ground. As a result, we are discovering the power and progress that comes from combining our strengths, despite our differences and historical struggles to find common ground. By pooling our skills, resources and experiences, our capacity grows synergistically, and we are increasingly able to overcome common obstacles like lack of funding, lack of participation and an inability to get these preventive tools into the hands of those in need.

Two electrified fence night pens were built to protect this Rocky Mountain Front flock after at least 12 sheep were killed by grizzly bear depredations over six weeks in the summer of 2018. The pens were a collaborative project spearheaded by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks involving USDA Wildlife Services, Defenders and NRDC.
Why did this happen in Montana? This is a question Steuber was asked at the International Wolf Symposium in Minneapolis in October 2018. Perhaps the initial departure from the norm was sparked by a few key individuals, including Steuber, who showed willingness to try a new approach to managing longstanding conflicts. However, a combination of circumstances made Montana a likely stage for this kind of collaboration to develop. Montana is one of the few states that has both grizzly bears and wolves over a large portion of the state. A major selling point among Montana livestock producers is that, unlike lethal removal of grizzly bears or wolves, which is only an option under specific circumstances after depredation, we can provide conflict deterrence tools like turbo fladry and electric fencing before losses occur. Many producers report being able to sleep better at night knowing their livestock have another line of defense.

Finding common ground
While our day-to-day work might make us appear unlikely allies, the similarities of our mission statements make it easy to find common ground. NRDC works to safeguard the earth — its people, its plants and animals and the natural systems on which all life depends. Defenders is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. The mission of USDA Wildlife Services is to provide federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist. Our overlapping missions and work create a common runway from which we can launch cooperative efforts to work directly with producers who also have a vested interest in trying more proactive approaches to protect property and avoid wildlife conflicts.

Wildlife Services has expertise in managing wildlife damage through lethal removal of animals that can pose a threat to humans and their property, including livestock. However, the agency has used conflict prevention tools for years in specific states and referred producers to these tools. In the 1980s, Wildlife Services conducted livestock guard dog research, and in the late 1990s, a Wildlife Services employee and his wife sewed turbo fladry in their Idaho home. Wildlife Services has used fladry in Wisconsin to protect livestock from wolves and electric fencing in Maine and New Hampshire to deter black bears. At the national level, Wildlife Services created a position in 2009 to coordinate and encourage the use of conflict prevention tools by producers, Wildlife Services staff and other organizations, but did not have funds to provide sufficient tools and dedicated staff to widely implement preventive methods.

Our organizations — Defenders, NRDC and Wildlife Services — openly acknowledge that we have substantial differences. After years of litigation and
well-publicized conflicts, we now agree to disagree on polarizing issues like the use of traps and toxicants. Despite our contentious history and these continued differences, we are focusing on the goals we have in common. We all want to reduce unnecessary losses — to people and to the environment. We agree that we need to expand the collective toolkit and find new ways to reduce conflicts. Finding common ground by holding space for our differences opens doors to what might seem an unlikely dialog — whether it be between our organizations or between neighbors.

One way our collaboration leads to progress is by relying on evidence-based science whenever possible, though there is a broadly recognized need for additional, high quality research on the effectiveness of livestock-carnivore conflict prevention tools (van Eeden et al. 2018). Where we reach the limits of knowledge, we partner with the research branch of Wildlife Services — the National Wildlife Research Service (NWRC) — to test questions and uncertainties in the field.

For example, turbo fladry was identified as an effective means of deterring wolves from attractants through studies with captive and wild wolves (Musiani et al. 2003 and Lance et al. 2010). We used our 22 turbo fladry projects conducted over three years between 2016 and 2018 to add to the body of evidence that turbo fladry can be an effective tool for preventing conflicts between livestock and wolves in certain settings (Young et al. 2018). This study was part of efforts to expand the use of turbo fladry in other western states including Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon. Thanks to the demonstrated success of fladry and experience gained in its practical applications, the combined efforts and resources of our partnership resulted in the rapid expansion of Wildlife Services’ stock of fladry to include at least 15 miles of the flagged fence line in nine western states where little to no fladry existed previously.

In addition to fladry, NWRC is also conducting novel research on the effectiveness of European guard dog breeds for protecting livestock from wolves and bears (e.g. Kinka & Young, 2018), with real-life implications for ranchers who are learning to live alongside large carnivores. Meanwhile, the use of electric fencing to deter bears from accessing various types of agricultural practices, from apiaries and chicken coops to small livestock pastures and agricultural crops, is well documented (Jonker 1998, Lewis et al. 2015). Collectively, these studies guide our work on the ground and point to new directions for preventing livestock-carnivore conflicts.

**Building bridges by building fences**

In an increasingly polarized and complex socio-political climate, building partnerships between conservation groups, agencies and landowners is no easy task. All too often, it seems that groups are labeled as a whole, based on information that may or may not be representative of the individuals who work for or support them. These prejudices can lead to real or perceived barriers to collaboration which hinder long-term progress.

![Image of USDA Wildlife Services Field Specialist Ted North shaking hands with NRDC’s Zack Strong](Credit: USDA Wildlife Services)

**USB Wildlife Services Field Specialist Ted North shakes hands with NRDC’s Zack Strong across turbo fladry they installed to protect a spring calving pasture in northwestern Montana.**

![Image of Turbo fladry protecting a calving pasture in northwestern Montana](Credit: USDA Wildlife Services)

**Turbo fladry protects a calving pasture in northwestern Montana.**
In Montana, open-minded individuals have created new space for collaboration between their respective agencies and organizations by building one-on-one relationships. By getting to know each other, we have watched assumptions and biases diminish and common ground become easier to identify, particularly after spending the day swinging a hammer or stringing wire shoulder to shoulder. When we come together over a project, whether on a conference line or a fence line, we see each other as individuals. Out in the field, it can feel like friends or neighbors getting together for a community barn building. It’s the lingering conversations along those fence lines that continue to reinforce our common mission. When we are out working on a project, everyone stands on the same ground.

Without formalizing any rules of collaboration, there have been a number of important principles that help us navigate the path towards progress. We value our shared goals, clear communication and joint ownership of our projects. Feedback, patience and mutual respect help us build trust in one another.

While these tenets formed organically, they bear a marked resemblance to some of the values of a different, community-driven collaboration that set a standard in Montana: the Blackfoot Challenge. In Human-Wildlife Interactions, Wilson et al. (2017) describe the approach of “the landowner-driven partnership working to enhance, conserve and protect the natural resources and rural lifestyle” in the Blackfoot Valley as a belief “that effective partnerships and working relationships are based on trust, respect, credibility and the ability to empathize across a diversity of values.” In addition, our collaboration has seen the importance of learning, adapting and remaining flexible so that we can continue this work in the future and forge new paths for achieving our goals.

Partnering has allowed us to share risks and benefits to develop synergy, resulting in outcomes that none of our organizations could have achieved working alone. We cannot overstate the importance of individuals being willing to set aside differences, deviate from cultural norms and trust each other to the formation of this successful partnership. By holding space for each other in this collaboration, we hope to find space for large carnivores and livestock in today’s Western landscapes. We hope this collaboration serves as a model for future conservation initiatives that seek to balance the needs of humans and wildlife in increasingly divisive times.
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