



# MARK CARWARDINE

## WILD THOUGHTS

The farming lobby is crying wolf yet again. Research by the University of Oslo combined a public opinion survey with computer models to predict the impact of reintroduced wolves on Scotland's red deer population. They found that most people (having been assured that attacks by wolves on humans are extremely rare) liked the idea of them returning to the Scottish Highlands. Farmers were a little concerned but, typically, "far less negative than the organisations that represent them."

The farming lobby has a disproportionate influence on many issues. It, and the state vets who give it succour, is responsible for the Government's 'kill badgers' mantra that has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of badgers with no long-term impact on the incidence of TB. And it made sure that farming took precedence over tourism during the recent foot-and-mouth crisis – even though it's of considerably less value to the economy.

Farmers are certainly more positive about wolves than the farming lobby pretends. Some sheep would be eaten, but many sheep farms operate at a loss and survive on subsidies anyway. The study's computer models revealed how its virtual wolves kept Scotland's 400,000-strong red deer population under control, and in real life, this would save landowners from expensive deer culls, encourage reforestation and improve wildlife diversity.

Elsewhere in Europe, wolves wander across international borders and re-establish themselves without intervention. As an island, we would have to make a conscious decision to reintroduce wolves after an absence of 260 years, but we get in a pickle over foxes, so no wonder we're prevaricating over their larger relatives.

Tooth and Claw – a project designed to improve awareness of Britain's predators – points out that "managing predators in Britain today is about managing people's perceptions." Perhaps if the farming lobby wasn't so determined to give this dog a bad name, wolf reintroductions could be a howling success.

**We get in a pickle over foxes, so no wonder we're prevaricating over wolves.**