

Wolves in the West

What big quotas!

SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

Western Republicans would like to see more wolves killed

IN 1915, WITH WAR waging in Europe, America's Congress had a different conflict in mind. That year it appropriated \$125,000 (equivalent to \$4m now) for the purpose of "destroying wolves, coyotes, and other animals injurious to agriculture". By the 1930s there were essentially no wolves in the western United States (some survived in the upper Midwest). It was not until the 1990s that a few—at first imported from Canada—were reintroduced. Around 2,600 now roam between Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Some would like to wipe them out again.

In Montana, after six hours of debate at a meeting in August, the state's fish and wildlife commission authorised a quota for hunters and trappers of 452 grey wolves. That is equivalent to two-fifths of the state's estimated *canis lupus* population. A single Montanan hunter can now get a licence to kill up to 30 wolves, spread between a 15-wolf hunting and a 15-wolf trapping permit. On private land, hunters can use thermal rifle scopes. The eventual aim is to get the population down to 450 wolves in the state, the lowest sustainable level as determined by a 1987 plan to guide the species's reintroduction.

What did the wolves do to deserve this? "Every calf lost to wolves is a blow to my family's livelihood," said Nancy Conover, a rancher from Dillon, Montana, at the commission hearing (though ranchers do get compensation for livestock). Justin Webb of the Foundation for Wildlife Management in Idaho, a



Wanted: dead

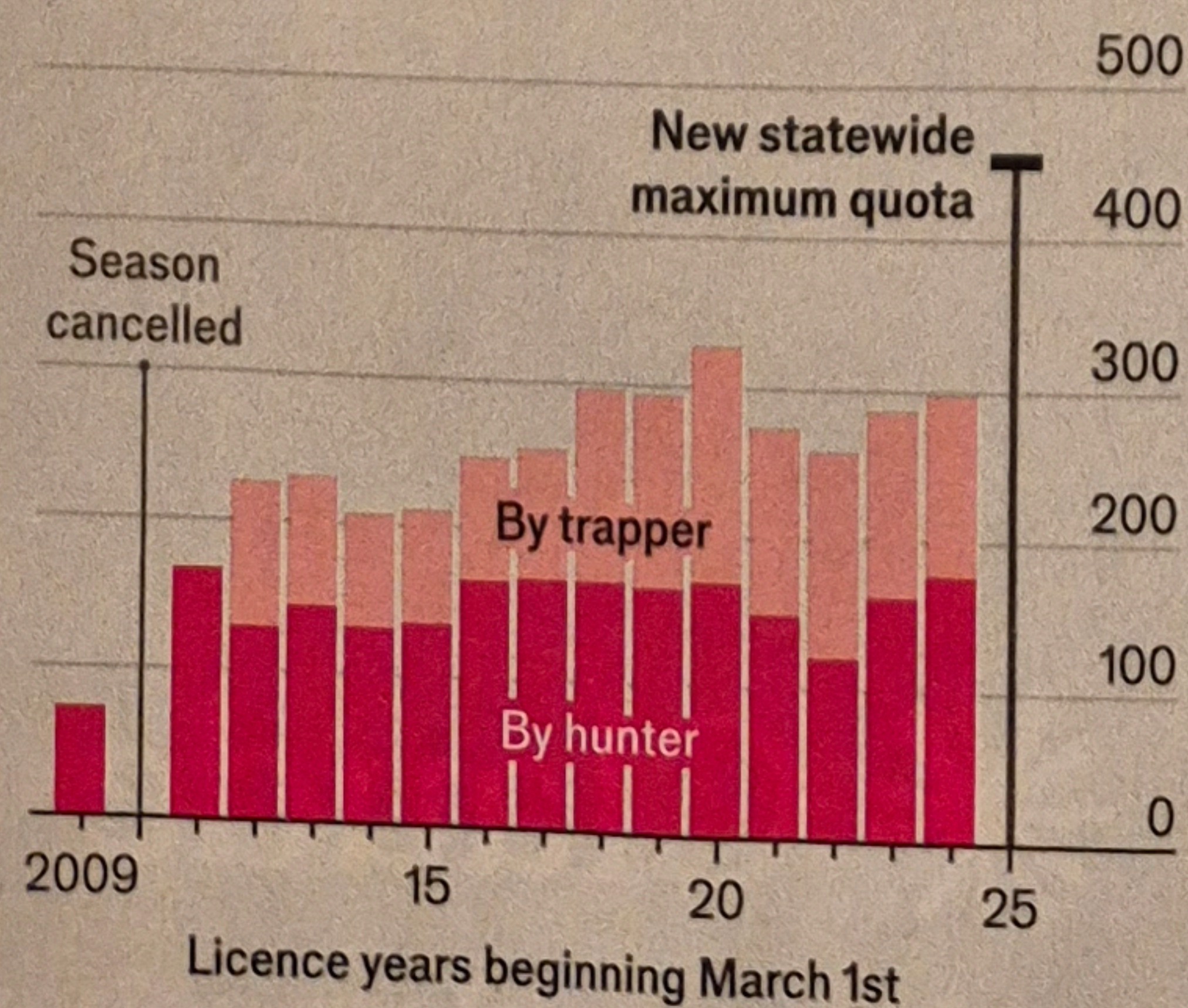
pro-hunting group, accused regulators of "bowing to preservation extremists". Unless Montana shrinks wolf numbers, he warned, the legislature may strip the wildlife agency of authority altogether.

Conservationists are horrified. The Center for Biological Diversity, a charity, says that "the cruelty in Montana is extreme". People in the tourist trade are also upset. "A wolf close to Yellowstone National Park has great economic value," said Jim Bell, a Bozeman business owner, noting that wildlife watching generates far more for the state's economy than hunting wolves does.

Since the wolf in the Northern Rockies was first delisted from federal protection in 2011, allowing hunting, the population has fallen. In August a federal court ordered the state to do more to protect wolves. To Republicans, that reeks of federal overreach. The spokeswoman for Greg Gianforte, Montana's governor, said that this was "another activist decision in favour of environmental extremists". The wolf population, she argued, is "healthy and sustainable". His administration has backed higher quotas, bounties of up to \$1,000 per kill and trapping methods like neck snares. Still, fewer than 2% of licensed hunters kill a wolf. For all the heat, few Montanans actually want to pull the trigger.

To the moon

Montana, wolves harvested



Source: Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Letters wolves and ranchers
Bannon, voting in An
York, barefoot runnin

Dire times for wolves

Your article about Montana's decision to allow the hunting of more wolves portrayed a "battle between farmers and conservationists", describing the debate and its participants as heated and horrified ("What big quotas!", October 4th). I recently spent a month in the American West interviewing hunters, ranchers and conservationists about wolves. I encountered only moderation. Ranchers explained that despite compensation payments for livestock lost to predation, it hurt them to see the animals they raised ripped apart by the wolves. Similarly, hunters, who placed great importance on making clean kills to minimise animal suffering, were disturbed by the wolves' ruthlessness in bringing down elk and other prey.

But when I pushed ranchers and hunters they almost always said they would not eradicate wolves. Their reasons varied. Wolves belong in the ecosystem; local people like to hunt them so it's good to have some around; they understand that much of the land is public and other people want wild carnivores on it. They lamented that a minority of radicals gave them all a bad name.

In this they were at one with conservationists, who explained how extreme voices within their movement vilified ranchers and hunters, making it hard to collaborate with these groups. Given the extent to which wolves tap into broader social and political divisions (liberal versus conservative, rural versus urban), and the deeply polarised times in which we live, we would do well to amplify the moderate majority and sideline the radical few.

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