



Maureen Hackett, founder and president of wolf advocacy group Howling for Wolves, gives an Earth Day presentation to students at the School of Environmental Studies in Apple Valley on April 22. (Photo: Kevin Featherly)

Maureen Hackett: Leading the pack

By: Nancy Crotti April 30, 2014 0

Some people give Maureen Hackett a hard time because she has never seen a wolf in the wild. The closest she has come was seeing their paw prints in the snow while dogsledding.

That doesn't bother Hackett, founder of Howling for Wolves, a nonprofit organization that advocates for Minnesota's gray wolf population.

"When I tell that to people it's like, 'How dare you say what happens to them if you haven't seen them?'" she says. "I'm basically a wildlife enthusiast and I always have been. I'm also extremely concerned about ecology and our environment."

The gray wolf was nearing extinction in the lower 48 states when the federal government put it on the endangered species list in 1974. The Obama administration removed wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan from that list in 2012, declaring that more than 4,000 wolves in those states had recovered from widespread extermination. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources began allowing wolf hunting and trapping the same year to manage the wolf population.

The DNR divided the wolf hunt into two time frames: an early hunting-only season, which coincides with firearms deer hunting season, and a late hunting and trapping season. The first hunt, in 2012, netted 413 wolves, 13 more than the DNR's goal. Last year's late hunting season closed more than a month early because hunters and trappers had killed 237 wolves, 17 more than planned by the DNR.

"It's hard to kill them [but] it's easier to kill them when you have several hundred thousand deer hunters in the woods," Hackett says.

A forensic psychiatrist, she went to high school in Chicago and attended a small liberal arts college in Lake Forest, Illinois, before enrolling in medical school at Northwestern University in 1983.

Hackett joined the Air Force and did a one-year medical internship and a three-year residency in psychiatry at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. In 1994 and 1995, she did a fellowship in forensic neuropsychiatry at Tulane University Medical Center in New Orleans.

The opportunity to live near her nieces and nephews plus a love of the outdoors drew Hackett to Minnesota 19 years ago.

The wolf issue wasn't Hackett's first exposure to politics, but it did propel her into action. She briefly ran for Congress in 2010, aided by state Sen. Chris Eaton, the DFL Majority Whip and a friend and author of two bills supporting the cause.

"I got in because it seemed like a done deal and nobody even knew about it," Hackett says of the wolf hunt. "It was a matter of democracy; it was a matter of policy and process. I really thought Minnesota could be the place that would show the rest of the country that these animals can exist and we don't need to rush to a hunt."

Through Howling for Wolves — not a membership organization — Hackett enlists support via online petitions and brings her message personally to the Capitol. Hackett had a rough start there last year, according to Eaton.

“She’s learning the politics and has actually hired some people to help her with that. I think she’s doing a better job with connecting with legislators” this session, Eaton says. “She had a little difficulty with offending some of them initially because she’s so passionate.”

Working with farmers

Wolf-protection bills currently in the Legislature include:

- HF 3196, authored by DFL Rep. Peter Fischer of Maplewood, to prohibit wolf trapping and baiting, and snaring of any animals, and increase penalties for violations related to wolves.
- HF 2680, authored by DFL Rep. Jason Isaacson of Shoreview, to modify wolf management provisions, limit wolf baiting and temporarily suspend the wolf hunt. It’s been referred to the Environment and Natural Resources Policy Committee, and Eaton’s companion bill in the Senate, SF 2256, is in the Committee on Finance.
- SF 666, which would reinstate the wolf-hunting moratorium, authored by Eaton; Isaacson authored its companion bill in the House, HF 1163, which is also in the Environment and Natural Resources Policy Committee.

Although HF 1163 has 10 co-sponsors, Eaton doesn’t expect it or the other bills to go far this year. Senators and legislators have to vote on them and get their stance on the public record first, she says.

Still, Eaton credits Hackett’s efforts with changes in the wolf hunt.

“I don’t think that the decreases in the hunting season and the number of wolves they’d hunt would have happened if it wasn’t for her organization,” Eaton says. “She is making an impact.”

Hackett maintains that ending the hunt would help the wolves and the environment. Without the threat from predator wolves to keep them on the move, deer defoliate much more land than they might, she says. This causes erosion near streams, leading to more runoff and harming other species.

Hackett says she is willing to work with farmers on nonlethal methods of keeping wolves at bay. Howling for Wolves recently applied for a grant from the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources to fund removal of animal carcasses that attract wolves to farmland. The commission makes funding recommendations to the legislature for special environment and natural resource projects.

Hackett has met with farmers, and had two testify in January on behalf of wolf-saving legislation. “They went to make it clear that they don’t necessarily want to kill all the wolves, but they don’t want to be told what to do,” she says.

The organization’s petition to Minnesota legislators has attracted about 70,000 signatures from state residents and

The organization's petition to Minnesota legislators has attracted about 7,000 signatures from state residents and others. Cindy Elgren of Robbinsdale, who describes herself as "a huge animal lover," got involved with Howling for Wolves when she saw the group's first television ads in 2012.

"The wolves, they are such a critical species for the health of the environment," Elgren says. "The wolf is clearly an issue that is obviously very divisive, but it affects everybody. So much of it is happening as a result of politics, and ugly politics, I think."

Elgren says Hackett inspires her.

"She's an incredibly strong leader, I think, and I have learned so much from her. She's not afraid to go out there and fight the good fight, fight for what she believes in," Elgren says. "She just dove right in. Not a lot of people would do that."

THE HACKETT FILE

Name: Maureen Hackett

Job: Founder of Howling for Wolves

Age: 53

Grew up in: Ohio

Lives in: Minnetonka

Education: M.D., Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois, 1987; B.A., chemistry and biology, Lake Forest College, Lake Forest, Illinois, 1983.

Family: Husband, Roman, and daughter, Marianna.

Hobbies: Swimming, bicycling, getting out in nature.

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MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES



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