CHAPTER 7

Attitudes and Perceptions About Prairie Dogs

Berton Lee Lamb, Richard P. Reading, and William F. Andelt

We sometimes get the impression that all ranchers and farmers of the western United States hate prairie dogs, and that people everywhere else love them. This generality contains elements of truth, but better documentation of attitudes and perceptions is paramount for good conservation. In this chapter we examine attitudes and perceptions about prairie dogs, and how state and federal actions affect these viewpoints. We also investigate how wildlife managers might respond to attitudes and perceptions about prairie dogs.

Attitudes and Perceptions

People in western states who are directly affected by prairie dogs (i.e., human stakeholders) include ranchers, farmers, environmentalists, public land and wildlife managers, outdoor recreationists, Native Americans, political activists, and residents of some rural and urban areas. Except for those who identify themselves as "environmentalists" or urban residents, most people from other stakeholder groups dislike, or are apathetic about, prairie dogs (Randall 1976a; Dolan 1999; Reading et al. 1999; Lamb and Cline 2003). Because so many people live in urban areas, however, the majority of people express support for prairie dogs—but this support is generally weak. In a survey of residents in eleven states with prairie dogs, for example, 69% said that deciding the fate of prairie dogs was less important than other environmental issues or not an issue at all, whereas 31% said prairie dogs have the same or more importance than other issues (Sexton et al. 2001). The most common perception of prairie dogs among rural people is that they are pests. In 1989, for example, 78% of the gen-

eral public in western Kansas regarded prairie dogs as pests, and only 18% viewed them as ecologically important (Lee and Henderson 1989; see also Fox-Parrish 2002).

The most important factor that instills a negative attitude toward prairie dogs is direct experience with them (Zinn and Andelt 1999; Lamb et al. 2001). Farmers and ranchers usually express antagonism, for example, but urban dwellers usually like prairie dogs. Some people do not believe that the prairie dog is an important environmental issue, but nonetheless favor a balanced approach. The most important issues identified by citizens regarding prairie dogs are prevention of disease (42%), ranching and farming (25%), and protection of habitat (11%) (Sexton et al. 2001).

The attentive public consists of people who are knowledgeable and politically active about a subject that they view as important (Miller et al. 1996). Almost every issue concerning prairie dogs has an attentive public. Political participation (e.g., signing petitions, writing representatives, belonging to interest groups) is linked to knowledge about prairie dogs, and those who are politically active are more likely to appreciate the importance of conservation (Lamb and Cline 2003). In the sections that follow, we summarize the attitudes and perceptions of several groups regarding prairie dogs, with the understanding that great variation exists within each group.

Ranchers and Farmers

Most ranchers believe that prairie dogs compete with their domestic livestock for food, and that horses and cows break their legs if they step into prairie dog burrows. Consequently, ranchers generally dislike prairie dogs (Chace 1973; O'Meilia et al. 1982; Fox-Parrish 2002; McCain et al. 2002; Chapters 5, 17, and 18). Ninety-seven percent of ranchers in Montana favor reducing prairie dog populations, for example, and 91% believe that financial losses caused by prairie dogs on public lands are unacceptable (Reading and Kellert 1993; see also Kayser 1998). Ranchers in other states have similar perspectives (Lee and Henderson 1989; Wyoming Agricultural Statistics Service 2001; Fox-Parrish 2002).

A minority of ranchers favors the retention of small to medium-sized prairie dog colonies on public grazing-lands (Table 7.1) (Carr 1973; Reading 1993). Further, 23% of Wyoming ranchers, and especially those with ranches of more than 6,000 hectares (14,800 acres), would accept financial compensation for maintaining prairie dog colonies on their domains (Wyoming Agricultural Statistics Service 2001; see also Chapter 14). Many ranchers in Colorado would participate in a similar program administered by the Colorado Division of Wildlife; three counties, however, have threatened to pass

Table 7.1. Percentage of Montana residents who want different percentages of public land to be inhabited by prairie dogs. Reference: Reading et al. 1999.

	Percentage (%) of public lands that should be inhabited by prairie dogs			
Respondents	*0*	*<2*	*2–5*	*>5*
Ranchers	56	30	13	2
Rural residents	36	36	17	11
Urban residents	18	27	25	30
Conservation group members	7	21	27	46

regulations designed to discourage participation in this program (Reading et al. 2002, 2005).

In addition to the obvious financial concerns, ranchers dislike prairie dogs for the following four reasons, some of which have more subtle financial implications:

- Prairie dogs are symbols of poor land stewardship.
- Management of prairie dogs might lead to a loss of control over public and private grazing lands.
- Conservation of wildlife, especially for species protected by the Endangered Species Act, might lead to restrictions on ranching operations.
- Conservation of prairie dogs poses a threat to rural western lifestyles (Carr 1973; Reading and Kellert 1993; Reading et al. 1999, 2002).

Many western farmers also disdain prairie dogs. They worry that prairie dogs consume crops, that burrows drain fields of precious water, and that burrow-mounds damage farm equipment (USFS 1978; Fox-Parrish 2002).

Rural and Urban Residents

As for many other animals (Woodroffe et al. 2005), protecting prairie dogs is more important to suburban and urban residents than to rural residents (Table 7.2). Of the residents of Fort Collins, Colorado, who live adjacent to prairie dogs, 70% report problems with them; 84% of respondents living near prairie dogs, and 68% of the general population, favor management that includes poisoning, but also preservation (Zinn and Andelt 1999). Among the urban, suburban, and rural residents of Boulder County, Colorado, 73% agree,

and only 19% disagree, that prairie dogs should be controlled if they damage land; only one-third consider prairie dogs a nuisance and health hazard, whereas 41% consider them important members of the grassland ecosystem (The Public Information Corporation 1998). Wildlife managers are less likely to encounter opposition if they relocate, rather than poison, prairie dogs (Zinn and Andelt 1999; Chapter 13).

Men and Women

Perhaps because women usually have less direct experience with prairie dogs, four studies have shown that women are more likely than men to favor the conservation of prairie dogs (Reading 1993; The Public Information Corporation 1998; Lamb et al. 2001; Fox-Parrish 2002).

Hunters

Hunters are more favorable than nonhunters to the conservation of prairie dogs, for two reasons (Randall 1976b; Reading 1993). First, hunters are more aware that the prairie dog is a keystone species of the grassland ecosystem. Second, many hunters like to shoot prairie dogs. Most hunters, however, oppose the notion of reintroducing prairie dogs into areas where they are currently absent.

Environmentalists

More than two-thirds of the citizens of the United States call themselves environmentalists (Ungar 1994). However, environmentalism is a complicated

Table 7.2. Percentage of respondents living in or near shortgrass prairies who indicated high to low benefits for conserving prairie dogs on public and private lands. Reference: Sexton et al. 2001.

	Benefit from conservation of prairie dogs				
Respondents (%)	*High*		*Neutral*		*Low*
Urban	13	16	28	15	28
Suburban	6	11	22	16	44
Rural	5	9	22	14	51
All	8	12	23	15	42

indicator of attitudes and preferences, and individuals are commonly pro-environment on some issues and anti-environment on others (Guber 2003). Part of this variability reflects the ambiguity of the term "environmentalist," with some people focused on issues such as pollution while others are concerned about loss of biodiversity. Many environmentalists appreciate the keystone role of prairie dogs to the grassland ecosystem, and commonly favor the moral and ethical arguments for conserving prairie dogs as well (Reading and Kellert 1993; Graber et al. 1998; Reading et al. 1999). Most environmentalists expect benefits from careful management, and therefore regard conservation of prairie dogs as a serious issue (Lamb et al. 2001).

Native Americans

Some reservations allow recreational shooting of prairie dogs (Chapter 10), but most Native American tribes nonetheless appreciate the importance of conservation. The Sioux on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, for example, limit the number of licenses for recreational shooting (Graber et al. 1998; Dolan 1999), and the Cheyenne River Sioux have developed a conservation plan that emphasizes the keystone role of prairie dogs (Roemer and Forrest 1996). This emphasis probably results, at least in part, because several Native American tribes harvest prairie dogs for food—and therefore do not want them to disappear (Hoogland 1995; Bourland and Dupris 1998; Graber et al. 1998).

Effect of State and Federal Actions on Attitudes and Perceptions About Prairie Dogs

In response to the disdain of most ranchers and farmers for prairie dogs, many state and federal agencies have actively tried to eliminate prairie dogs—mainly via poisoning (Long 1998; Chapter 8), but also by encouraging recreational shooting (Chapter 10). The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has designated reintroduced populations of black-footed ferrets as "experimental and nonessential"; this designation frees landowners from legal responsibility if ferrets are harmed in the shooting or poisoning of prairie dogs, and consequently makes the landowners more likely to respond favorably to reintroductions. Until 2000, every state with prairie dogs designated them as pests and encouraged eradication. Many state and federal agencies (including the National Park Service) regularly have poisoned prairie dogs as part of "good-neighbor" policies (Chapters 15 and 17). Other states have required control of prairie dogs if a neighboring landowner demands it.

The view of prairie dogs by state and federal agencies is changing. In 2000, for example, USFWS designated the prairie dog as a candidate species for the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants (FLETWP) (USFWS 2000a; Chapter 12). Most states with prairie dogs are now participating in a multi-state conservation plan (Chapter 14). Further, state and federal agencies are considering incentive programs by which landowners will receive financial compensation if they maintain prairie dog colonies on their domains (Wyoming Agricultural Statistics Service 2001; Colorado Division of Wildlife 2002b, but see above; Chapter 14). Such changes in state and federal policies might lead to improved public perceptions of, and attitudes toward, prairie dogs, especially if agency personnel (from agricultural agencies, in particular) embrace these changes (Miller et al. 1990, 1996).

The petition to list the prairie dog as a threatened species (Graber et al. 1998; Chapter 12), and the subsequent designation of it as a candidate species for FLETWP (USFWS 2000a; Chapter 12), probably promoted positive attitudes among some human stakeholders. For other human stakeholders, however, the petition and designation as a candidate species perhaps promoted further disdain, which might have led to increased efforts to eradicate prairie dogs before they were eligible for rigorous protection following listing. We are unaware of quantitative data that support or refute these speculations.

In 2004, USFWS concluded that the prairie dog is no longer a candidate species for FLETWP (USFWS 2004). We suspect that some human stakeholders favor this reversal, and that others oppose it—but once again we have no rigorous information to support our speculation (but see Chapters 17 and 18).

How Should Wildlife Managers Respond to Public Attitudes and Perceptions About Prairie Dogs?

The conservation of prairie dog colonies and associated species such as black-footed ferrets, burrowing owls, and mountain plovers will require developing more positive attitudes and perceptions among key human stakeholders (Reading et al. 1999; Chapter 17). Because personal experience and peer pressure exert the greatest influence on attitudes and perceptions, the best results are likely to come from education programs that are comprehensive and practical, rather than simply informative (Reading and Kellert 1993). Such programs should work to correct misperceptions, and to cultivate positive attitudes (Reading et al. 1999).

Financial incentives for conserving prairie dogs perhaps provide the best hope for changing attitudes and perceptions (Chapters 10 and 14). But simply paying people to allow prairie dogs to persist supports the idea that they are

pests (Reading et al. 2005; Chapter 17). We need programs that reward landowners for adopting practices that maintain colonies and promote positive values about prairie dogs. The changing of attitudes that have evolved over many generations will be an onerous task. Thus, even well-designed programs probably will require years before significant changes in attitudes occur. Wildlife managers should work with agricultural and ranching agencies to develop innovative programs that recognize the value of prairie dogs to the grassland ecosystem, but minimize interference with farming and ranching.

Summary of Review of Literature

- Many ranchers believe that prairie dogs compete with their livestock for forage, and that a horse or cow will break a leg after stepping into a prairie dog burrow. Many farmers worry that prairie dogs consume crops, that burrows drain fields of precious water, and that burrow-mounds damage farm equipment.
- Many state and federal agencies actively have tried to eliminate prairie dogs. These actions support the notion that the prairie dog is a pest.
- The petition to list the prairie dog as an endangered species (in 1998), and the subsequent designation as a candidate species for FLETWP (in 2000), probably promoted positive attitudes among some human stakeholders and negative attitudes among others. The later removal of the prairie dog from the candidate list (in 2004) probably has had similar mixed results on attitudes among human stakeholders.
- The conservation of prairie dog colonies and associated species such as black-footed ferrets, burrowing owls, and mountain plovers will require developing more positive attitudes and perceptions among key human stakeholders. Financial incentives for conserving prairie dogs perhaps provide the best hope for changing attitudes and perceptions.
- Wildlife managers should work with agricultural and ranching agencies to develop innovative programs that recognize the value of prairie dogs to the grassland ecosystem but minimize interference with farming and ranching.

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Saving North America's Western Grasslands

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Edited by

John L. Hoogland

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