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The Working Circle: Wolves, Ranchers, and Karin Vardaman's Pursuit of the 'Radical Middle'

"Wolves are once again going to be a part of the landscape, and that is a reality we must accept going forward." - Karin Vardaman

"The wolf is neither saint nor sinner, except by those who make him so." - L. David Mech

On the evening of January 6, 2020, Karin Vardaman, co-founder and Executive Director of the non-profit organization Working Circle Proactive Stewardship (Working Circle), learned that a proposed initiative that would let Colorado voters decide whether or not to reintroduce wild wolves to the state had received enough signatures to appear on the ballot in November 2020. Among the Coloradans likely to oppose the reintroduction bill, which recent data suggested would pass,¹ were many of the state's ranchers (a.k.a. producers). They were also the people with whom Vardaman was eager to discuss how wolves and ranches could coexist and mutually thrive. Getting ranchers to engage in these conversations, and to do so constructively, was often difficult, but it was a challenge Vardaman increasingly believed she had the attributes, the experience, and the team to overcome.

Working Circle was established in 2016 in California to help resolve disputes often referred to as the "Wolf Wars."² On one side, environmental activists (including many biologists) defended wolves and argued for their return to their historic range. On the other, ranchers tended to hate and fear wolves. They generally opposed reintroduction, and often insisted that they be permitted to have wolves treated like vermin and killed.

Working Circle's approach to the conflict was unique. Although she was unapologetically pro-wolf, Vardaman maintained affection and respect for ranchers. Rather than treat them as the enemy, Working Circle strived to serve ranching communities and treat them as true partners. The Working Circle process involved engaging groups of ranchers at small workshops and meetings, gaining their trust, and then working with those producers, often on an individual level, to jointly devise solutions and practices that could reduce the stress and loss often experienced when operating in areas inhabited by wolves. To achieve this, Vardaman enlisted a core team of individuals with decades of combined experience amongst wolves and livestock. Her budget, like her team, remained small – approximately \$350,000 annually, the bulk coming from a single private donor.

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Since launching in 2016, Vardaman had made big breakthroughs with ranchers in California. Approximately 70% of the close to 150 producers she and her team met in Northern California continued to engage with the group on some level. In Oregon, where the rancher-versus-wolf debate had raged for longer, Vardaman faced a stiffer challenge, but by 2019 many Oregonians who were skeptical at first were electing to engage with the Working Circle. Colorado would present new challenges, in part because unlike Oregon and California, wolves were almost certain to return (at least in part) via reintroduction, not merely through the natural dispersal of existing wild populations (recolonization). Previous experience led Vardaman to suspect that this would lead to even greater animosity towards wolves, and wolf supporters. Although Working Circle chose to not endorse the reintroduction bill, Defenders of Wildlife, a wildlife conservation organization who partnered on a series of workshops in Colorado based on the Working Circle model, was officially in favor of reintroduction. In light of these factors, what changes might she need to make to Working Circle's approach and messaging?

The Colorado question was not the only one on Vardaman's mind. For its first few years, the Working Circle had operated under the umbrella of the California Wolf Center, a regional non-profit. In early 2018, due to concerns that the group was more closely affiliated with conservationists than with ranchers, Working Circle separated from the California Wolf Center. Although the Working Circle benefited in some ways from greater independence, Vardaman found herself increasingly occupied with administrative duties, such as fundraising and reporting. Going forward, she wished to devote more time to the work of creating greater understanding, respect and appreciation of diverse values and perspective so that different groups could move forward together rather than work against each other. In addition, she wished to see the organization scale so that it could operate in other locations. Reintegrating with another organization seemed like a good option, but Vardaman wondered about the potential downsides, and who the optimal partner would be—a conservation organization with more resources and better alignment, or an agricultural organization with more established credibility in the ranching community?

An 'Animal' Person

Vardaman was born and raised in Orange County, California. Her father passed away when she was eight years old. Her mother worked, and although she had three siblings, Vardaman became something of a loner. A 2019 profile by Ingfei Chen in *The New Yorker* described her as “shy and elusive,” and noted that she “spent hours alone, on hikes or swimming at the beach, absorbed in her own thoughts.”³ She developed an affinity for animals, which was strengthened through extensive volunteer work at a local marine mammal rehabilitation center. She was also intensely moved by instances of human cruelty and indifference towards animals. Sometimes, she recalled, “animal distress moved me more deeply than human unhappiness.”⁴

This love of animals and desire to protect them inspired Vardaman to study marine biology in college, and to pursue a career in ocean conservation. During more than 20 years at the Southern California-based Ocean Institute, she held a number of education and outreach roles, and worked with a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies and community members. Said Vardaman of her approach while at the Ocean Institute, “I was a pretty typical conservationist, I think, in that I favored hardcore advocacy. For example, there was a debate whether or not to allow sportfishing in the waters off of Dana Point. My colleagues and I opposed the idea. We treated the issue like a battle we had to win, and the fishermen were the enemy. We made very little effort to get to know them, or to understand their points of view. Collaboration was not something we considered.”

From Water to Wolves

Vardaman's fascination with wolves blossomed when in her mid-40s she began volunteering at the California Wolf Center. In 2013, she left her job at the Ocean Institute in order to run development for the center. Within a year she had been chosen to represent the organization in statewide stakeholder meetings regarding the future of wild wolves in California. Said Vardaman, "I was still relatively new to wolf conservation, but I knew that the leading cause of death for wolves was livestock laws, and that relative to disease and climate change wolves were much smaller threats to cattle. Ranchers, therefore, were the enemy. It was easy to maintain that feeling while sitting behind a desk."

Despite entering the stakeholder conversations with anti-rancher biases, Vardaman viewed the meetings as opportunities to learn. The takeaways, however, were not what she expected. "Some of the people at the table had twenty or more years of wolf-specific experience," she said. "I was comparably green and naïve. I was ready to listen, but not prepared to have my whole thinking transformed. Frankly, I was caught off guard. It was like a veil being lifted off my head." The question Vardaman was most interested in was why ranchers were so in favor of lethal controls. "In listening to their reasons," she said, "I heard real frustration and real fear. Whether or not those feelings were valid, i.e. justified by data and research, they were real. I also heard expressions of real love: for their families and traditions, but also for the land, for the environment, and, most surprisingly, for animals."

From Agenda to Friendship

Ranchers tended to guard their privacy closely, and to view outsiders (especially liberals, urban dwellers and environmentalists) with suspicion, in part because those groups were known to label ranchers as heartless killers and environmental villains. Vardaman's willingness to listen to the ranchers' opinions and not pass immediate judgment earned her invitations from several ranchers to visit their properties. Still, she was not prepared for the extent to which her attitudes would transform. "It started out as this cool adventure," she said. "The biggest catalyst was meeting and spending time with Kathy DeForest and her husband on their Modoc County property. DeForest agreed that wolves were incredible creatures. Yet even though she would one day send the cows she raised off to slaughter, she loved them deeply, felt responsible for their safety, and was terrified of them being torn to shreds by vicious wolves." Vardaman, wrote Chen, "was coming to see that people who care about animals can care in different ways."

Vardaman was also disabused of the idea that ranches had only negative impacts on the environment. From restoring streams to planting native species to adopting sound grazing practices, many ranchers were actively taking steps to improve the health and resilience of the land. Vardaman also learned how important it was to ranchers to be able to pass their ranches down to their children. Many of the ranches she visited had been in the same families for generations. Current owners believed wolves jeopardized their chances of leaving behind viable operations. "They were terrified," said Vardaman, "and understandably so, because they had been told horror stories, many of which had been grossly exaggerated."

Said Vardaman, "At first, meeting with these ranchers and listening to their stories was part of my pro-wolf agenda, but it became more than that. I quickly came to care for these people. I respected their passion and their work ethic and saw a lot of beauty in their way of life. They warmed up to me, too. They appreciated that I took the time to visit, to listen, to help out and get my hands dirty, and to tour their property. They said, 'No one has come and spent time with us like this before.' We didn't agree on everything, and still don't, but I'm proud to call many of them my friends."

The Working Circle

Vardaman, who had also formed relationships with a range of individuals from the wolf community, suddenly found herself at what she considered an interesting nexus. "I realized," said Vardaman, "that it was necessary to consider all the sides and all the dynamics. If you're into wolves, you have to be into ranchers." She therefore proposed that the California Wolf Center launch a program designed to help ranchers adapt to the presence of wild wolves. Other groups had made efforts to do this, but Vardaman's idea was for a program that would be community based and driven. She secured funding from a private donor, with the California Wolf Center agreeing to cover some expenses as well. Vardaman coordinated her first workshops for ranchers and wolf "coexistence experts" in early 2015 before the Working Circle was established.

Her original team included Carter Niemeyer, Joe Englehart and Timmothy Kaminski. After two rounds of workshops, Kaminski left the organization, and Hilary Anderson came on board. Niemeyer was a biologist with more than three decades of wolf experience in roles ranging from government trapper to recovery coordinator. By the time he officially retired he was widely considered one of the country's preeminent experts on wolves. (See Exhibit 1 for more on Niemeyer.) Anderson and Englehart were both ranchers (she in Montana and he in Alberta, Canada) who had found ways for livestock to thrive in territory inhabited by wolves and grizzly bears. Englehart had worked on a number of ranches in British Columbia before settling in Alberta. He spent a great deal of time solo, in difficult terrain, working with livestock and in areas with healthy predator populations. Anderson and her husband not only raised cattle, they were also bringing up several young children who played and helped out around the property.

The Process

Workshops titled "On Wolves and Ranching" (later renamed "Ranching With Predators") were held in the communities where producers lived and worked, so as not to ask an already skeptical audience to spend time or money to travel. The ideal number of attendees, according to Vardaman, was less than thirty. "Much bigger than that," she said, "and it becomes hard to have conversations or make personal connections." The sessions were typically scheduled to run from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m, but sometimes went longer. Working Circle typically tried to organize several workshops in a condensed period in a given area. "That way," said Vardaman, "people have multiple opportunities to attend. If they're dubious, there's the chance they'll hear from other members of their community that we're not bad guys and that the session was worthwhile." In its first year, Working Circle conducted sixteen workshops in California.

After brief introductions, Vardaman and her team kicked off the workshops with introductions and by listening. She explained:

Most of the time it starts pretty confrontational. Because of experiences and assumptions, most of the ranchers figure we're there to tell them they're wrong and tell them what to do. We've had workshops where ranchers are carrying concealed weapons and making threats. The best thing we've found is to go around the room, let people tell us why they're there, let them vent, lash out, get some of that frustration out of their systems. Occasionally we have to remind them that we're not the enemy, but in general we try not to counter them. We acknowledge their views and thank them for bringing them forward. We affirm their feelings, even if we don't affirm the accuracy of their claims.

Once tempers cooled, Englehart typically shared a brief anecdote before the more formal presentations. The presentation schedule, which had evolved over the years, typically began with

Niemeyer offering facts regarding the biology and natural history of wolves in North America, especially since 1995, when packs were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and wilderness areas in Idaho. The goal of this session was to give attendees an accurate sense of wolf populations, behaviors, and impacts on things such as elk populations, and to dispel common myths about wolves. Said Vardaman, "People believe all sorts of things, often because inaccurate anecdotes get passed around. Carter gives them information that no, elk herds are not being decimated. No, wolves do not present a new or greater threat in terms of acting as disease vectors. No, killing a wolf is actually more likely to enflame a wolf-livestock conflict than to resolve one. It's important to get as many of us talking on the same factual level as possible as early as possible because you can't make good management decisions based on myths. Carter knows the science and has the personal experience to contextualize that information. His physical size and personality make it so that no one is going to push him around."

Anderson typically spoke next. Her presentation served as an appeal to producers to rethink the paradigms and frameworks they used to set management priorities and make operational decisions. She urged ranchers to treat and understand underlying problems, not only symptoms. She spoke of the advantages of being proactive rather than reactive, of thinking in terms of long-run resilience rather than short-run crises, and of taking an empowered rather than victimized perspective. Said Vardaman:

Hilary is great at articulating the challenges and goals of a rancher. A goal should not be, 'no wolves in my area.' A goal should be, 'I want to run an economically viable and thriving ranching operation,' or 'I want to enjoy my livelihood,' or 'I want to carry or pass on the ranching heritage.' Ranchers, Hilary says, too often allow wolves to hijack attention away from those objectives. The panic is disproportionate to the size of the problem. A lot comes down to the questions ranchers ask. 'How many wolves is too many?' is a question we hear a lot. A better question, Hilary says, is, 'how can I reduce losses to all types of predators?'

After a break for lunch, which Vardaman and her team provided, Englehart spoke at length about herding techniques and grazing principles that he found greatly reduce the chances of losing livestock to predators. Many of the tips he gave would, he argued, not only reduce losses due to predation, but also decrease the odds livestock would suffer from disease, stress, or other threats, including ingesting toxic weeds such as larkspur.

Niemeyer wrapped up the day's presentations with a lengthy and sometimes grisly exploration of ways livestock were likely to meet their demise. Said Vardaman, "The point of this is to help producers understand if a problem they encounter is wolf-related or something different. At first glance, a bloody carcass may appear to be a wolf predation, or if wolves are in the area that might be the assumption. But all types of forensic evidence at the site and in the remains often suggests that some other culprit – grizzly, cougar, coyote, snakebite, eagle, automobile, scavenger – may be the true cause of death or of the condition of the carcass. The idea is that it's better to work for the truth than to assign blame based on biases and speculation. Carter likes to say, 'I can't always tell you what killed your cow, but most of the time I can conclusively give you a list of things that definitely didn't.'"

After several hours of introductions and presentations, Vardaman allotted time for additional questions conversations. Attendees were encouraged to share their experiences and concerns, too. "We offer information and discuss viable strategies," she said, "but the primary goal for these first interactions is to start building trust and credibility. Ranchers might still be skeptical, but it's hard to attack Joe and Hilary and Carter when between the three of them they have over 70 years of stories. I don't talk too much during the day, usually. Maybe ten minutes of introductions and concluding remarks, and any questions directed at me. It's important for audiences to hear from individuals who have lived it."

Day-long workshops such as these typically cost Working Circle around \$2,000. Itemized budgets typically included speaking fees for Anderson, Englehart and Niemayer, as well as costs for transportation and lodging, venue rental, and catering. (See Exhibit 2 for a sample workshop agenda.)

Not all workshops went off as planned, however. In some instances, ranchers used scheduled workshops as opportunities to stage demonstrations. At least once, Vardaman and her team set up for their presentations only to have not a single attendee. Said Vardaman, "Sometimes rumors about us get spread through local communities, for example that we take attendance or make claims that all attendees support pro-wolf legislation. Sometimes we learn that peer pressure or even threats are used to discourage people from attending. We've found that curiosity and our reputation eventually win out, however. For example, the day after one of our zero turnout workshops, just 90 minutes away we had one of our most well-attended and productive meetings."

In addition to ranchers, many meetings were attended by members of local and federal agencies with mandates ranging from preservation to recreation to public safety. Some wished merely to listen and learn. Others offered their opinions on wolf related issues. Sometimes agency officials welcomed the return of wolves, though at times they expressed doubts and reservations.

Next Steps

While the primary goal Vardaman and her team had for the workshops was to elicit buy-in from the ranchers, another was simply to open attendees' minds to the possibility of engaging further. Said Vardaman, "While people come to initial events confrontationally, they typically come to these secondary workshops, during which we get more into the nitty gritty, with an open mind and desire to learn."

Sometimes the next step was a workshop on stockmanship and/or range stewardship. Topics covered at these workshops—which could go from three to six days, depending on the goals of the attendees—ranged from horsemanship, to animal husbandry, to grazing strategies, to the use of working dogs, to wildlife tracking, to developing a more instinctual herd mentality in livestock. These workshops were nearly always held in Montana, at Hilary Anderson's ranch, but some were conducted in other states. Six-day workshops (always in Montana) were similar but included more hands on training. Most of the expenses were covered by Working Circle. Said Vardaman, "Costs vary, but typically, to send six ranchers to Montana for a six-day workshop, with their horses, who participate in the training as well, once you include travel and some reimbursement for missing work, it totals approximately \$20,000."

Arguably the most critical component of the Working Circle curriculum and approach was range stewardship. Range stewardship was defined by the organization as a more comprehensive version of range riding, in which ranchers on horseback taught herds how to behave when wolves (or other predators) were in the vicinity, for example larger adult animals forming perimeters around vulnerable juveniles. Range riders also guided herds towards specific locations at specific times for grazing, sleeping, avoiding predators, and so forth. This approach emphasized teaching animals to choose behaviors that would benefit them, rather than training them to respond only to fear and punishment. Working Circle's goal was for individuals from within a given operation or community to serve as so-called Range Stewards, but the organization was willing to provide Range Stewards on a short-term basis as mentors or in the event of an emergency.

Another option for follow-on engagement (which could occur before, after, or instead of a multi-day training) was for ranchers to invite Englehart to their property to conduct a baseline assessment. This included "comprehensive ranch and resource assessments," "wolf-livestock conflict assessments"

and assistance with "planning and strategic development."⁵ Said Vardaman, "Assessments are hugely helpful because no two ranches are identical, meaning that even proven strategies have to be tailored for specific cases. Experimentation is part of the process, too."

Other Forms of Support^a

Beyond workshops and training events, Working Circle maintained several additional options for assisting ranchers. These included:

Connections: Vardaman and her team made introductions and facilitated conversations within and across communities and stakeholder groups.

Financial Support: Although Working Circle wished to avoid fostering long-run dependence among ranchers, the organization offered to assist "individual operations and communities to implement practices strategies that WCPS promotes or for WCPS services provided."

Emergency Response: In the event that an individual operator or community faced an unanticipated or escalated threat from wolves, Working Circle offered assistance in the form of manpower (e.g. Range Stewards) and/or fladry (a type of fencing used to deter wolves).

Public Outreach and Education: In addition to educating individuals in the ranching industry, Working Circle delivered presentations to audiences in urban, rural, and university settings, so that present and future generations of voters, advocates, scientists, and ranchers could better understand issues related to wolves and livestock.⁶

Lessons Learned and Keys to Success

By early 2020 Vardaman had spent a great deal of time reflecting on how she and her partners had gained the trust and respect of hundreds of ranchers, and in doing so had done a lot of good for ranchers and wild wolves. "There were many ah-ha moments," she said, and elaborated:

One of the catalysts was definitely a willingness to question the status quo. I began my wolf-work in a room where wolf people were on one side of the room and ranchers were on the other. Disgust, stubbornness, and distrust were the prevailing attitudes. I asked myself, 'How is this helping wolves?' Well, it wasn't.

Questioning led to listening, which led to empathy. There was no denying that the ranchers in those meetings were afraid: for their businesses, their families, their animals, and for the future. Saying to have empathy is obvious, and a cliché, but it's absolutely necessary because without it you probably won't have sincerity. I didn't agree with ranchers on many of their opinions, but the way I cared about them and tried to express that care was genuine, and separate from whatever pro-wolf agenda I have. They could sense that, and I believe it's what led ranchers like Kathy DeForest to open up to me.

Especially once Working Circle got up and off the ground, other things became important as well. The interactions we have require both humility and credibility. It is imperative to not pretend to have solutions and answers when in fact you do not. Yet it was also critical to demonstrate to ranchers that we were not just city slicker activists and academics

^a Information in this section of the case was obtained from the Working Circle website, accessed in January 2020.

parachuting in to lecture them. Carter, Hilary, and Joe have that credibility from decades on ranches and amongst predators. I have it from the time I've spent with them.

Once you've got all these things—empathy, sincerity, humility, credibility—you can finally have relationships with trust. Trust is key because it allows you to have those tough conversations, and to disagree. You can push back if the other side makes a claim you believe to be false, and not worry that it's the end of the conversation. It's what allows us to tell anyone that yes, we are pro-wolf, but we are also pro-rancher.

A "No Compromise Philosophy"

Another of Working Circle's guiding principles was what Vardaman referred to as its "no compromise philosophy."⁷ The idea was that asking the other side, in this case ranchers, to make compromises, was likely to be perceived as a request for them to give up more. "It can be asymmetrical," Vardaman said. "When a rancher loses an animal, or takes the time to attend one of our workshops, the loss is tangible. That's not the case for an urban wolf-lover. It's also different for someone like me. When I attend a meeting on behalf of wolves, I get paid." She and her team worried that issues like these "could quickly bring an end to well-intentioned efforts to find meaningful solutions."

Said Vardaman:

When ranchers adopt the practices we endorse, the wolf-loving public gets their wolves, and public agencies face less criticism. Those outcomes are easy to see. What's perhaps less obvious is that these practices benefit ranches in other ways beyond decreasing the odds of losing livestock to wolves. The stockmanship practices we promote make them less susceptible to many diseases, which are a far greater threat than wolves. Once the cattle are trained, ranchers can spend less time herding, and more time on other operational tasks. Rotational grazing is good for the landscape. Where enacted, we've seen elk and deer numbers rise, which provide wolves with their natural preferred prey, which in turn further decreases the chances of livestock predation. There are other examples of these types of impacts, but in the end they all add up to more productive and resilient ranches.

What we've seen occur in some instances in Oregon is a great example of why we need to continue to prove that the measures we're asking ranchers to take is beneficial whether or not they are dealing with wolves. When wolves first returned to the state, federal law banned lethal control. When that law expired, and the state allowed lethal control, some ranchers we struggled to engage with all of a sudden figured 'No need, we'll just go back to killing wolves.'

The bottom line is that if ranchers make changes just because of wolves, they will inevitably resent wolves. Therefore we've started working with ranchers who don't have predator issues. We offer them support and seek to demonstrate why methods we recommend may benefit them regardless of whether wolves are present. Again, it's not a one size fits all scenario, but if they benefit, that may be the best endorsement for our work. The strategies and methods are new, so it will take time.

The Rancher's Timeline

Sometimes Vardaman and her team were accepted by ranchers almost immediately. "Every time I go into a workshop," said Vardaman, "I wonder how we're going to diffuse all this tension. Then Hilary and Carter and Joe work their magic. I've seen meetings that started with screaming end with hugs and handshakes." That was not always the case, however. Vardaman explained:

In California, we had strong engagement from the outset. Part of that was thanks to the breakthroughs I had with people like Kathy DeForest, but it was also due to other factors. Wolves were new to the state, having returned only in 2011, and California state law forbade the killing of any wolf. Although 'Shoot, shovel, shut-up' was espoused by some, most were willing to consider lawful means of dealing with wolves.

In Oregon, wolves had returned as early as 1999. We faced more of an uphill battle there because the feeling among many ranchers was, 'We've already tried a bunch of things that haven't worked.' But we're seeing renewed interest. Part of that is that we've developed a good reputation with the government agencies and ranchers across the border in California. Part of it may be ranchers finally feel ready, or that our reputation in California became good enough. A lesson we've learned is that sometimes it takes time, more for some than others. Our philosophy is to meet people where they're at. We essentially say, 'We think we can help, take this information and do with it what you feel.' I've seen ranchers warm up to us, only to go back to their communities and be criticized, labeled as traitors, only to eventually re-engage. One rancher spewed the the same old heated rhetoric at me time and again, but eventually, after more than a year, finally opted to engage constructively.

The stubbornness is understandable. Many of these ranchers have done things the same way for generations. Change is hard. It requires admitting they or their ancestors might have been wrong. We've found older generations are more resistant. As always, we put it back on them: don't you want your children to inherit the most resilient ranch possible? Younger generations tend to be more open. When it comes to doing things differently they see appeal. It's also true that the landscape today – for wolves and ranchers – is not what it was 100 or even 50 years ago. To be successful all of us must operate within the realities of today's world. (See Exhibit 3 for partner and rancher testimonials.)

The Future of the 'Radical Middle'

In addition to describing the Working Circle as both pro-wolf and pro-rancher, Vardaman also liked to say that the space the group occupied was the 'radical middle.' It was why, she said, she and her team had decided to remain officially neutral on issues such as lethal control and the Colorado ballot initiative. Yet she occasionally received pushback on these claims, for example when ranchers would remind her that Working Circle was still affiliated with the California Wolf Center and that, "she and her colleagues were still in charge."⁸

In response, in early 2018, Vardaman supported the formation of the California Council, a consortium of ranchers who going forward would grow and maintain the group. Vardaman would still shoulder responsibility, but the partnership would entail ranchers taking the lead on community and on the ground efforts. Despite these changes, Working Circle and California Council would still rely on support from the California Wolf Center, who became known as a (or 'the') rancher-friendly wolf group. However, several livestock predations and wolf-killings escalated tensions, and many

ranchers wanted to see a complete break from the California Wolf Center. Wrote Chen, "They wanted to build an independent, wolf-friendly organization firmly rooted in the ranching community. The donor who had originally funded the Working Circle agreed to continue supporting the project only if Vardaman would return to run it. She agreed."⁹

"The cause should drive the organization"

Although her relationships with the ranching community remained strong, Vardaman found that striking out alone created new complications. "Although our original private donor continues to generously support Working Circle," she said, "there remains the need for additional funds, which we've had to compete for with other organizations. I try not to fall into the competition trap. Organizations and their decisions should be driven by causes. Competition can flip that around." Vardaman also felt constrained by the nature of her organization and her relationships. "Most ranchers are intensely private," she said. "They don't want their stories floating round out there. They wish to avoid controversy, and they don't want to feel like they're being used."

Difficulties aside, after nearly five years Vardaman believed she was just getting started. In addition to Colorado, where Working Circle held several one-day workshops in late 2019 in partnership with Defenders of Wildlife and was planning to conduct at least half-a-dozen more in early 2020 (See Exhibit 4 to view the workshop advertisement), Vardaman also envisioned expanding the organization into Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, as well as Southwestern states where a different subspecies of wolf was making a comeback. Said Vardaman:

The idea is that in California and Oregon, we'll be able to decrease our activities and spending over time as ranchers do more to educate one another and sound, sustainable models become the norm. In Colorado, it's too early to come up with a timeline. In Idaho and Wyoming challenges are liable to be even greater because there is no balance between stakeholders, no high concentration of 'tree-huggers' like you'd find in Coastal California, Portland, or the Colorado Front Range. To achieve all that we want to achieve we'll therefore need funding – right now I think we could do everything we want in California, Oregon and Colorado for under \$750,000, but opening new states would cause that number to jump.

We also need the right people. It's still Hilary, Carter, Joe and me, though we have added a stellar coordinator named Jennifer Mueller. To do what we do a person would need the right knowledge, experience, and soft skills. The knowledge is the easy part, something you can teach. The soft-skills, such as the ability to connect with people and see things in wider contexts, are, I think, more innate. I've seen bright people with the best intentions come in and just not be able to make those personal connections with ranchers, and it doesn't work. But I'm confident that the right people are out there.

Something that I keep coming back to is the idea that a partnership could be the solution to many of our funding and personnel challenges. I have identified one conservation organization that agrees the 'Wolf Wars' mentality is counterproductive and seems really interested in the idea of collaboration with ranchers. If we were to merge with them, and and we could use the Working Circle model as the example for coexistence moving forward, this could be a powerful partnership for wolves and ranchers, and perhaps set an example for other like organizations to follow. We can work towards neutralizing the polarizing debate instead of perpetuating it. Still, I worry somewhat about sacrificing the 'radical middle.' An alternative would be to partner up with an agricultural organization. We definitely want more people from that side to be involved, to increase our credibility

and our reach, but people on the agriculture side tend to be so busy with other issues. One ag-org has mentioned wanting to adopt us, but I'm still not convinced we would be able to make as great of an impact with them as our partners.

As Vardaman continued to ponder the future of Working Circle, one thing remained crystal clear in her mind. "Ranchers have to remain the heroes of the wolf story. They are the ones doing the difficult work. They are the ones who host wolves on their land—land they are not selling to developers for condominiums."

Exhibit 1 Carter Niemeyer Biography


Carter Niemeyer, Formerly of the Dept. of U.S. Fish & Wildlife where he served as the wolf recovery coordinator for Idaho. As an expert government trapper, he was a key member of the federal wolf reintroduction team in Canada in the mid-1990s. Carter is an Iowa native but adopted the West as his home in the early 1970s. He has two degrees from Iowa State University and is a Wildlife Society certified biologist. In 2010 he wrote his first memoir, *Wolfer*. His second collection of stories, *Wolf Land*, was published in March 2016. He currently lives in Idaho.

- State trapper - Montana Department of Livestock, 1973-74 (Rabies suppression in skunks)
- Research trapper - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1974-75 (Bobcat/small predator studies)
- District Supervisor - USDA/ADC/Wildlife Services, 1975-90 (Golden eagles, fox, coyote, mountain lion, black/grizzly bear, wolf)
- Wolf Management Specialist - USDA/Wildlife Services, 1990-2000 (Wolf management - principle livestock depredation investigator/capture specialist in ID, MT, WY)
- Idaho Wolf Recovery Coordinator - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2000-06 (Gray wolf recovery and management decision in Idaho)
- In retirement: Freelance advising/training/mentoring for states, tribes and academia

Source: Carter Niemeyer

Exhibit 2a Ranching With Predators Flyer

Ranching with Predators on the Landscape
Free Workshops for Livestock Producers in Colorado,
February 2020



The return of predators on working lands is just one of the many expanding challenges ranchers face in today's world. As such, there exists a greater need for understanding, resources, and support for the stewards of Colorado's wild-working landscapes.

These workshops are designed to provide insight from first-hand experience, discuss viable solutions, and offer an opportunity to have open, respectful, and sincere conversation around the topic of ranching with wolves and other predators.

Locations	Date	Time
Ignacio, SunUte Community Center, Capote Rm.	February 8	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Montrose, Holiday Inn and Suites, 1391 S. Townsend Ave.	February 10	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Rifle, Hampton Inn & Suites, 715 Megan Ave.	February 11	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Walden, Antler's Inn, N. 460 Main St.	February 13	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Presenters:
~ Joe Engelhart, ranch manager and livestock producer, Alberta, Canada
~ Hilary Anderson, livestock producer, Anderson Ranch, Montana
~ Carter Niemeyer, former Wildlife Services trapper; wildlife biologist
The speakers have a combined 70 years of direct experience with predator- livestock interactions, agriculture, and livestock operations.

Workshop Topics:

- Management options and tangible strategies to reduce predator-livestock conflict
- Increasing ranch resilience and sustainability for future generations
- Understanding gray wolf and other predator behavior and ecology
- Identifying different types of predator damage
- Opportunity for open discussion with:
 - livestock producers who have ranched with wolves and other predators
 - wildlife biologists who have experience working with wolves and other predators in livestock country

Refreshments and hearty snacks will be provided throughout the day.

Workshops are a collaborative effort between Spruce Ranching Cooperative, Anderson Ranch, Working Circle, and Defenders of Wildlife.

For questions email:
karin@workingcircle.org
jmurtaugh@defenders.org

Source: Working Circle Proactive Stewardship

Exhibit 2b

- 9:10 Welcome & Introduction
- 9:30 Joe – A Lifetime of Ranching With Predators
- 9:50 Carter- Wolf Biology, Ecology, and Behavior
- 10:35 Q&A
- 10:45 Break
- 10:55 Hilary – Ranching in the Modern World
- 12:30 Lunch
- 1:00 Hilary – Ranching in the Modern World (cont.)
- 1:45 Joe – Stockmanship for Sustainable Ranching
- 2:15 Hilary and Joe – Open Discussion
- 2:45 Break
- 2:55 Carter- Predator Depredation Investigation
- 3:40 Q&A
- 3:55 Final Comments and Moving Forward
- 4:00 Adjourn
- 4:00 - 5:00 Presenters available for open discussion and questions

Source: Working Circle Proactive Stewardship (www.workingcircle.org)

Exhibit 3 Testimonials from Working Circle Participants and Partners

You are the only ones that have bothered to take the time to truly get to know us, involve us, and understand our challenges. Ranchers are not about wanting to kill wildlife, on the contrary we take great pride in providing healthy wildlife habitats and preserving open space from urban development. It is our lands that host the elk, deer and much of the habitat that wolves need to survive, and we just want to be able to survive ourselves. The Working Circle is providing real-life solutions along with an acceptable coexistence approach for ranchers that not only supports and improves livestock operations, but helps the wolf by making the wolf a "non-issue" for ranchers, thus protecting them long-term. My heartfelt thanks to you and your commitment to our efforts."

~ Northern California Rancher

No other organization could have made the inroads that you have. Your approach is smart! And it's working, for ranchers and for wolves. Unlike other groups that go around the root of the issue, you are willing to go right through it. It's been enlightening to watch this unfold and it's been an honor to work with you."

~ Wildlife Project Manager (retired), California Department of Fish and Wildlife

"...your organization is, indeed, invested in helping us to maintain our livelihood and our heritage! Thanks again for all of your help!"

~ Siskiyou County rancher

Source: Working Circle Website (www.workingcircle.org)

Endnotes

¹ Weigel, Lori and Bob Meadow. "Strong Support for Restoring Wolves to Colorado Evident in New Survey." New Bridge Strategy and Lake Research Partners. March 12, 2019. Press Release. Web.
<https://www.krcc.org/sites/krcc/files/201906/Polling-Data-Wolves-2019-Executive-Summary-D5-1-1.pdf>

² Chadwick, Douglas H. "Wolf Wars." *National Geographic*. March 2010.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2010/03/wolf-wars/>

³ Chen, Ingfei. "The Persuasive Power of the Wolf Lady." *The New Yorker*. July 9, 2019.
<https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/the-persuasive-power-of-the-wolf-lady>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Working Circle Proactive Stewardship. <https://www.workingcircle.org/programs.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chen, Ingfei. "The Persuasive Power of the Wolf Lady." *The New Yorker*. July 9, 2019.
<https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/the-persuasive-power-of-the-wolf-lady>

⁹ Ibid.