

## Thinking Like a Mountain- *Troll*

By Dave Person

Jack Ward Thomas once said that "ecosystems are not only more complicated than we think, they are more complicated than we *can* think". In a similar vein, Aldo Leopold described a complex web of connections between a mountain, plants, deer, and wolves in his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain". Only the mountain has been around long enough, and has the knowledge to think objectively about the howling of wolves. He urged us to elevate ourselves above our narrow self-interested goals in managing nature and bring the perspective of the mountain into our plans. Of course Leopold was sort of a wealthy gentleman farmer and scientist who didn't have to worry too much how his bread was buttered. Mountain trolls, on the other hand, don't care about any of that stuff. Trolls only want to waylay travelers, rob them, and occasionally feed on them. To them, Leopold and all the other ecodruids are just a bunch of muddleheaded party-poopers who together constitute a rather poor meal. Troll goals are simple, short-termed, and easily understood; in short, the kind of thinking that policy makers and politicians love.

I attach no particular moral value to either worldview. Trolls have been around for centuries and appear to be very busy and healthy in numbers, while the mountain thinkers are a relatively new force whose longevity and usefulness is unknown. However, it is useful to consider the art and science of wildlife management within the context of those paradigms. When we take a complex boreal forest ecosystem, manipulate populations of the top predators and expect to squeeze more moose out of the system without any unintended ecological consequences, are we thinking like a mountain or a mountain troll? The goal of more happy moose for us to eat, which may lead to more happy hunters and ultimately more happy legislators, is a very simple and sensible troll-like objective. However, do we really think we can control the ecological situation that well? Do we comprehend most of the important pieces over a long enough time span to act as if we are a bunch of moose ranchers putting more hooves on the range? Maybe we do and are really thinking like a mountain. On the other hand, when we apply the same formula to every area with low moose or caribou populations and assume one prescription fits all, maybe we are thinking like trolls. We have a great deal of good research showing that wolves and bears can limit moose populations under some circumstances. Nonetheless, that work doesn't tell us anything about what might happen when we remove those limiting factors except to say that we may have more moose. For example, can human hunters actually regulate high densities of ungulates within large geographic areas before they destroy the range? What do high densities of moose mean for plant growth and diversity? What are the effects on small mammals and birds from changes in vegetation due to heavy browsing? To mountain thinkers those kinds of complex questions are virtues, to mountain trolls they just get in the way.