

7. Wolf Conservation

The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) and red wolf (*Canis rufus*) were two of the first species to be protected under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) after its passage in 1973. The red wolf is classified as endangered. Gray wolves are listed as endangered in the lower-48 states, except for Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and portions of the surrounding Western Great Lakes states where federal protections were removed. Wolves in Alaska are not listed under the ESA.

Endangered means a species is considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

Portions of Yellowstone, central Idaho, Southwest and the Southeast are designated as non-essential experimental populations, which isolate geographically-described groups from other existing populations and offer special regulations.

The ESA establishes rules about how existing populations of endangered and threatened animals are to be treated. For instance, an endangered species cannot be killed, collected, wounded or harassed. It is also illegal to buy, sell or possess any parts of endangered species or items made from them. The ESA also mandates that efforts must be made to recover species, which means returning them to healthy population levels.

The conservation of wolf populations requires the cooperation of state and federal agencies, zoos, citizens and wildlife organizations to uphold the laws that protect wolves, to preserve and enhance wolf habitat and to develop captive breeding programs for populations whose numbers are critically low. Brief descriptions of wolf conservation efforts around the United States follow.

Alaska

Alaska is home to the largest remaining population of gray wolves in the United States. Some 7,000 to 11,000 wolves roam the state in habitats as diverse as barren arctic tundra and lush temperate rainforests. In Alaska as elsewhere, wolves play an essential role in maintaining healthy prey populations and biodiversity in the ecosystems they inhabit. They are also vital to the state's tourism economy. People from all over the world come to Alaska for the opportunity to see a wild wolf. Yet even as extraordinary efforts are underway to restore wolves in the lower 48 states, the persecution of wolves in Alaska continues.

Because wolf populations in Alaska have never declined to the extent they have in other states, Alaskan wolves are not on the endangered species list. That means that it is still legal to hunt and trap wolves in Alaska. These pursuits claim more than 1,000 wolves per year, not including "unreported harvests which may equal or exceed the reported harvest," according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

In addition, ignoring a number of studies that show that predators rarely are the sole cause of significant or long-term declines in prey populations, wolf control supporters in

Alaska continue to push for intensive control, including the highly controversial practice of aerial gunning. This unsportsmanlike control method is nearly impossible to regulate and leads to many other violations of hunting regulations such as chasing, herding and harassing wolves.

Great Lakes

The gray wolf found in the Great Lakes region, commonly called the eastern timber wolf, once ranged from Minnesota to the Atlantic Ocean and from southern Canada to the Ohio River and perhaps even farther south. Wolf recovery in this area has been notably successful. In the 1960s, this population was limited to northeastern Minnesota, where fewer than 1,000 wolves roamed. Today, wolves are thriving in northern Minnesota and have also crossed into northern and central Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Individuals continue to disperse into areas with suitable habitat, with recent wolf sightings in Michigan's Lower Peninsula and other states in the western Great Lakes region.

Now the combined total of gray wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan is more than 4,000. As a result of this incredible success, federal protections were removed for this population of wolves in 2007. Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin now manage the wolf populations within their boundaries. Each state has produced a wolf management plan that maintains policies that help reduce human-wolf conflicts and encourages the use of proactive, nonlethal management tools, while at the same time ensuring ongoing wolf recovery and conservation.

Northern Rockies

The northern Rockies were once a stronghold of wolves, but control programs initiated in the 1880s essentially wiped out the species there by the 1930s. The 1995 and 1996 reintroductions of Canadian gray wolves in Yellowstone National Park and in Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area were remarkable wolf restoration achievements. Today, there are more than 1,500 wolves in the northern Rockies. This includes the descendants of the wolves reintroduced in the greater Yellowstone area and central Idaho, and a separate gray wolf population in northwestern Montana established by animals that crossed the border from Canada on their own beginning in the late 1970s.

In 2007, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced plans to remove federal protections for wolves in the northern Rockies region. However, only Montana has a plan that meets long-term wolf conservation objectives. Idaho and Wyoming remain hostile toward wolves. Until all factors that threaten long-term wolf viability are resolved, it is premature to delist wolves in this region.

Southeast - The Red Wolf

The red wolf once roamed throughout the southeastern United States as far north as Pennsylvania and as far west as central Texas. Because of its wide distribution, the red wolf played an important role in a variety of ecosystems. However, by the 1970s,

persecuted like their gray cousins, red wolves existed only along the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana. Biologists pronounced the red wolf gravely endangered, and captured the few remaining for animals for a last-ditch effort to save the species by working with zoos and captive-breeding facilities.

Reintroduction to the wild began in the late 1980s with a successful but limited release of red wolves on Bulls Island, part of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge off South Carolina's Atlantic coast. The reintroduction of red wolves in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and later in Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina followed. Currently, nearly 100 wild red wolves roam more than 1.7 million acres in North Carolina, and 150 red wolves reside in 37 captive-breeding facilities. The recovery plan calls for reintroduction in at least two additional locations. Like gray wolves, red wolves face myriad threats to their recovery, including illegal killings and deaths caused by motor vehicles and severe weather. Current and proposed developments also threaten to degrade wolf habitat. Hybridization, the interbreeding between coyote and red wolf populations, is yet another constant threat to the recovery of the imperiled wolf of the Southeast.

Southwest - The Mexican Wolf

Prior to European settlement, the southwestern United States and Mexico were home to the Mexican wolf, a gray wolf subspecies. Biologists captured the last Mexican wolves in the wild, four males and a female, in Mexico between 1997 and 1980 to establish a captive-breeding program. Today, the reintroduction plan calls for returning at least 100 Mexican wolves to the wild. Biologist released the first of these in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona in 1998. These wolves immediately demonstrated their ability to adapt and survive. They formed packs, killed elk, established territories and reproduced. There are currently about 60 wolves in this region. However, because of local opposition, these wolves cannot roam outside set boundaries. Wolves that do are captured and returned to the designated wolf area. This restriction undermines the ability of these wolves to form stable packs and expand their range, and inhibits progress toward Mexican wolf recovery.

Other potential recovery sites include the Grand Canyon and the adjacent Kaibab Plateau, which has been identified as one of the best places for wolves in the lower 48 states; Big Bend National Park; Black Gap Wildlife Management Area in Texas; the Sky Islands region of Arizona and New Mexico; and several sites in Mexico. Habitat corridors between Mexico and the United States could allow for dispersal and interbreeding among future populations, increasing the Mexican wolf's chance of long-term survival.

Other Regions

Although wolves are making a comeback in several regions, it is important to explore the feasibility of restoring them in other parts of the country to establish the multiple, resilient populations necessary for the viability of the species. Having established populations of wolves in just a few areas does not guarantee the survival of the species since disease or a natural disaster could easily wipe out an entire population.

Defenders of Wildlife advocates restoration projects to return the wolf to its former range where feasible. Among the areas being considered are the Northeast, Southern Rockies and Pacific Northwest.

The first step toward bringing wolves back to a region is to determine if the area is capable of supporting them. The criteria for assessing this include such things as a sufficient prey base, adequate land area, a low human population and low road density. Many wildlife refuges and state and national parks and forests meet these criteria and are the most promising potential recovery areas.

The Northeast

The last gray wolves in New England were killed around the end of the 19th century. The good news is that several studies have shown that suitable habitat and sufficient prey still exist for wolves in New England, from Maine across New Hampshire and Vermont to the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park in New York. These studies suggest that the Northeast could support at least 1,200 wolves and perhaps as many as 1,800. Even better news is that the public supports these efforts. Key to the successful return of the wolf to this region is the careful examination of the social and biological factors necessary to meet the needs of wolf restoration. Development, insufficient travel corridors and uncertainty about the taxonomic status of eastern wolves and coyotes all complicate reintroduction and recovery. Public involvement in promoting wolf restoration in the Northeast is needed to persuade state and federal officials to undertake the necessary studies.

The Pacific Northwest

Gray wolves once lived throughout much of the Pacific Northwest, but most were gone by the 1930s. Fortunately, many areas of potentially suitable habitat remain. In the 1990s, scientists even found that several wolf packs from wolf populations in British Columbia and Alberta denned and raised pups in North Cascades National Park and in Ross Lake National Recreation Area on the Canadian border. Since then, several confirmed—and several hundred unconfirmed—sightings of wolves in Oregon and Washington have been reported. Areas with potential for wolf recovery in the Pacific Northwest include the Blue and Willowa Mountains in eastern Oregon and Washington, the Cascade Mountains in western central Washington and Oregon, Washington's Olympic Peninsula (although its size and proximity to cities limit its potential), the Klamath-Siskiyou region and Modoc Plateau of southwestern Oregon and northern California, and the northern Sierra Nevada in California.

The Southern Rockies

The southern Rockies in Colorado, southern Wyoming and northern New Mexico offer several potential gray wolf restoration sites, including Colorado's San Juan Mountains, Flat Tops and Grand Mesa areas. The federal government administers 55 percent of this region, including 9.5 million acres of roadless areas. Wolf habitat and prey abound. Indeed, Colorado hosts an estimated 292,000 elk, the greatest statewide elk population

in the United States and nearly one-third of the nation's total elk population. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study completed in 1994 indicates that Colorado alone could hold more than 1,000 wolves. Another area in the southern Rockies that shows great promise for supporting wolves is media executive Ted Turner's Vermejo Ranch, which straddles the Colorado-New Mexico border and nearby Carson National Forest. Turner's lands exemplify the potential of private landowners to contribute to wolf restoration and the need to develop mechanisms at the state and federal level to encourage more private participation in recovery efforts.

Check Your Reading Skills
Wolf Conservation

1. Which states have wild wolves? In which states is wolf reintroduction being considered?
2. List two problems associated with “land and shoot” hunting in Alaska.
3. What is the name of the law that protects wolves and other rare species? List three ways this law protects wildlife and plants that are in danger of extinction?
4. What factors threaten the survival of red wolves?