

Wild Lands

The Value of Wild Lands for Wolf Restoration

Nina Fascione

Federal protection of wolves and active reintroduction programs have worked to increase wolf populations in the contiguous 48 states in recent years. Achieving true long-term recovery of the gray wolf and red wolf, however, will require not just continued protection and expansion of current populations, but also active restoration to additional areas.

With much of the United States developed to the point that reintroduction of a large carnivore is no longer a viable option, it is imperative to restore wolves to suitable areas of our remaining wild lands. Vast tracts of Oregon, northern California, Washington, Utah, Colorado, northern New Mexico and the northeastern states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York, for example, show potential for wolf

recovery—combined they could support 4,000 or more wolves, according to biologists. Every effort should be made to restore wolves to these areas wherever there is sufficient habitat for a population of several hundred or more. Even smaller areas should be considered where restoration is necessary to maintain the environmental, ecological or geographical representation of the species, or to provide the multiple populations that successful conservation demands.

Wild lands, particularly large tracts of public land, play a key role in ongoing wolf recovery and long-term survival. Large wild areas with low human density can act as core population bases, where wolves are free from human persecution and pack social structure is relatively unaffected by human disturbance. These populations serve as a source for surrounding areas, with dispersing wolves establishing populations in adjacent managed lands when biologically and sociologically feasible.

However, we must also ask not only what wild lands can do for

wolves, but what wolves can do for wild lands. Restoring wolves to national parks and other large tracts of public land is crucial for maintaining the long-term viability of ecosystems. As witnessed in Yellowstone National Park since the reintroduction of wolves, restoring a top carnivore can benefit the full spectrum of an ecosystem's flora and fauna. We have every reason to believe this will be the case in all wolf recovery areas.

Protecting wild lands and fostering long-term wolf survival can ensure environmental health well into the future. Restoring multiple, resilient populations of red and gray wolves across as much of their full, original geographical distribution as possible should be the standard by which wolf recovery is judged, not only for the sake of these species, but to preserve America's ecological integrity. ■

Nina Fascione has a Master's degree in Conservation Anthropology from the University of Maryland, U.S.A. Fascione is currently Director of Carnivore Conservation at Defenders of Wildlife, where she manages recovery programs for endangered species.

WWW. 

For maps associated with this article, visit: <http://www.wolf.org>.