

Mexican Wolf Fate Teeters Between Science and Politics

by MICHAEL J. ROBINSON

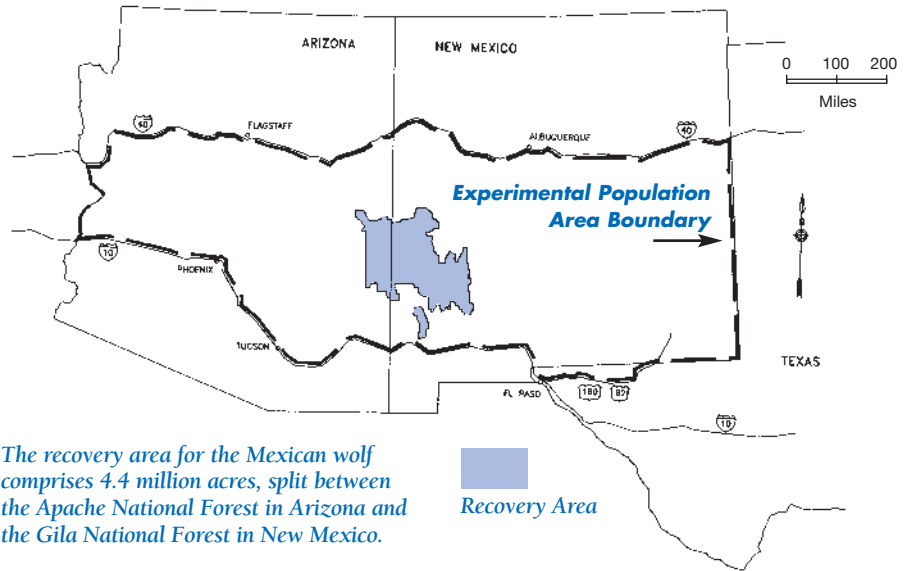
California Wolf Center

The saga of the troubled Mexican gray wolf recovery program can be traced through the life of M166, a seven-year-old male lobo who at birth in the Wild Canid Survival and Research Center in Eureka, Missouri, was given the more romantic and even hopeful name, Rio, “river” in Spanish.

Until recently, every known Mexican wolf was born in captivity, the progeny of the last five wild wolves trapped in Mexico between 1977 and 1980, interbred with two lineages already held in captivity in the U.S. An emergency captive breeding program raised the world’s Mexican wolf population to around 200 animals, but until reintroduction began in March, 1998, there were no wolves known in the wild in either Mexico or the southwestern United States.

Rio was one of the first eleven animals released that historic spring. The recovery area for the Mexican wolf comprises 4.4 million acres, split between the Apache National Forest in Arizona and the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. Unlike Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, more than two-thirds of the Mexican wolf recovery area is grazed by cattle; the Gila contains the largest chunk of ungrazed terrain and three-quarters of the recovery area.

However, to meet the opposition of the livestock industry-dominated New Mexico Game Commission, wolves from the captive population would only be released in the Arizona portion of the recovery area, with allowance for translocating animals into New Mexico following their recapture from the wild.



The recovery area for the Mexican wolf comprises 4.4 million acres, split between the Apache National Forest in Arizona and the Gila National Forest in New Mexico.

A second equally-unprecedented management provision, also demanded by ranchers, called for removal of any wolves that establish territories outside of the recovery area—even on other public lands and even if the wolves are not killing livestock.

Finally, in contrast to the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, there are no provisions requiring livestock operators to assume any responsibility for cleaning up the carcasses of cattle that die from other causes before wolves scavenge on them and become habituated to stock. In the Southwest, where many allotments are grazed year-round, it is not uncommon to stumble upon dozens of dead cattle that succumbed to starvation, disease and other factors.

Shortly after the first eleven pioneering Mexican wolves were released in the Apache National Forest, they started getting shot. Rio’s mate was one of five wolves killed within half a year. A sixth wolf disappeared and is presumed dead, and Rio’s pup, thought to be the first Mexican wolf born in the wild in the U.S. in over 70 years, disappeared and is also presumed dead after its

mother was shot. (There has been one conviction from these [first] five shootings - that of James Rogers, a member of a local ranching family, who served four months in prison.)

Over the next two years, Rio was successively provided four new mates, the first of which was killed by a mountain lion and the next two recaptured after showing insufficient fear of humans. But the last mate displayed suitable wild behavior: The pair avoided people and domestic animals. Then they crossed out of the recovery area.

As a result, Rio and this last mate found themselves back in captivity. After four months, they were re-released in the Gila National Forest in December, 2000. But the once-established pair split up shortly after their release.

Rio’s experience wasn’t unusual. Three other packs were released in Arizona but recaptured and held in captivity for several months, and two of those have been re-released. Each split apart after re-release, with most of those animals subsequently recaptured, killed in vehicular hit-and-run incidents, or dying or disappearing suspiciously.



California Wolf Center

In Arizona, where wolves have been released directly from the captive population, five packs with around 25 wolves are now established, and several litters of pups have been born this year.

During Rio and his mate's peregrinations alone in the first half of 2001, each separately scavenged on livestock carcasses. A rancher refused to allow Fish and Wildlife Service biologists to remove a bull Rio had been feeding on, even though the bull (when alive) was not supposed to have been in that part of the national forest. He was one of a number of trespass cattle in the area; a necropsy revealed he had died from a fall—not from wolf predation.

This also is not atypical. The first three wolf packs to be recaptured had each scavenged on cattle. One pack's scavenging had taken place in a region closed to grazing by the Forest Service but with cattle still present in defiance of that order. Two of those packs went on to kill cattle. The third pack was recaptured to prevent possible future depredations, resulting in an injury

that required the amputation of the alpha female's leg (perhaps a factor in that pack's dissolution upon re-release and her eventual disappearance and presumed demise.)

Then, in May of this year, Rio and his mate re-united and began killing cattle, leading to their recapture in June. They have been separated in captivity, and Rio has been assigned a new mate—his sixth—in preparation for another release.

The Mexican wolf recovery area spread across parts of two states aptly illustrates the difference a state line can make. In Arizona, where wolves have been released directly from the captive population, five packs with around 25 wolves are now established, and several litters of pups have been born this year. But in New Mexico only one pair survives.

In June, 2001, four biologists led by Dr. Paul Paquet, released an 86-page study of the first three years of the reintroduction. The scientists concluded that "survival and recruitment rates . . . are far too low to ensure population growth or persistence. Without dramatic improvement in these vital rates, the wolf population will fall short of predictions for upcoming years."

They recommend eliminating artificial management boundaries. "By far the most important and simplest change the Service can make," they write, is "obtaining the authority to conduct initial releases in the . . . Gila National Forest." They also recommend allowing wolves that are not "management problems" to roam freely outside the



recovery area, noting that “in sharp contrast with the Service’s approach elsewhere, the Mexican wolf project developed a rule that requires wolves to be removed from public and private land outside the . . . recovery area, even in the absence of a problem.”

Another recommendation is to “Require livestock operators on public land to take some responsibility for carcass management/disposal to reduce the likelihood that wolves become habituated to feeding on livestock.” They note that “At least 3 packs were removed from the wild because they scavenged on dead livestock left on national forest lands. Such scavenging may predispose wolves to eventually prey on livestock.”

Unfortunately, Mexican wolves have seldom benefited from scientific-based decision-making. The first Fish and Wildlife Service Mexican wolf recovery coordinator lost his job in 1999 when he proposed allowing wolves from captivity to be released in the Gila. After Clinton Administration officials finally agreed to this change, the agency failed to follow through with the requisite amendment to the management rule, and still has not initiated the legal process to do so.

Now, rancher-congressman Joe Skeen (R-NM), infuriated by the scientists’ recommendations, is pushing legislation to conduct a new study of the recovery program to be conducted by non-biologists.

Whether sonorous howls will continue to echo along southwestern canyon walls will depend on whether politics continues to hold sway or whether we finally heed the scientists’ warnings. For North America’s most imperiled mammal, the stakes couldn’t be higher. ■

Michael Robinson represents the Center for Biological Diversity and lives in Pinos Altos, NM, on the edge of the Gila National Forest. He is completing a book tracing the political and cultural history of the federal wolf extermination campaign. For up-to-date coverage of the Mexican wolf, see <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/swcbd/species/mexwolf/wolf.html>.

WOLVES IN SPACE!

(CYBERSPACE THAT IS)
www.wolf.org

700 web pages

Here you will find volumes of information. Biology, bibliography, scientific abstracts, studies and reports. News on wolf populations around the world. Telemetry, event listings, photos and Wolf Watch, our live wolf cam. Plus updates on our resident pack in Ely, Minnesota, U.S.A. And these features: USDA Wildlife Services Livestock Depredation Reports, and polls where you can state your opinion on a variety of wolf issues.



International Wolf Center
Teaching the World About Wolves

