

Where the Wild Things Are

Now

by NINA FASCIONE

“When Wolves Move In.” Headline from the *Oregonian*, Nov. 10, 2002

Newspaper headlines can adroitly sum up prevailing public attitudes. Such is the case with wolf recovery in the United States. In late November 2002, a gray wolf known as number 253, born into the Druid Peak pack in Yellowstone National Park’s famed Lamar Valley, traveled at least 200 miles to the Logan area of Utah, only 25 miles north of Salt Lake City. Wolf 253 was discovered when a surprised trapper found him in a coyote trap and handed him over to state authorities. The fact that a wolf traveled this distance is not unusual. Most young wolves eventually leave their natal packs in search of their own territory and a mate. The reaction by state and federal wildlife authorities and the general public was also not unusual:

the discovery of wolf 253 created much hysteria.

At the request of Utah officials, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service transported wolf 253 back to Wyoming and released him in Grand Teton National Park. The public reaction was similarly zealous. Wolf 253’s travels elicited no fewer than 40 newspaper articles, letters to the editor, opinion pieces and television and radio reports espousing varied opinions about the first wolf to appear in Utah in approximately 70 years.

The interest in wolf 253 and federal actions did not surprise those familiar with wolf recovery efforts in the United States. A few years ago, a lone female wolf, number B45, traveled from central Idaho into eastern Oregon, the first confirmed wolf in that state in decades. The federal government trapped wolf B45

and took her back to Idaho, though officials stated at the time that they weren’t in the wolf moving business.

Translocating wolves can cause problems. In both Oregon and Utah the dispersing wolves may have had mates. A second, smaller set of tracks was found where wolf 253 was trapped, indicating that he may have been paired and starting a pack with a female, who probably remains in Utah. Since wolves form monogamous pairs, separation is disruptive, especially for a dispersing wolf, for whom finding another mate is unlikely. Equally problematic is the possibility of aggression by other wolves wherever the dispersing animal is translocated to. Conservationists challenged the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, pointing out that wolf dispersal is a naturally occurring phenomenon and key to wolf recovery in the United States. Indeed,

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to many the news was reason to rejoice: the road to wolf recovery in the lower 48 states has been a long one.

“Wolf at the Door.” Headline from the *Eugene Weekly*, Dec. 5, 2002

America’s campaign in the 1800s and early 1900s to eliminate the gray wolf was successful by the standards of the day: fewer than 1,000 of the species were left in the lower 48 states by the 1960s. Since wolves were protected under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1973, wolf populations have rebounded in the Great Lakes region to more than 3,000 wolves in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Wolf populations in the Northern Rockies recovered through natural recolonization of Canadian wolves to Montana and a government reintroduction of 66 wolves from Canada to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in the winters of 1995 and 1996. Those animals thrived, and biologists estimate there are now 650 or more wolves in Idaho, Wyoming and Montana.

Environmentalists and scientists believe this is good news. Like most living things, wolves play a role in the ecological systems they inhabit, and their return is triggering a series of environmental changes that appear to be restoring a measure of balance. Studies in Yellowstone show that coyotes were reduced by as much as 50 percent in areas where wolves were restored. State officials in Utah may want to take note of this, since there are so many coyotes in Utah that the state is considering a sterilization program to control their populations and potential impact on livestock. Ongoing research in Yellowstone is showing a correlation between wolf recovery and the recovery of key tree species such as aspen and cottonwood, attributed to a change in the foraging behavior



of elk since the return of the wolf. Carrion left over from wolf kills is feeding a wide variety of species ranging from grizzly bears to carrion beetles. Most scientists believe that wolves strengthen the overall health of ungulate populations by weeding out the sick and infirm.

“The Beef with Wolves.” Headline from *AlterNet*, Jan. 6, 2003

On the other hand, wolves are not a problem-free species. While some fears about wolf recovery can easily be put to rest—wolves pose no real threat to human safety, for example—there are some legitimate concerns for those residing in wolf territory, particularly ranchers.

Though livestock depredation has been relatively low, and Defenders of Wildlife maintains a program to reimburse ranchers for livestock lost to wolves, many feel that the challenges posed by wolves outweigh their ecological benefits. Those espousing this view seem to have a firm grip on the state and local legislatures in the West, and their influence is felt. A number of bills have been introduced across the country prohibiting wolf restoration or calling for wolf removal. Though at this stage federal authority supersedes state and local laws, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has said it will begin the process to remove federal protections for the



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with no official wolf populations are not required to develop management plans, though some are stepping up to the plate anyway. Oregon has just held 15 public meetings around the state to obtain input on wolf recovery issues. The results of these workshops will be submitted to state authorities who will determine the future of wolves in that state. Hopefully the outcome will be a well-balanced management plan. With the arrival of wolf 253, Utah residents are now considering their options and discussing the need for a state wolf plan. A Utah state representative has proposed what he is calling the “Wolf Control Bill,” which asks the Service to downlist wolves and revert control to the state. The bill will be debated this legislative session, and like all public discourse on this species, is bound to trigger a lively discussion.

“Problem or Welcome Home.”

Headline from the *Medford Mail Tribune*, Dec. 5, 2002

Ultimately, though somewhat surprisingly, wolf 253 rejoined his original pack in Yellowstone. Perhaps this is a sign that no matter what laws we humans create, whether they support wolves or hinder their recovery, nature has a way of asserting its own will. Since November, there are rumors of another wolf that escaped from a trap in the same part of Utah. Last fall, a lone wolf was seen in eastern Washington briefly before it retreated to Idaho. A wolf was shot in Nebraska recently, though authorities are not sure

whether it was a dispersing wolf or a released pet. Nonetheless, it appears that the species is fighting the odds and attempting to make a full recovery across the West. With expanses of habitat suitable for wolves in at least seven additional states, all wolves need is the chance to expand unhindered. Given a little tolerance on the part of humans and creative management plans that address the needs of both wolves and people, perhaps in the future there will be no need for attention-grabbing headlines. ■

Nina Fascione is the vice president of species conservation for Defenders of Wildlife and co-author of “Places for Wolves: A Blueprint for Restoration and Long-Term Recovery in the Lower 48 States.”

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Lynn and Donna Rogers, www.bearstudy.org

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