

Wolves of the World

WOLVES OF ETHIOPIA

Another Setback for the Imperiled Ethiopian Wolf

by Neil Hutt

Rabies – An acute fatal viral inflammation of the brain.

Center for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia

Ethiopian wolves once inhabited most of the mountainous regions of northern Ethiopia, but the encroachment of humans and the introduction of rabies have reduced their numbers dramatically in recent decades.

In August 2003, a thin, weak female wolf, thought to be a disperser, was sighted in the Web Valley of the Bale Mountains, home to 300 of the critically endangered Ethiopian wolves. Suspicion that the wolf may have been sick arose when four wolf deaths were reported on October 9, 2003.

The Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme (EWCP) began scouring the Bale Mountains, searching for sick and dead animals. Their tentative diagnosis of rabies has been recently confirmed by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta. Twenty wolves died of rabies as of October 28, 2003, and more will surely succumb.

Since 1996, the EWCP has been vaccinating domestic dogs within 10 miles of the Bale Mountains National

Park in the hope of reducing the risk of rabies, distemper and other canine diseases. No feral dogs live in the area, but farmers routinely enter wolf territory in late summer to graze their livestock. Even though 80 percent of the dogs in surrounding communities have been vaccinated, an infected animal has started an outbreak that could result in a drastic reduction of the fragile wolf population.

“We should be moving to vaccinate the wolves,” said Stuart Williams, British conservationist and coordinator of the EWCP in Addis Ababa. Otherwise, a disaster similar to the one in 1991 could occur. During that rabies epidemic, the wolf population dropped from 450 to 120. Referring to the recovery of the wolf population, Dr. Claudio Sillero of the University of Oxford said, “Six months ago, we were complimenting ourselves.” Since

Martin Harvey





rabies seems to strike when the population density rises above one animal per square kilometer, it might be better not to allow wolf density to reach its maximum. "As a manager, I would rather have a lower stable state," Sillero said.

Meanwhile, the EWCP is searching for options to contain the outbreak. With the cooperation of other groups and agencies, authorities are working to trace the transmission route and the spread of the current epidemic. They are searching rigorously for sick or dead animals, doing postmortems, inoculating all unvaccinated dogs in the region and soliciting the help of local communities for information about the health of domestic animals. Williams insists the solution is vaccinating wolves not yet infected by the disease. However, the Ethiopian government has been hesitant to undertake such a program. Authorities are wary of a genetically modified vaccine. Additionally, they are reluctant because of adverse publicity surrounding a vaccination program in the Serengeti where wild dogs receiving rabies inoculations later died of distemper.

Ethiopian wolves are small, weighing about 50 pounds. They live in packs, but they forage and hunt alone. They once inhabited most of the mountainous regions of northern Ethiopia, but the encroachment of humans and the introduction of rabies have reduced their numbers dramatically in recent decades. Scientists still disagree on whether Ethiopian wolves are true wolves or jackals.

The author acknowledges the following sources of information:

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Dwight Andrews

WOLVES IN SCOTLAND

A Howl in the Highlands: A British Yellowstone?

by Neil Hutt

Scotland has to create more excitement than a monster in Loch Ness. . . . There is enormous eco-tourism building in the world, and Scotland is losing out.

— Paul van Vlissingen, owner of an 81,000-acre estate in the Western Highlands

Wolves aren't on our agenda at all!

— Scottish Natural Heritage

Attention all fans of bagpipes and castles and monsters lurking in the depths of Loch Ness! If wealthy Dutch businessman Paul van Vlissingen has his way, Nessie may have to settle for second billing as Scotland's number one wildlife attraction. Van Vlissingen wants to reintroduce wolves, extinct for 250 years, to the Highland heaths where foxes and a burgeoning population of deer roam the timeless landscape.

Those inclined to dismiss van Vlissingen as an eccentric entrepreneur with a romantic reverence for

Supporters of reintroducing wolves to Scotland are convinced that biologically and ecologically, there is no reason why wolves cannot adapt to the environment where they once lived.

big predators should take another look. First of all, he is one of Britain's wealthiest men. His vast Letterwe estate encompasses 81,000 acres of highland landscape, and he is eager to share it. Hikers and other outdoor aficionados are welcome at Letterwe to walk the hills and experience the wild beauty of this place. Secondly, his record in conservation is solid. He has been influential in pioneering greater public access to private estates, and he helped bring sea eagles back to Scotland 80 years after they disappeared.

Van Vlissingen publicly laments the fact that "Scotland has become the centre for sheeplife, not wildlife," and his vision includes the notion of lynxes and perhaps even brown bears and bison inhabiting the wilds of Scotland. That may seem far-fetched until one considers the fact that in the past five years, van Vlissingen has taken over the management of six large game reserves in southern Africa. Detractors insist that business interests and profits must surely weigh into van Vlissingen's motives.

But the controversial landowner has rejected offers to exploit mining and hydroelectric development on his estate. "I never bought Letterwe with any idea that I would make one penny out of it," he said.

Van Vlissingen's ideas have the support of several conservation groups in Scotland who insist that the absence of natural predators along with other factors such as progressively milder winters have caused an unprecedented rise in the number of the three main species of deer in Scotland: red, sika and roe. The deer have caused widespread damage to habitat and are a major hazard on the roads.

But sheepherders and the Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Scotland's government conservation agency, aren't buying the Dutchman's dream of major predators as boosters of Scotland's flagging tourist industry.



B. and C. Promberger

"Scotland has become the centre for sheeplife, not wildlife," laments Paul van Vlissingen.

Van Vlissingen and his supporters are convinced, however, that biologically and ecologically, there is no reason why wolves cannot adapt to the environment where they once lived. A proposed wolf center in the Highlands, funded by private enterprise, would serve the most important preliminary requirement for the successful reintroduction of major predators: education.

Public support must include livestock interests, and that will be hard to achieve. Compensation funds must be considered, and steps need to be undertaken to revise a government subsidy system heavily relied upon by sheep farmers. Suggestions include making subsidies available to farmers only if they practice good husbandry, a requirement that would mean a change in the present style of sheep management.

Van Vlissingen's vision includes lynx in the wilds of Scotland.

Proponents of wolf recovery in Scotland also cite the ethics perspective. Britain has signed the Bern Convention agreeing to consider reintroduction. This means, the argument goes, an admission that wolves have the right to exist and includes a commitment to support research into the feasibility of a reintroduction program. With van Vlissingen leading the way, the splendor of the Highlands could someday be enhanced by the howl of the wolf. ■

The author acknowledges the following sources of information:

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- 🐾 Paul Gallagher, "Rich Laird with a Passion That's Priceless," *Scotsman.com*; www.news.scotsman.com/index.cfm?id=483042003.

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International Wolf Center