



Wolf Recovery Planning in the Southwest

by TRACY SCHEFFLER

Recovery Efforts for the Wolf

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has initiated three landmark recovery efforts to return the gray wolf to portions of its historic range. Wolves once again roam the western Great Lakes region, the Northern Rockies and the southwestern United States. Prior to concentrated wolf extirpation campaigns in the 1800s and 1900s, wolves ranged across most of North America from Canada to Mexico.

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to conserve threatened and endangered species and their ecosystems. Many conservation actions are typically necessary to improve a declining species' status, including land management, monitoring and research, law enforcement and public education. The USFWS is responsible for organizing a program to recover each species listed under the act, but it is only with the participation of many partners, from individual landowners to state agencies, that recovery can be achieved. A program for species recovery is guided by a plan that includes a list of management actions needed to conserve the species, criteria to explain when the species no longer meets the definition of threatened or endangered, and estimates of the time and cost

required to achieve the plan's goal. When a species has recovered, it is then removed from the list of threatened and endangered wildlife (or delisted).

The USFWS approved the first plan for the gray wolf, covering the species in the Midwest, in 1978 and revised it in 1992. Recovery plans for the Mexican gray wolf and wolves in the Northern Rockies followed in 1982 and 1987, respectively. These recovery plans guide efforts to reestablish viable wolf populations through the protection,



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



George Andrejko, Arizona Game and Fish Department

Approximately 44 to 48 free-ranging wolves inhabit a single recovery area in Arizona and New Mexico.

The recovery plan includes a captive breeding program from which wolves, like these pups, may be selected for breeding and/or release into the wild in either Mexico or the United States.



translocation, reintroduction and management of wolves in three areas of the country. Thus, the wolf population in the Midwest has grown from the only remnant breeding population in the United States in northern Minnesota and Isle Royale, Michigan, to over 3,500 wolves in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin. More than 800 wolves now inhabit three recovery areas in the Northern Rockies, in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. In the southwestern United States the extirpated Mexican wolf has been reintroduced from descendants of captive stock, and approximately 44 to 48 free-ranging wolves inhabit a single recovery area in Arizona and New Mexico. Across the border, Mexico also plans to reintroduce the Mexican wolf.

Recovery Planning in the Southwest

Wolf recovery in the Southwest currently focuses on the reintroduction of the Mexican wolf in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona and New Mexico. The program is making great progress in achieving the 1982 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan's interim objective of a population of 100 Mexican wolves in the wild. However, the 1982 recovery plan stopped short of a full definition of recovery, and the progress of the reintroduction program and

the USFWS's 2003 gray wolf reclassification emphasize the need to reconsider the big picture of wolf recovery in the Southwest. How many wolves are needed to reach recovery? Where does suitable habitat remain in the Southwest? How is wolf recovery affecting local communities, and how might it do so in the future?

These and other questions spurred the Southwest Region of the USFWS to initiate a recovery planning effort in 2003 to revise the 1982 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan, this time including recovery criteria.

Experience tells us that recovery plans cannot be written in a vacuum; that is, the people whose lives are entwined with the species must be a part of the solution. Recovery is a complex process and often represents an intricate weave of scientific and social considerations. A recovery plan must have an objective, scientific foundation, yet it must be grounded in the social and economic reality of affected human communities if it is to be successfully implemented. For the wolf in the Southwest, this means involving wolf experts, Native American tribes, ranchers, outfitters



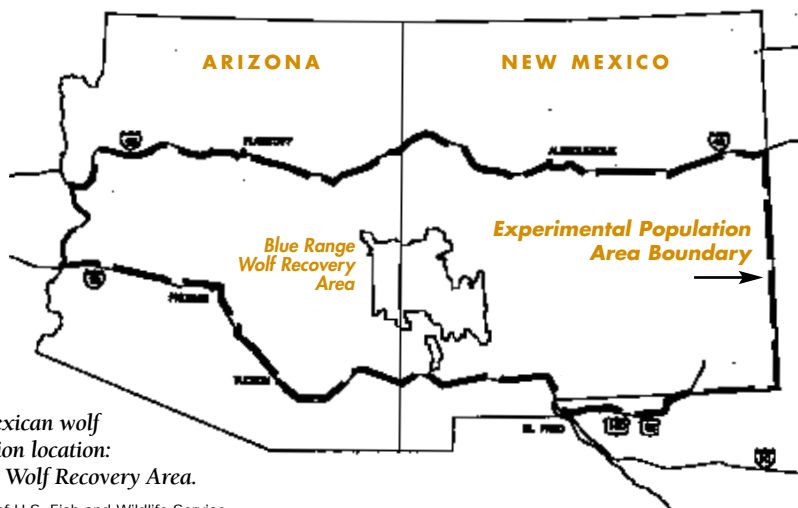
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Mexican wolves were loaded into panniers and carried on mules to the remote area where they were released.

and guides, special-interest groups, state and federal agencies, county governments and Mexico in the planning.

The breadth and depth of information gained by involving a diversity of experts are rivaled by the challenge of participation by a wide variety of interests, especially in the controversial world of carnivore restoration—discussions are contentious, relationships are difficult to build, and progress can be slow. Meeting these challenges is a small price to pay for a recovery planning effort that results in local partners and the affected community understanding the needs of the wolf and voluntarily embracing the effort to recover the wolf in the Southwest.

Coordination between Mexico and the United States is one of the first steps in developing a vision of wolf recovery in the Southwest, given the wolf's historic transboundary distribution. The wolf is federally protected in both countries. In Mexico, the Mexican gray wolf subspecies is listed as endangered under the Ley de Vida Silvestre (2000), Norma Oficial Mexicana (NOM), and conservation measures are guided by a recovery plan completed in Mexico in 2000. The Mexican wolf captive breeding program, managed by the Species Survival Program, is a binational program from which wolves may be selected for breeding and/or release



Current Mexican wolf reintroduction location: Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area.

Map courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



into the wild in either country. There are additional opportunities for binational collaboration, such as technical assistance and technology transfer, yet each country recognizes the need to pursue independent recovery goals and criteria relative to its wildlife statutes. Recovery planning in the Southwest should consider how the two countries' goals relate to one another and should provide recommendations for cooperative recovery efforts, including the establishment of a comprehensive borderlands strategy for wolf management.

Recovery planning in the Southwest must assess availability of wolf habitat north of the border to determine how recovery can be achieved. Similar to the wolf recovery programs in the Northern Rockies and western Great Lakes, more than one wolf population will likely be needed to achieve recovery in the Southwest. Wolves are habitat generalists that need large spaces, with adequate prey density and little human interference, in which they can establish packs, maintain territories, hunt and disperse. As we begin to answer scientific questions about how many wolves are needed to ensure the viability of the wolf, assessment of the landscape must also occur. Scientists must identify the most ecologically suitable areas for wolf recovery and determine whether recovery goals are realistic. Information about the subspecies' historic distribution patterns must also be considered. Before colonization, the Southwest was a mixing ground of several gray wolf sub-

species, with the Mexican wolf being southernmost in the United States and into Mexico.

As goals for recovery in the Southwest are developed, technical information about the wolf and its habitat must be considered within a social and economic context. Will dynamics between wolves and elk and mule deer affect the livelihoods of hunting and guiding professionals? How should local communities' concerns about the safety of living in proximity to wolves be addressed? How can ranchers who experience wolf depredation on livestock be fairly compensated for their losses? Answers to these questions should be used during the planning process to develop recovery implementation strategies that minimize the social and economic costs of recovery while still achieving biological goals. This is the most challenging aspect of recovery: there are no statistical models to identify the perfect balance between scientific, social and economic information; there is no chart to determine how much discussion is enough; there is no crystal ball to show us the ancient past or the distant future.

Beyond all else, paving the road to recovery requires elbow grease and an open mind—it takes a group of

committed, concerned people ready to tackle hard questions and even harder answers. It requires an ability to listen to one another and find an answer to the fundamental question: how do we recover a highly imperiled species that must compete for our ever-decreasing resources?

Although the Mexican wolf has regained a foothold in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, recovery of the wolf in the Southwest is in its infancy. The recovery team has invested a year and a half in the development of a recovery plan for the distinct population segment of the gray wolf in the Southwest, but its work is currently on hold due to litigation on the USFWS's 2003 gray wolf reclassification. The USFWS commends the team for its time and efforts, and we look forward to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. ■

Tracy Scheffler has worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as an endangered species biologist in the Southwest Region since 2001, focusing on recovery planning and implementation for over 130 southwestern species.

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