



Welcome Letter

INTERNATIONAL
WOLF CENTER

Why Wolves in the Southwest?

by Dale Hall

The primordial howl of the Mexican lobo once again echoes across the canyons and mountains of the American Southwest. Universally feared and reviled at the turn of the last century, the Mexican wolf is staging a miraculous resurrection in a tiny corner of Arizona and New Mexico, a comeback that even the most ardent wolf proponents dismissed as unlikely as recently as 10 to 15 years ago. The Mexican wolf was the focus of an intensive elimination campaign by numerous governmental and private entities in the late 1800s to mid-1900s. Now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and various private, county, state, tribal and federal partners are cooperatively working to return this keystone subspecies to ecological relevance.



Dale Hall

The Mexican wolf is special. It is the rarest, smallest, southernmost occurring and most genetically distinct subspecies of the North American gray wolf. By the late 1970s, the Mexican wolf was on the brink of extinction. In 1977–80, the last five Mexican wolves were removed from the wild. These animals were the founders of a captive breeding population that now includes approximately 275 wolves in captivity and a minimum of 44 to 48 free-ranging wolves in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area of Arizona and New Mexico.

Wolves are often romanticized as symbols of wild nature and dependent on wilderness for survival. In reality, wolves are highly adaptable habitat generalists, capable of thriving almost anywhere there is an adequate prey base.

In comparison to successful wolf recovery programs in the Midwest and Northern Rockies, recovery of the Mexican wolf in the Southwest has faced a number of unique challenges. Chief among these is that captive-reared wolves released in the early stages of the reintroduction program did not have the skills required to immediately prosper in the wild. With time, some captive-reared Mexican wolves gained the necessary survival skills to successfully hunt, acquire and defend a territory, and breed and raise pups in the wild. Currently we have second- and third-generation Mexican wolves, born and raised in the wild, existing much as their ancestors did more than 100 years ago.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is fortunate to work with a dedicated cadre of partners (Arizona Game and Fish Department, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, U.S. Department of Agriculture APHIS Wildlife Services, U.S. Forest Service and White Mountain Apache Tribe, to name a few) in helping to recover the Mexican wolf. Critical to wolf recovery is ensuring that our other vital partners in this effort, the community of individuals that live and work in the area affected by the return of the Mexican wolf to the wild, are not needlessly burdened.

As to the question “Why wolves in the Southwest?” the Mexican wolf fulfills a unique role in the history and development of our country and is part of our national heritage. Of equal or more importance, reintroduction restores a significant component of a functioning ecosystem missing for over 35 years. Finally, it is a public mandate and responsibility held by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act. To quote Aldo Leopold, the father of the modern-day conservation movement, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” ■

Dale Hall is the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Southwest Region.

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