

A Look Beyond

Red Wolf Recovery: Facing the Challenges, Celebrating the Successes

by Kim Wheeler and Cornelia Hutt

It is long past sunset, and the group gathered for the “howling” is shivering from the December chill and from anticipation. Will the wolves sing tonight? As suspense mounts, no one moves or speaks, not even in a whisper. And suddenly from the distant darkness of the wildlife refuge, the haunting notes rise and hang suspended before fading into silence. The red wolves are out there!

Once officially extinct in the wild and still one of the world’s most endangered canids, the red wolf now ranges wild and free in the lowlands of coastal North Carolina.

Nevertheless, those of us who value this elusive predator must confront the hard realities of the species’ long-term recovery. The greatest of these is the threat of hybridization with coyotes. A fragile population of 100 red wolves inhabits the region; thus, coyotes are ever-present antagonists despite the Red Wolf Recovery Team’s remarkable success at reducing their numbers within the recovery area.

Another challenge is the scarcity of unoccupied space in the Southeast. “A look beyond” rural northeastern North Carolina reveals three sobering facts: high human density, a labyrinth of roads and few large tracts of undeveloped land. Experts have judged that two additional reintroduction sites for the red wolf must be designated to ensure the creature’s survival. But where? Additionally, there is the issue of human attitudes. In the recovery area, where red wolves range on federal, private and state land,

some landowners remain hostile to predators—especially wolves.

Increasing genetic diversity among the wild population is also an issue. The “gene pool” is limited. Just 14 red wolves founded the present wild population, the remnants of a once wide-ranging species.

Despite these and other challenges, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Red Wolf Recovery Team and the Red Wolf Coalition (a non-profit group of red wolf advocates) are optimistic about the future. Their hopeful outlook is based on some positive trends. The skilled and dedicated USFWS biologists have reduced coyote numbers in the recovery area, thus allowing red wolf packs to become established. And the Recovery Team’s bold experiment with captive-to-wild “pup fostering” has worked. This method for infusing new genes into the population involves the placing of very young captive-born red-wolf pups into the dens of red wolves, where they are then raised by wild parents.

Encouraging public investment in red-wolf conservation through education is paying dividends. The Coalition reaches out to schools, community groups, hunters and other local citizens through a variety of projects and initiatives. The organiza-

tion’s major goal is to build a Red Wolf Center, a facility that will teach people about the red wolf’s role in the regional ecosystem and provide a tourist destination to benefit the regional economy.

The recovery goal of 220 red wolves in the wild seems remote and unreachable at times, but each spring brings a new crop of pups and fresh hope. “A look beyond” energizes us and reinforces our determination to keep the red wolf on the road to recovery. And like the group on that December night, we listen for the howls that sing the message: the red wolf is back and thriving. ■

Kim Wheeler is the executive director of the Red Wolf Coalition.

Cornelia Hutt is president of the board of the Red Wolf Coalition and an International Wolf Center board member.



Greg Koch

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