

Back from the Brink of Extinction:

The Red Wolf Species Survival Program



by Will Waddell

A critical step in the red wolf's journey from near extinction to reintroduction in northeastern North Carolina was initiating a managed breeding program. Without this effort, securing the red wolf's future would have been doubtful.

Before the Association of Zoos and Aquariums established the Species Survival Plan® (SSP) program in 1981, only three facilities were involved in red wolf captive management. The SSP concept is straightforward; conserve rare species in a cooperative way to promote long-term population diversity and demographic stability. Cooperation is the operative word and is a hallmark of the Red Wolf SSP. Today, 42 approved zoos and wildlife centers around the United States participate in the Red Wolf SSP and collectively manage a population of 208 red wolves.

How does the Red Wolf SSP fit into the recovery equation with field efforts focused on monitoring the wild population? Managing the population as a genetic reservoir is our primary task. Since all red wolves managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Red Wolf SSP are descended from just 14 founder wolves, preserving genetic diversity is critically important. However, the Red Wolf SSP does fill multiple roles. While the need to provide adult wolves for reintroduction has diminished in recent years as more red wolves breed and produce pups in the wild, the innovative technique of cross-fostering pups from the Red Wolf SSP to wild litters (where the captive-born pups are raised by wild wolves along with their own offspring) has emerged as an important way for the Red Wolf SSP

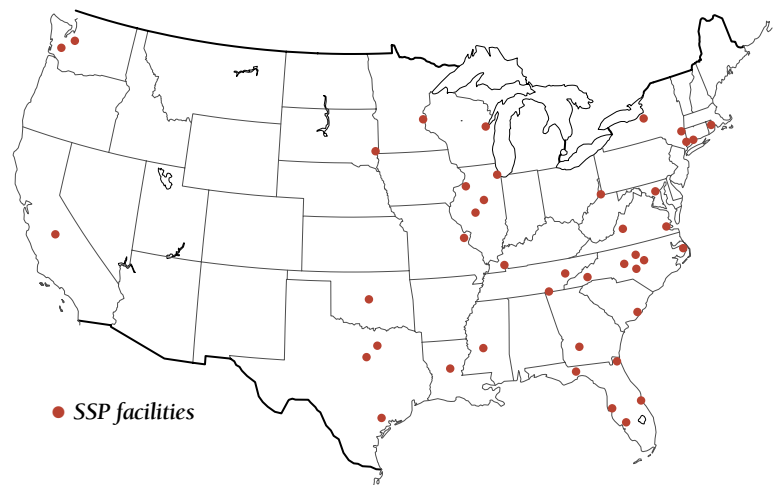
to support interactive management between the two populations.

Coordinating research in genome banking, assisted reproduction, behavior studies and veterinary medicine are all examples of areas that will enhance our ability to manage the population and are possible through Red Wolf SSP cooperation and involvement. Informing the millions of people who annually visit Red Wolf SSP institutions about the red wolf story provides a great opportunity for education. In recent years, educators in the Red Wolf SSP, the USFWS and the Red Wolf Coalition have organized education workshops to evaluate education programs and materials and develop initiatives that can be shared with red wolf partners and local teachers.

It is fitting that we celebrate 20 years since red wolves from the Red Wolf SSP were released at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. This effort represents a conservation success story that has been a model for other species restoration projects. This year also marks another important anniversary in the red wolf program. In 1977, four years after the breeding program was formalized, the first litter of red wolf pups was born at the Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium in Tacoma, Washington. The partner-

ship between the USFWS and the Red Wolf SSP is an important component of implementing strategies outlined for the recovery program. This long-standing commitment to red wolf recovery by the USFWS and the Red Wolf SSP illustrates our collective understanding of the role this unique predator plays in the diverse landscape of the southeastern United States. The fact that the red wolf is living in the wild is a testament to the tenacity of red wolves and the people who want them to succeed. ■

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