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The Decline and Recovery of the Wolf

By Alfred J. Smuskiewicz
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The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) was once the most widespread carnivorous mammal in the world. Able to live in almost any kind of climate, wolves roamed the forests, grasslands, mountains, and tundra throughout the Northern Hemisphere. North America, Europe, and Asia were all home to large numbers of wild, free-ranging wolf packs.

Wolves and humans have always had a close but complex relationship. Wolf packs had similar habits to—and lived in similar habitats as—tribes of prehistoric people. The frequent encounters between wolves and humans led to the domestication of wolves approximately 14,000 years ago. All of the dogs living as pets with people today—from the tiny chihuahua to the mighty mastiff—are descendents of the wolf.

The relationship between wolves and humans turned ugly as wandering hunter-gatherer tribes developed into the first permanent agriculture-based settlements. Wherever large numbers of people settled, they killed wolves—sometimes to protect livestock, other times simply out of fear. As a result, wolf populations declined dramatically over the centuries. Today, in most of the wolf's formerly enormous range, only sparse wild populations remain.

North American Wolf Populations

Before European settlers spread across North America in the 1700's and 1800's, wolves were common throughout the continent, from Canada to Mexico and from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean to that of the Pacific Ocean. In the United States, wolves were brought to the brink of extinction through government poisoning programs, bounties offered for the deaths of wolves, and private predator-extermination efforts.

By the mid-1900's, there were few wolves left in the conterminous United States (the lower 48 states). These remnant animals consisted of several hundred gray wolves in northern Minnesota, an isolated population of grays on Michigan's Isle Royale, and a small number of grays in the Southwest. In addition, a few red wolves, which are smaller than the typical gray wolf, lived along the Gulf coasts of Texas and Louisiana. Most biologists consider the red wolf, *Canis rufus*, to be a separate species from the gray wolf. Large numbers of North American gray wolves remained only in Alaska and Canada.

By the 1960's, many conservationists sounded the alarm about the disappearance of this magnificent animal. Dedicated conservation efforts came to the rescue of wolves in the United States with the 1973 Endangered Species Act, which was designed to protect many declining species from extinction. Between 1973 and 1976, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) placed various subspecies of gray wolves on the Endangered Species List (ESL), thereby protecting these wolf populations from hunting, trapping, and other activities harmful to them or their habitats. In 1978, the entire gray wolf species was placed on the ESL. The red wolf was also listed on the ESL.

Thanks to the protection of the Endangered Species Act, wolf numbers have rebounded in the United States. With their protected status, some wolves from natural populations in Canada have been able to migrate across the border to the United States. Other wolves have been restored to natural habitats in the United States through special recovery programs, in which government agencies (including the USFWS), universities, and conservation organizations work together to release animals into certain wild areas as "experimental populations." These animals are relocated to these areas from other wild places in which they are relatively abundant or from captive-bred populations.

Today, more than 5,000 gray wolves live in the wild in the lower 48 states. The major populations of grays are in three regions—the Western Great Lakes region, the Northern Rocky Mountains region, and the Southwest region.

The Western Great Lakes Region

According to the USFWS, the known numbers of gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes region as of 2006 (the latest-available data as of January 2008) were as follows:

- 434 individuals in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan
- 30 individuals in 3 packs on Isle Royale in Michigan
- 3,020 individuals in 485 packs in Minnesota
- 465 individuals in 115 packs in Wisconsin

Wolf numbers in the Western Great Lakes region have increased naturally by the spread of the remnant population from northern Minnesota and from populations in Canada. In fact, wolf numbers in this region have increased to the point where the USFWS now considers these animals to be secure, functioning, self-sustaining members of the ecosystem. Thus, the USFWS removed the wolves of the Western Great Lakes region



from the ESL in March 2007. The USFWS credited the wolf recovery to decades of cooperative work by conservation groups, Native American tribes, and state and federal government agencies.

The "delisting" removed federal protection for wolves in this region—including not only Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, but also nearby areas into which the wolves might eventually disperse (parts of North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio). These states are now allowed to establish possible hunting and trapping seasons for wolves, provided that such activities do not threaten the survival of the animals.

The state departments of natural resources in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, as well as local Native American tribes, are now in charge of the long-term management of wolf populations in the Western Great Lakes region. However, the USFWS plans to monitor the region's wolf populations for several years to ensure that they do not slide back toward becoming endangered. The USFWS reserves the option of relisting the wolves on the ESL should their numbers fall too low again.

The Northern Rocky Mountains Region

The known numbers of gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains region as of 2006 were as follows:

- 159 individuals, including 13 breeding pairs, in northwest Montana
- 713 individuals, including 46 breeding pairs, in central Idaho
- 371 individuals, including 30 breeding pairs, in the Yellowstone ecosystem of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming

The wolves in northwest Montana migrated there naturally from Canada. To speed up the natural recovery process in this region, a USFWS-led recovery program relocated 66 wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996 as experimental populations. The wolves at Yellowstone today are the descendants of those animals.

In light of updated estimates of approximately 1,500 wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains region, the USFWS was expected to remove the wolves of this region from the ESL in early 2008. This move would leave wolf population management in the hands of state authorities in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. As with the Western Great Lakes region, delisting would allow the wolves of the Northern Rocky Mountains region to be hunted and trapped, with the goal of maintaining enough animals for a self-sustaining population.

The proposed delisting of wolves in this region was controversial, because many conservationists believed that there needed to be at least 2,000 wolves in a viable, self-sustaining population.

The Southwest Region

The known numbers of Mexican gray wolves (a subspecies of the gray wolf) in the Southwest region as of 2006 were as follows:

- 59 individuals, including 7 breeding pairs, in Arizona and New Mexico

The Mexican gray wolves of the Southwest region are an experimental population that is part of a joint recovery program involving both the USFWS and the government of Mexico. Previous to the wild reintroduction of wolves from a captive-bred stock in this program, the last confirmed wild Mexican gray wolf was seen in the United States in 1970, and in Mexico in 1980.

To obtain Mexican gray wolves for captive breeding, conservation officials captured the few remaining wolves in Mexico between 1977 and 1980. These animals were then bred in captivity to build up their numbers. In the 1990's, officials began to move some captive-bred wolves to remote wildlife facilities, including the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico, to prepare them for living in the wild and hunting on their own.

In 1998, the USFWS released 13 of these wolves into Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in eastern Arizona. Since then, there have been additional releases of wolves in this national forest and in Gila National Forest in New Mexico. In addition, released wolves have given birth to a number of pups in the wild. The goal of the USFWS is to establish a wild population of at least 100 Mexican gray wolves. The recovery program houses approximately 300 wolves in captivity.

Unfortunately, the Mexican gray wolf recovery program has been plagued by a number of problems, including cases of wolves roaming outside the reintroduction area and attacking livestock on ranches. As a result, officials were forced to kill several wolves. Furthermore, more than 20 wolves have been shot and killed illegally. In early 2008, the USFWS was reportedly re-evaluating the program.

Gray Wolves in Alaska and Canada

Unlike wolf populations in the lower 48 states, the populations of gray wolves in Alaska and Canada have never reached the point at which special protection as members of an endangered species was deemed necessary. Thus, the wolves in these regions are not on the ESL.

In Alaska, the state government manages a population of approximately 6,000 to 8,000 gray wolves. In Canada, provincial governments manage a total population of roughly 50,000 to 60,000 gray wolves.

Because wolves in Alaska and Canada are not considered to be endangered or threatened, they are commonly trapped for the fur market.

Red Wolves

The red wolf is one of the most endangered wild canids (members of the dog family). The red wolf was formerly found throughout the Southeast United States and up the eastern seaboard to New England. By 1980, wild populations of red wolves had been eradicated, and only 14 survived in captivity.

As part of a captive-breeding program involving the USFWS and nearly 40 wildlife facilities in the United States, red wolves began to be reintroduced into the wild in 1987. An experimental population of red wolves was established at the Alligator River National

Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina and nearby lands in northeast North Carolina. As of 2006, there were approximately 100 red wolves in 20 packs roaming the wilds of northeast North Carolina, along with about 170 in captivity.

The USFWS's goal is to build up red wolf numbers to about 550, including at least 220 in the wild. A big problem with increasing the wild numbers, however, is that red wolves have a tendency to interbreed with coyotes, producing hybrid animals rather than pure red wolves.

Wolves in Europe and Asia

The gray wolf survives not only in North America, but also in parts of Europe and Asia. Several Eurasian subspecies of the gray wolf once lived throughout northern Europe and Asia and south into India and the Arabian Peninsula. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the original worldwide range of *Canis lupus* has been reduced by about one-third. Nevertheless, because the gray wolf survives in a relatively widespread range around the world and its numbers are trending upward, the IUCN classifies the status of the gray wolf as being of "least concern."

Wild populations of Eurasian gray wolves are most common in central Asia, including Russia, Kazakhstan, and other parts of the former Soviet Union (where there are more than 90,000 wolves) and Mongolia (where there are more than 10,000 wolves). Thousands of wolves are reportedly killed every year in Russia for the fur trade and as a result of conflicts with people, such as attacks on livestock. In China, wolves are widely persecuted and threatened by habitat loss, hunting, trapping, and poisoning.

Small numbers of gray wolves can be found in parts of Western and Eastern Europe, including Spain, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, Poland, Romania, and Croatia. As in the United States, government protection since the 1970's, including official protection by the European Union, has allowed the previously decimated wolf populations of Europe to bounce back somewhat. In some European countries, the increased wolf numbers are being culled by bounties and hunting. There are also gray wolves in India and the Middle East (including Israel, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Iran).

A third species of wolf, *Canis simensis*, lives in the highlands of Ethiopia, in Africa. This species, commonly called the Abyssinian, or Ethiopian, wolf, consists of only about 400 to 500 individuals in isolated populations.

Coming Full Circle

The relationship between wolves and humans has come full circle. Wolves were once nearly exterminated in the wild by humans. Then they were rescued by conservation measures. Now, with their populations substantially recovered in certain areas, wolves in the United States are once again becoming subject to hunting and trapping.

This time, hopefully, we can trust our government institutions to keep the conservation of wild wolves at the core of their population management strategies. After all, there should be enough room in this world for both wolves and humans.

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