

# Can We Save the Wolf?

By Stephen Capra

It was 1998. After two decades of planning, environmental assessment, threats of litigation, and sometimes raucous public debate, something special was happening. Mexican wolves were once again free in the wilds of the Blue Range of Arizona and poised to return to the Gila country of New Mexico. It was a hopeful moment for the most imperiled subspecies of gray wolf in North America—the Mexican gray wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*.) Much like recovery efforts in the northern Rocky Mountains, where wolves had been released into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, it seemed we had learned in the Southwest to share our lands with native wild-life. Working with ranchers and rural communities, conservationists sensed a new respect for nature and a desire for ecological balance taking root after generations of abuse and slaughter. But unlike Yellowstone's success, the fate of the Mexican lobo is far from certain.

The story of *Canis lupus baileyi* is a complex and mostly frustrating tale of good intentions, an old West mentality, politics, and unsatisfactory results. Originally, the Mexican wolf ranged from central Mexico to today's U.S. Interstate 10 in Arizona and New Mexico. It was exterminated from the southwestern United States by the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey. In 1950, the Bureau's successor agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, launched a program in Mexico that eliminated almost all of its wolves by the mid-1970s. Such extermination campaigns reflected the anti-predator alliance that had been forged between government agencies and the livestock industry. Fortunately, a handful of Mexican wolves survived extermination in a few remote hideouts in Mexico. Five wolves were live-trapped between 1977 and 1980 and placed in a captive breeding program, which saved the subspecies from almost certain extinction. Other wolves held in captivity were later discovered and integrated into the captive breeding pool. All Mexican wolves alive today stem from just seven founders. These animals were truly rescued from the brink of extinction.



In 1976, the Mexican wolf was placed on the endangered species list; and in the late 1980s, the threat of a lawsuit by wildlife supporters prompted the Fish and Wildlife Service to undertake a reintroduction program with captive-bred animals. The agency selected the Apache National Forest of eastern Arizona and the Gila National Forest of western New Mexico as the initial reintroduction site, and called this 6,854 square mile area the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA). In 1998, the Fish and Wildlife Service began releasing wolves, but did so with major policy constraints. The rules were complex. Because the State of New Mexico and its Department of Game and Fish flatly opposed wolf reintroduction (a position that Bill Richardson's

administration reversed), captive-bred wolves would be released into Arizona, and only wolves that had been captured from the wild could be re-released (translocated) into New Mexico. In addition, wolves could get to the New Mexico portion of the BRWRA using their own four feet. Wolves leaving the recovery area would be captured and returned to the BRWRA or to captivity. The rules allow (but do not require) responsible agencies to control or kill, if necessary, wolves that depredate livestock and for other reasons. No reductions in livestock numbers or distribution or changes in livestock husbandry practices were required, such as the removal of dead livestock that may attract wolves to an area.

Flexibility was built into the reintroduction project's regulations to allow the agencies to adjust management practices based on the nature and extent of conflicts, the results of population monitoring, and the progress toward the population objective of 100 wolves. The formal name for this approach is "adaptive management." The formal regulation contained general guidelines, and implementation details would be spelled out in Fish and Wildlife Service approved management plans or operating procedures. Formal reviews of the reintroduction project were required at three and five years following the initial releases.



In 2001, the Three-Year Review of the BRWRA reintroduction project was completed. In that report, several prominent wolf researchers stated that the Fish and Wildlife Service must gain the authority to release wolves directly into New Mexico, allow wolves that are not creating problems to roam outside of the recovery area (just as endangered wolves and other animals elsewhere are allowed), and that ranchers should be made responsible for removing livestock carcasses (which attract wolves into the proximity of live cattle) from their grazing allotments. Congressman Joe Skeen then asked for another review which was conducted by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and jointly endorsed by the game commissions of Arizona and New Mexico. This led the Arizona Game and Fish Department to ask for more control over the reintroduction project. In late

2003, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed that created a multi-agency working group formally dubbed the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee (AMOC), chaired by Arizona Game and Fish. AMOC was to make decisions on management of the reintroduction project and the Fish and Wildlife Service retained responsibility for future recovery planning for the Mexican wolf. All formal cooperating agencies hold a seat on the AMOC, which operates by consensus.

Since the end of 2003 when AMOC took charge, the wild population of Mexican wolves has plummeted due to removals and mortality exceeding the capacity for the population to grow. An appropriate adaptive response would be to implement measures to increase the survival of wolves, reduce the number of wolves removed from the wild, and to release more wolves. No such measures and none of the critical recommendations in the Three-Year Review for increasing wolf survival and retention in the wild have been adopted by the AMOC. In early 2005 following a population decline the previous year, the AMOC proposed a moratorium on new releases of wolves and a revised procedure for addressing livestock depredation that would remove managers' discretion and create a rigid formula for when to initiate trapping or shooting of wolves that prey on cattle. These draconian proposals closely followed two meetings held by Congressman Pearce on behalf of wolf recovery opponents. High-level regional Fish and Wildlife Service officials and the Forest Service's AMOC representative attended these meetings at the Congressman's request. Clearly, the AMOC jettisoned the mandated "adaptive management" approach at the first sign of political heat. This does not bode well for the future of the Mexican wolf reintroduction project.

Eight years after the first wolves tasted freedom, the wolf reintroduction program lags far behind the established goal of 100 wolves and 18 breeding pairs in the wild by the end of 2006. Instead, at the end of 2005 only 35 wolves and five breeding pairs could be confirmed. Recently, 12 Mexican wolves, including six pups in one pack, were killed through AMOC-authorized predator control actions. By our calculations (with wolves dying so fast it is hard to keep track), these mortalities reduce the five breeding pairs documented at the end of 2005 to three. A few additional pairs have reproduced this year and if at least two of their pups survive to the end of the year, they will be added to the breeding pair count. Clearly, current management of the program is not leading to recovery of the Mexican wolf as required by the Endangered Species Act. Furthermore, the Fish and Wildlife Service has abandoned all efforts to develop a new recovery plan for the Mexican wolf. The original 1982 plan did not set specific recovery objectives for removing the Mexican wolf from the endangered species list—a consequence of the dire straits of the "lobo" at the time and the seeming remoteness of the possibility of recovery. Thus, on at least two counts the Fish and Wildlife Service is in non-compliance with the Endangered Species act: (1) failure of the reintroduction project to further the conservation of the wolf, and (2) failure to develop a recovery plan.



Unlike the northern Rocky Mountains, the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area does not offer a large area free of livestock. And livestock in most of the BRWRA stay on the national forests year round, whereas in the northern Rockies most livestock leave the public lands over the winter. This leaves wolves less refuge from the possibilities of encountering livestock, and fewer areas in which native prey are not competing with cattle for available forage. Furthermore, year-round public lands grazing in the South-west has allowed more ranchers to live on tiny parcels of private land and run their cattle on tens of thousands of acres of public lands, usually with little or no tending or monitoring by range riders. During drought, the cattle often stay on the national forest and sometimes die in significant numbers—drawing wolves in by their smell. Thus, the opportunity for the development of conflicts between wolves and livestock is present nearly everywhere and nearly all the time in the BRWRA.

On May 6, 2006, a male wolf came across the carcass of a bull that had died of a disease. The wolf fed on the carcass and later preyed on live cattle. On June 18 he was shot by agency personnel; and his mate was shot on July 6, without having preyed on livestock in the intervening period. The female was especially valuable to the wild population because she possessed genes from all three founding lineages. The Three-Year Review identified untended livestock carcasses as a problem that needed to be addressed, but AMOC refuses to take corrective actions. Current policies and procedures give livestock primacy over wolf survival and recovery in all conflict situations.

Defenders of Wildlife, a national conservation organization, compensates ranchers at fair market value for confirmed livestock depredations. Confirmation of depredation is the job of USDA Wildlife Services (formerly Animal Damage Control).

In 2005, Governor Bill Richardson, responding to complaints expressed by Catron County residents, set up a task force to study the situation, chaired by his environmental advisor and by the Director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. In response to local demands for a compensation plan that would not require confirmation of every wolf depredation in order to receive payment, the representative of the New Mexico Department of Agriculture presented a state-funded plan, administered by the New Mexico Livestock Board, which would have paid compensation based on livestock losses compared with average losses in previous years. No confirmation would have been required beyond an occasional spot check. In addition, ranchers cooperating with the plan would have been paid a stipend of \$150 to \$200 per year for their trouble. Ranchers and other local members of the task force unanimously rejected the plan. Instead, they presented a list of “non-negotiable” demands, including putting wolves behind fences and allowing individuals to kill wolves for a variety of reasons including threatening “the physical and mental well-being of residents.”

While we may not all agree on wolf reintroduction, the position of one group in this equation that remains perhaps the most unclear is that of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Do they seriously support recovery of the Mexican wolf? Their policies and actions, particularly in the face of steady population declines, lead one to wonder. The Endangered Species Act, signed into law by Richard M. Nixon on December 28, 1973, endows the Fish and Wildlife Service with the responsibility to recover the Mexican wolf. NMWA Board member, Dave Parsons, once led the agency’s reintroduction program and was on hand for the release of the first wolves into the wilds of Arizona. He has acknowledged that from the start the reintroduction suffered from political compromises largely in response to the strong objections of the livestock industry. Parsons thought he had built enough flexibility into the rules to allow forward progress toward wolf recovery while addressing legitimate conflicts. But the agencies have used that flexibility to move in the wrong direction.

The role of the Fish and Wildlife Service is abundantly clear—they are solely responsible for recovery of the Mexican wolf, period. This remains true even though they have delegated management authority for the reintroduction project to Arizona Game and Fish. I truly believe that many members of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program staff are hard-working, dedicated people who genuinely care about the wolves and want this reintroduction to succeed. But despite their best intentions, the program has had its share of set backs and politically motivated decisions that are not in the best interest of the Mexican wolf.

Dr. Benjamin Tuggle is the new Southwest Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque. He is faced with some tough decisions for reversing the declining population trend, advancing science-informed recovery planning, and putting the project on a trajectory toward recovery. Tuggle has clearly earned the respect of his staff and is perceived by many in the conservation community as smart, fair, and concerned. But the politics of wolf recovery and the Bush Administration’s continued “slow death” approach to conservation/environmental issues makes one wonder how far



Dr. Tuggle will be willing or allowed to go for the lobo. Our hope is that he will be bold and willing to pursue new ideas and creative solutions, use the authority and flexibility he already has under federal regulations, and make the innovative changes necessary for advancing recovery of the Mexican wolf. The existing management paradigm is clearly not working.

Important changes must be made if Mexican wolves are to have a

fighting chance in the wilds of the Southwest. We recommend that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

- Immediately institute a moratorium on all management removals and predator control directed at Mexican wolves, except for that which is specifically required by the existing reintroduction rule—specifically, capturing and returning wolves to the recovery area when they establish territories outside the boundaries of the BRWRA; capturing or killing wolves that threaten human lives; and on private or tribal land, allowing the take of wolves caught in the act of killing, wounding, or biting livestock. Additionally, wolves could be removed if such removal contributes to the immediate survival of that wolf.
- Immediately pursue a rule change that would eliminate boundaries imposed on Mexican wolves' roamings, eliminate restrictions on where wolves can be released, and hold blameless wolves that kill livestock after the same wolves have been documented to have scavenged on one or more livestock carcasses from animals they are found not to have killed. Alternately, in order to address the livestock carcass problem, the Forest Service could institute regulations requiring ranchers to remove or render carcasses inedible (as by lime). Such a rule change should provide a level of protection to the reintroduced Mexican wolf population sufficient to fulfill the Endangered Species Act mandate to recover the species.
- Reclaim full authority for all aspects of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program by placing the AMOC in an advisory role and review and revise all agreements, procedures, and regulations for compatibility with the removal moratorium and progress toward recovery.
- Add recommendations to the Five-Year Review that would serve to immediately increase the odds of survival and persistence of Mexican wolves in the wild and assign the highest priority for implementation to these recommendations.

- Immediately reinstate a functional Mexican Wolf Recovery Team and expedite the development and approval of a new recovery plan.
- Vest decision-making authority for wolf removals and control in the Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator (MWRC), as it was before the Memorandum of Understanding, rather than in the AMOC. Control decisions should be in writing, signed by the appropriate official (the MWRC or his designee), and include a statement as to the cause and full disclosure of the depredation investigations.
- Step up law enforcement efforts to deter illegal killing of Mexican wolves.
- Continue wolf releases to augment losses that cannot be replaced through natural productivity.

The Mexican wolf needs our help. We must be the voice for these magnificent animals that have historically called New Mexico home. The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance can help promote Mexican wolf recovery by protecting the wild lands and ecosystems upon which they depend. We appreciate the dedication and volunteer efforts contributed by our members to this cause. Many of you have attended and testified on behalf of Mexican wolf recovery at public meetings and hearings, and we are most grateful for that extra effort!

Leopold said it so sadly, but so well, in his famous essay on the wolf, that resonates today as it did then. “Everyone reached for their guns and began to fire away; we reached the old wolf in time to watch the fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

The killing must stop. We have a chance to restore the balance the mountain demands, but our silence will be the wolf’s demise. Their howls are the real symbol of the wild we continue to fight for.