

A Look Beyond

The Southern Rockies: Next Step in Wolf Recovery

by Mike Phillips

For years, nongovernmental conservation organizations have promoted restoring wolves to the Southern Rockies Ecoregion (SRE). Several studies lend credence to the claim that the Southern Rockies is the mother lode for wolf recovery.

The SRE stretches from northcentral Wyoming, through western Colorado, into northcentral New Mexico (Figure 1). The Ecoregion includes 25 million acres of public land that support unnaturally large populations of native prey. This amount of land is twice as large as that available to wolves in Yellowstone and central Idaho, and five times as large as that available to Mexican wolves currently being reintroduced in the Southwest. This massive extent of public land and its robust populations of native ungulates justifies serious consideration of the ecoregion for wolf restoration.

Two studies have estimated the carrying capacity of the ecoregion for wolves. The first, conducted in 1994, concluded that the Colorado portion of the area alone could support more than 1,000 wolves. The second study concluded, after application of sophisticated modeling of variables that affect wolf survival (e.g., distribution/abundance of native prey), that the SRE could support 2,000 wolves.

Fortunately, the public is broadly supportive of restoring wolves to the SRE. A public opinion poll conducted in 1994 revealed

that 71 percent of Coloradoans supported wolf restoration. More recently, Decision Research, a national polling firm, determined that 66 percent of registered voters in Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona favored the wolf's return. Majority support was widespread among various demographic groups.

The appropriateness and importance of the Southern Rockies is not lost on the conservation community. Recently, 17 conservation organizations launched the Southern Rockies Wolf Restoration Project. The project has a simple mission: restore wolves to their full ecological role in the Southern Rockies (information about the project can be obtained from <http://www.rockywolf.org>).

Despite the improved conservation status of *Canis lupus*, the job of recovery is incomplete. No convincing argument concerning wolf recovery in the western United States can be put forth until there has been a serious discussion about restoring the species to the Southern Rockies. Such discussion is justified because of wide-

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spread and persistent public support, and because no other region in the U.S. offers the same potential to support a population of wolves on a vast expanse of public land that is currently unoccupied by them.

Restoring wolves to the Southern Rockies would provide nature with grist for recreating a wolf population that stretches from the Arctic to Mexico. Nowhere else in the world does such a viable opportunity exist to achieve conservation of a carnivore over such an extensive landscape.

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www.wolf.org
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