

# A Look Beyond

## The Future of Wolf Restoration

by Mike Phillips

The tremendous success with wolf recovery in the Great Lakes states (Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin) and the Northern Rockies (Montana, Wyoming and Idaho) indicates that recovering the species in the southwestern United States (Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah) is doable. This claim is bolstered by two recent studies that revealed tremendous potential for gray wolves to occupy the Southwest in numbers and with a distribution that would more than satisfy the spirit and intent of the Endangered Species Act.

Specifically, the studies determined that under current habitat conditions, probably more than 1,000 wolves could inhabit the southwestern United States. This area includes two refugia of high quality and highly secure habitat that is currently unoccupied: the Grand Canyon ecoregion and the Southern Rocky Mountains ecoregion. If one combines these with the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, where efforts have been underway for over a decade to restore Mexican wolves, then more than enough high-quality habitat exists to restore wolf populations that would persist indefinitely.

Reintroducing wolves to the Grand Canyon ecoregion, a place that enjoys the largest potential for wolves in the southwestern United States, and the Southern Rocky Mountains ecoregion

represents an outstanding opportunity to recover the animal throughout a significant portion of its range as mandated by the Endangered Species Act.

Moreover, these two reintroductions would reconnect wolves along the spine of the continent—the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Madres—from Mexico through Canada and into Alaska. Noted wolf biologist David Mech concluded the following when considering such a vision: “Ultimately then this restoration could connect the entire North American wolf population from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan through Canada and Alaska, down the Rocky Mountains and into Mexico. It would be difficult to overestimate the biological and conservation value of this achievement.”

A rare opportunity exists to recreate the evolutionary potential of wolves, as well as reestablish the role of wolves as a keystone species with strong ecological interactions throughout the Rocky Mountain West. Evolutionary and ecological restoration will be hindered if we limit wolf recovery to the success in the Northern Rockies and the Great Lakes states. Additional reintroductions in the Grand Canyon and Southern Rocky Mountain ecoregions are clearly called for as important steps in returning the gray wolf to its rightful place as an important and fascinating part of our nation's ecological past and future. ■

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*Author's note: The essay above draws heavily on chapter 11 (Potential for and implications of wolf restoration in the Southern Rocky Mountains) of a new book about wolf restoration: Awakening Spirit: Wolves in the Southern Rockies (Fulcrum Press, Golden, CO).*

