

DETERMINED TO CONSERVE

BY BEAU TURNER

In 1995 my father, media executive R. E. "Ted" Turner, and I visited Yellowstone National Park to witness firsthand the restoration of wolves. We left convinced that restoration was an alternative to extinction. As the year progressed we frequently discussed the wolf project and in more general terms the alarming worldwide loss of biological diversity. The losses are of great concern because, if left unchecked, they will have profound and negative consequences for all of humankind.

The trend is clear and troubling: every year thousands of native species and attendant ecological interactions fine-tuned by time and place disappear at the hand of mankind. Losses are so severe that the redundancy and certainty of nature are being stripped away, wearing thin the lives of millions. The Yellowstone project gave us hope that the trend could be reversed.

The seriousness of the extinction crisis captured our attention. But we were also drawn to the issue because the primary cause of the crisis is habitat loss that occurs, mostly on private land, in the name of development and economic growth. Clearly, arresting the extinction crisis will require the intensive involvement of private landowners. As the largest private landowners in the United States, we were keenly motivated to set a vivid example.

By late 1995 we had decided that our family's active involvement in the conservation of imperiled species could improve the recovery prospects for many plants and animals. With landholdings that encompass about 1.7 million acres, we knew that we could demonstrate to other landowners that coexistence with endangered species is possible and, by

doing so, illustrate the usefulness of the Endangered Species Act. These possibilities prompted the family to form, in June, 1997, the Turner Endangered Species Fund (TESF) and Turner Biodiversity Divisions (TBD).

The fund and the divisions are dedicated to conserving biological diversity by ensuring the persistence of imperiled species and their habitats, with an emphasis on private land. We concentrate on carnivores, grasslands, plant-pollinator complexes, species with historic ranges that include Turner properties, and dissemination of credible scientific and policy information about biodiversity conservation. Our projects, which are based on the principles of conservation biology, involve state and federal agencies, universities, nongovernmental organizations and private citizens.

TESF is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a nonprofit operational charity. Such recognition provides a tax exemption as long as TESF funds are used solely for projects involving species considered threatened or endangered by a state or by the federal government. In contrast to the Turner Foundation, which is a grantmaking charity, TESF is an operational charity that helps to conceive, design and implement field projects. TBD was formed to focus on imperiled species (and their habitats) that are not listed as threatened or endangered. We believe that maintaining the divisions is part and parcel of responsible ownership.

TESF and TBD now are involved in more than 23 projects, including reintroduction efforts for plants, birds, fishes and mammals. Our flagship effort for 1999 concerned conservation of migratory pollinators and their plant partners

along a 1,500-mile migration corridor that stretches from the southwestern United States to southern Mexico. Although our field work emphasizes Turner properties, we also launch projects that generate benefits transcending Turner boundaries. Several of our projects dovetail nicely with other well-known large-scale initiatives.

For example, our 113,000-acre Flying D Ranch in Montana is the largest tract of private land in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). The "D" is one of best known ranches in the West, and upon its purchase we donated a conservation easement to The Nature Conservancy. The ranch is dominated by montane rangeland and spruce forests and shares a border with the Lee Metcalf Wilderness in the Gallatin National Forest.

In sharp contrast to the situation on most private lands, large carnivores are welcome on the D. Grizzly bears and wolverines have been sighted, and during the winter of 1998-99 TESF biologists observed one wolf and detected wolf tracks on three other occasions. Wolf tracks were also found this past February.

Recently TESF submitted a proposal to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to assist with monitoring gray wolves that settle the public-private land interface in the northwestern corner of the GYE (with an emphasis on the ranch) and with developing aversive-conditioning techniques to reduce livestock depredations. Integrating the ranch in the mix of lands available to large carnivores and using the field skills of TESF greatly advances carnivore conservation. This is also a central feature of the Yellowstone-to-Yukon Conservation Initiative, a project working to conserve a broad corridor for wildlife and habitat across the

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Rocky Mountains of the northern United States and Canada.

Vermejo Park Ranch (VPR) in New Mexico totals some 580,000 acres along the southeastern border of the Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project, a nonprofit effort to conserve biodiversity in the southern Rockies bioregion. Elevations at VPR range from 6,000 to 12,000 feet. Because of this variation, many ecotypes can be found on the ranch, including short-grass prairie, pinyon-juniper woodland, ponderosa pine forest, mixed conifer stands, spruce-fir forest and alpine habitats. At one time the Department of the Interior considered Vermejo as a possible addition to the national park system.

Like all Turner properties, Vermejo is managed to ensure the persistence of native species. Here TEF and TBD have several important projects in place (e.g., restoration of black-tailed prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets). Moreover, the ranch gives TEF a grand opportunity to advance wolf recovery, an important component of the Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project's design.

Without doubt, Vermejo can support a self-sustaining population of wolves. The ranch's large size, dense elk herd, lack of human threats (e.g., poaching and collisions with vehicles) and location well within range of public lands designated for wolf dispersal make it an ideal origin point for wolves settling vast stretches of wildlands in the southern Rocky Mountains and beyond. Indeed, reintroducing wolves at Vermejo should greatly facilitate restoration of a wolf population that is continuous from Canada to Mexico.

The Armendaris Ranch (some 335,000 acres of Chihuahuan Desert grasslands, desert scrub and riparian habitat along the Rio Grande and the Fra Cristobal Mountains) and the Ladder Ranch (some 250,000 acres of mixed desert grassland, riparian areas, pinyon-juniper stands and mixed-pine forests) are situated along the northeastern edge of the Sky Island/Greater Gila Nature Reserve Network (SIGGNR) in New Mexico. The emphasis of these ranches

on native species conservation and their diverse habitats, variations in elevation, large size and proximity to public land ensure that they will always figure prominently in large-scale conservation efforts in the region.

SIGGNR emphasizes the restoration of carnivores, and efforts at the Ladder Ranch contribute a great deal to this end. For example, at the Ladder we maintain a captive-breeding facility for Mexican wolves for release to the wild by FWS. TEF fully supports reintroduction of Mexican wolves into the Gila National Forest, hopefully on the Ladder's allotments, and has offered the services of a biological technician to assist with radio-tracking.

Finally, the Ladder's management team greatly improved the suitability of the region for large carnivores by developing an agreement with the U.S. Forest Service for removing livestock from the ranch's two allotments, which cover 70,000 acres in the Gila's Aldo Leopold Wilderness.

During the last few years the Turner organization has made good progress conserving native species with an emphasis on private land. However, we realize that much work remains if we are to establish our efforts as a persistent force and properly integrate Turner properties into large-scale conservation efforts. We recognize that these tasks will be difficult, because emphasizing private stewardship of biodiversity is new, the problems are complex, and effective solutions involve broad-based socio-political, geographic and fiscal considerations.

The difficulty of the tasks, however, does not diminish our substantial resolve, which is based on the belief that any real solution to the extinction crisis will rely on the genius and determination of humankind. Accordingly, we are determined to contribute by establishing a new measure for conserving the wondrous diversity of life on Earth. □

Beau Turner is chairman of the board of trustees of the Turner Endangered Species Fund, fish and wildlife manager of Turner Enterprises, Inc., the landholding group of the Turner family, and trustee of the Turner Foundation.



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