

A Look Beyond

Another Turn Of The Crank: The Case for Wolf Restoration in Western Colorado

By Mike Phillips, Turner Endangered Species Fund

After completing decades of wolf recovery work elsewhere in the United States, conservationists can begin to turn the crank of progress by focusing on the last great, remaining expanse of wolfless wildlands in the lower 48 states—the public lands of western Colorado.

Wolves were rendered all but ecologically extinct there by the 1930s, and the

last wolf was killed near the Colorado-New Mexico border in 1945.

While it is fitting that the species is listed as endangered under Colorado state law, it is unlikely that any proactive, state-led recovery effort will surface. Why? The state's law is best suited for management actions that promote the persistence of imperiled but extant species. For extirpated species like the gray wolf, the law specifies that reintroductions must be authorized by the legislature. Given the influence of the livestock industry, and to a lesser extent the big-game hunting industry, it seems unlikely that the legislature would ever willingly authorize wolf reintroductions.

Nowhere else in the world does such an opportunity exist to restore an iconic, unfairly maligned animal across such an inspiring and continental landscape.



The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) also protects the wolf in Colorado. This should mean that recovery is inevitable. But for more than 20 years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has shown no interest in restoring the wolf to western Colorado. In 2013 the agency made its disinterest clear when it released a draft proposed rule for the species to be removed from the federal list of endangered and threatened species for most of the country, including Colorado. Curiously though, as of January 2017 the proposed rule had not been advanced beyond the draft stage.

In addition to legal mandates, wolf restoration to Colorado is strongly indicated by the presence of extensive and

highly suitable habitat. The area contains more public land and prey for wolves than anywhere else in the U.S.

From 2004–2015 the roughly 18 million acres of public land supported an average combined population of deer and elk that included about 760,000 animals. This probably represents the largest population of ungulates available for wolves anywhere in the world—a noteworthy situation, since prey abundance is the best predictor of habitat quality for wolves in areas where human-caused mortality of wolves is low. Not surprisingly, a congressionally mandated

1994 study concluded that Colorado could support more than 1,000 wolves. Three additional studies, using increasingly reliable techniques, affirmed that Colorado could easily support a self-sustaining population of wolves.

In addition to extensive suitable habitat, public approval of the wolf's return to Colorado is significant. Regional public opinion surveys conducted across a span of 20 years reveal strong and durable support for restoration.

Even though western Colorado is ideally suited for the gray wolf, the area is a considerable distance from wolf populations elsewhere, making it unlikely that a population will inhabit the area through natural recolonization.

Conventional wisdom based on decades of reliable research and wolf recovery actions indicates that reintroductions provide the best guarantee for re-establishing a wolf population in western Colorado. The distances are too great, with too many mortality hazards along the way, for a sufficient number of wolves from elsewhere to disperse to Colorado, find one another and survive long enough to give birth to the countless litters of pups required to create and sustain a population.

Gray wolf restoration remains a controversial and divisive issue. Consequently, the species continues to be restricted to about 15 percent of its historical range in the contiguous U.S., despite an abundance of suitable but unoccupied habitat, mostly in western Colorado. The best conservation science instructs that the widespread absence of this species creates a “problem of simplification” for nature. The big, bold idea of restoring the wolf remains a viable solution to that problem.

To advance this future, the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project (www.rockymountainwolfproject.org) was launched in March 2016 on the belief that education advances restoration.

A successful education effort could prompt the citizens of Colorado to convince the state or federal government of

the need to return the wolf to the state. Once begun, restoration would flow like water down a hillside. A wolf population in the western half of Colorado would serve as the last piece of a 40-year puzzle to re-establish the species from the High Arctic to Mexico. Nowhere else in the world does such an opportunity exist to restore an iconic, unfairly maligned animal across such an inspiring and continental landscape. For those who celebrate the importance of wild and self-willed nature, it is an opportunity that must be seized.

Once accomplished, a Colorado wolf restoration project would help to illuminate a new relationship with nature—one that is restorative and accommodating,

and advances peace, prosperity and justice for all life. ■

Mike Phillips has been involved with wolf research and recovery since 1980. He served as the first field leader for the historic efforts to restore the red wolf to the southeastern U.S. and the gray wolf to Yellowstone National Park. Mike has written and lectured extensively about wolves over the last few decades.

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Map courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project

Southern
Rockies
Ecoregion

North America
with Southern
Rockies Ecoregion
and Study Area

Jean-Francois Beaudry