

ARIZONA VOICES

Indefensible political boundary hinders Mexican wolf recovery

BY PHIL HEDRICK AND MIKE PHILLIPS

Conservation of the Mexican wolf, a unique subspecies of gray wolf, is a qualified success. Recall that by the 1970s organized killing of Mexican wolves had eliminated them from the United States and nearly eliminated them in Mexico.

Given the consequent endangered status of the subspecies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) developed a captive breeding program from seven unrelated founders. But only three of these would come to constitute 77% of the captive ancestry. In 1998, FWS biologists released descendants from these founders in the Blue Range area near the Arizona-New Mexico border. The aim

was to restore a viable population as an essential step toward recovering Mexican wolves. The wild population now includes about 260 animals.

The Kendrick Peak pack is part of that population and the first in many decades to live north of Interstate 40, although several other Mexican wolves have ventured this far north. This highway is an arbitrary political boundary established by FWS with support from Arizona Game and Fish Department. Notably, the area north of I-40 was historically occupied by wolves with Mexican wolf ancestry. Since the habitat remains suitable with mixed conifers and grasslands and a prey base of deer and elk, the presence of the Kendrick Peak pack is not surprising.

Because the Mexican wolf was nearly driven to extinction, the subspecies now has limited genetic variation and, consequently, reduced capacity to adapt to future circumstances, such as new diseases or environmental shifts caused by climate change. Adding to this problem is the high inbreeding level in Mexican wolves and significant inbreeding depression which compromises the fitness of individual wolves.

Mindful of these challenges, we and other expert scientists convened by FWS in 2004, 2011, and 2015 recommended that Mexican wolf recovery require establishment of three connected populations, one each in highly suitable public lands of the United States: Blue

Range area, the Southern Rockies Ecoregion of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, and the Grand Canyon Ecoregion of northern Arizona and southern Utah. Sadly, there is insufficient suitable habitat and legal impetus for Mexico to contribute to Mexican wolf recovery as called for by the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Science makes clear that three connected populations would maximize retention of genetic variation and promote security for the Mexican wolf like that provided to gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains and Great Lakes.

In addition to the importance of three connected populations, it is beyond debate that allowing some breeding with

northern gray wolves (simply another subspecies), would enhance the genetic vigor of Mexican wolves and greatly facilitate their future. Notably, the restoration of wolves to western Colorado will provide a reliable source of northern gray wolves to achieve this essential end. All state and federal biologists have to do is get out of the way and let nature take its course.

It is wrongheaded and counter-productive for FWS to destroy the Kendrick Peak pack simply because it has settled north of I-40, a boundary that exists for purely political reasons. If state game and fish departments and FWS continue to remove and relocate wolves that cross north of I-40, they are doing a disservice to the long-term success

of the subspecies. They should instead look to connect Mexican wolf recovery to highly suitable areas that scientists identified decades ago. Not surprisingly, the territory of the Kendrick Peak pack is in one such area.

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