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## The big, not-so-bad wolf

By Tony Povilitis | November 12, 2007

HIKING NEAR Yellowstone National Park recently, my wife and I met a wolf that howled at us with an intensity suggesting something more than a reaction to our mere presence on its territory. As wildlife biologists, we had been talking about an Idaho plan to kill wolves to produce more elk for hunters, and we imagined its plaintive voice asking, "Are you thinking like a mountain?"

A generation ago, Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife management, challenged the conventional wisdom of exterminating wolves by linking this policy with the explosive growth of deer and elk populations, overbrowsing of vegetation, and soil erosion on numerous game ranges across the country. His famous essay, "Thinking Like a Mountain," described hidden benefits in the wolf's presence, "long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men."

The Idaho plan is emerging just as the Northern Rockies region of the United States is about to celebrate an extraordinary chapter in conservation history: the successful restoration of gray wolves to a level that helps regulate populations of elk, deer, and other wild herbivores, with far-reaching benefits to natural ecosystems.

Studies in Yellowstone National Park indicate that wolves, since their reintroduction in 1995, have altered elk numbers and feeding patterns, triggering cascading effects such as less elk browsing on willow, more food for beaver, more beaver ponds, and thus new wetland habitat for fish, reptiles, songbirds, and other species.

By providing elk carcasses year-round, wolves have expanded the food supply of everything from magpies and eagles to beetles and bears, while enriching soils with leftover nutrients. By keeping coyote numbers in check, wolves can improve survival of pronghorn antelope fawns and fox, and locally increase small mammals to benefit birds of prey.

Biologists better understand the impact to park ecology from the wolf's long absence, including sharp declines in aspen and cottonwood trees, and floodplain degradation. Still, the ecological realignments caused by the wolf's return within and beyond Yellowstone Park will not be fully understood for many decades, if then.

Unfortunately, there are policy changes regarding wolves on the horizon that could undo progress in restoring the role of wolves in nature – and, at worst, all but eliminate them. The US Fish and Wildlife Service wants to turn management of wolves over to Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, with the requirement that each state maintain only 100 wolves.

Yet scientific analyses consistently show that conservation target levels must run into the thousands for wild animal populations to withstand disease, severe weather, food shortages, genetic problems, and other factors. Current wolf numbers, though still small relative to more secure wildlife populations, have reached some 1,500 individuals for the tristate region.

The wildlife service theorizes that a much smaller wolf population of a few hundred wolves can last into the foreseeable future, but concedes for that to happen wolves must connect as a single population. Yet scientists from the National Park Service and the University of California recently warned that genetic evidence indicates Yellowstone wolves are already isolated from other wolves.

Of course, wolves could be artificially transplanted from one area to another in an attempt to sustain a fragmented population of a few hundred animals. But this would make wolves more a product of human manipulation than of the wild, and, at such low numbers, ecologically irrelevant outside of the protection of national parks and a few wilderness areas.

Many conservationists expect a harsh public reaction as well as ecological consequences should Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming pursue heavy-handed wolf management. Fortunately, there are signs that Montana, generally more accepting of its wolves, might stand apart from the pack and adopt a progressive wolf conservation program.

Elsewhere in the West, much vacant wolf habitat remains but wolves will have to fill it themselves – there are no plans for further reintroductions. That may be difficult if wolves migrating from their few strongholds in the northern Rockies face both public hunting and misguided removal by state officials trying to artificially inflate game numbers.

Meanwhile, in Arizona and New Mexico, some 60 Mexican wolves struggle to survive as authorities continually remove individuals in deference to livestock grazing on public lands. And Mexican wolves are not allowed to recolonize habitat beyond a restricted "recovery" area.

After our wolf vanished in the glare of a rising sun, we wondered if policy makers would ever adopt a "mountain's perspective" by allowing wolves to reassume their rightful place on the living landscape.

Tony Povilitis is a wildlife biologist who lives in Bozeman, Mont.  
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