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Editorial: Let's expand range for Mexican gray wolf

For centuries, the wolf has gotten a bad rap, but in recent years it is proving to be a far better neighbor than legend and myth had us believing.

Now New Mexico and other Southwestern states have a golden opportunity, as recommended by biologists, to correct a disgraceful legacy of wolf persecution and embrace a broader and less restrictive repatriation of the Mexican gray wolf.

Additionally, the state should join in assessing the possibilities of reintroducing the common or northern gray wolf across the vast public lands of northern New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming, as other recent biological studies suggest.

Restoring this noble predator to another portion of its native range is ecologically sound, in tune with broad public support and might further enhance the state's outdoor recreational tourist appeal. Problems will occur, in particular occasional predation on livestock; however, measures are well identified to minimize such conflicts and to compensate ranchers for losses.

Certainly, we have the capability and the resources to restore the rather diminutive, unassuming but still persecuted Mexican gray wolf to as much of its native Southwest range as possible, including unfettered access across the public land of central and southern New Mexico.

The federal government's biological

five-year review of the program concludes the wolves' range needs to be expanded, because the capture and relocation of wolves that have strayed out of the designated recovery area are hindering the program. Only about 55 wolves now are in the wilds of the Gila and Apache-Sitgreaves national forests and the White Mountain Apache Reservation. We can and should be doing much better than that.

It's time for all of the Southwest to hear the wolf's howl. We encourage state, local and federal authorities to take off the program's leash and embrace the recent federal biologists' recommendations.

It is what is needed for the program to achieve the success that has escaped it, and it is what the majority of Southwest residents favor: wolves in the wild, where they can survive with little, if any, significant threat to people, livestock or big game.

Long ago, the ancestors of these wolves ran wild across New Mexico, Arizona, Mexico and parts of Texas. But today, even after decades of debate and a halting, marginally successful federal repatriation program, the Mexican gray wolf still stands on the precipice of extinction.

Biologists, in particular ecologists who best understand nature's intricate and balanced web, would tell you that these wolves play a vital ecological role, too

long missing in their native habitats. Increasingly, biologists are documenting unexpected ecological blessings - such as restoration of overgrazed and eroded stream banks - associated with the highly successful reintroduction of the gray wolf in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho.

The venerable U.S. Endangered Species Act has kept the Mexican gray wolf from the fate of too many of America's prized wildlife, now retained only as mounted specimens in natural history collections and museums. We have the power and the will to make it different for wolves.

The Mexican gray wolf program has demonstrated that this species belongs here and is capable of sustaining itself amid human civilization with very little conflict with people. The program - but most important, the species - deserves to succeed. Officials should provide the opportunity for wolves to exist in as much of their native range as possible without regard to human-imposed and rather arbitrary political boundaries.

Let nature take its course. Let the wolves howl wherever they can across the Land of Enchantment.