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El Lobo's Long Journey Home

Mexican wolves struggle to reclaim territory in the Southwest

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By Tim Vanderpool

A doe pauses in the hills above White River in east-central Arizona, ears perked to the crisp November breeze. Here on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, a breeze can carry many sounds to catch a deer's attention. It could be the snapping of a twig or a rustling leaf. Or it could be the yelp of wolves recently returned to this rugged range.

As many as two dozen Mexican wolves--rarest of North America's gray wolves--now roam parts of the 1.6-million-acre Fort Apache reservation, home of the White Mountain Apaches. Their reappearance here is the result of a lengthy collaborative effort to restore wolves to roughly 8,000 square miles of federal and tribal land in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico.

But the Mexican wolves' journey back to part of their former range in the United States has been difficult and slow. Their progress pales in comparison to that of gray wolves reintroduced to the northern Rockies, which now outnumber their southern cousins by more than 20 to one. A dearth of wild Mexican wolves and wild areas to put them in, along with fierce opposition from some local residents, have all posed major obstacles to the Southwest's recovery effort. Even here at Fort Apache, where tribal elders still recall wolves in ancient songs, the animals have faced challenges.

"We knew wolves were coming, and we had three options," says Cynthia Dale, the tribe's sensitive species coordinator, standing outside her office at the bustling tribal headquarters of White River. "We could remove them when they roamed onto the reservation. We could simply allow them to remain. Or we could participate in a release program." Fortunately for the wolves, the tribal council chose the latter option.

In some ways, ‘Mexican wolf' is a misnomer for the canids with tawny coats marked by patches of black and gray. These wolves are actually a subspecies of gray wolf, although they are smaller than their northern cousins. Adults average 70 to 80 pounds and stand about 30 inches high at the shoulder, making them comparable in size to a small German shepherd. Mexican wolves once ranged not only through their namesake country, but far into Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. They thrived on a steady supply of elk, deer and smaller animals until the mid-19th century, when cattle ranching boomed; prey was soon thinned out by hunters, and overgrazing devastated the habitat.

Defending Mexican Wolves

Defenders of Wildlife's field staff in the Southwest is working hard to help ensure the recovery of Mexican wolves. To minimize conflicts between wolves and livestock, we have helped pay for extra cowboys to protect cows during calving season, build fences to provide secure areas for cattle on private land and purchase extra hay to keep livestock from grazing near an active wolf den. The cost of these and other projects in 2005 alone was $21,000.

In addition, we have helped promote acceptance of wolves by ranchers by compensating them for livestock losses or injuries caused by wolves. Since the Mexican wolf reintroduction project began in 1998, Defenders has paid nearly $59,000 to more than 40 ranchers in New Mexico and Arizona for such losses.

Defenders is also promoting the growth and continued success of the White Mountain Apache's wolf programs by providing support, training and equipment, and developing projects to help the tribe benefit from the presence of wolves.

To learn more about these and other Mexican wolf programs, and find out how to help, please visit www.savesouthwestwolves.org.

Not surprisingly, the wolves turned to increasingly plentiful livestock to supplement their diet--and set the stage for conflict. Under pressure from ranchers, hunters with the federal government's Predatory Animal and Rodent Control program set out to eliminate wolves and succeeded in killing all but a few of the animals by the 1950s.

Canis lupus baileyi had been completely eradicated in the United States by 1976, when the government added it to the endangered species list. The first baby steps toward Mexican wolf recovery began in the late 1970s, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contracted a trapper to bring a pregnant female and four males from Mexico. Believed to be the last remaining Mexican wolves in the wild, they seeded a captive-breeding program that has expanded to nearly 50 zoos and other facilities in the United States and Mexico.

The government's recovery plan called for these captive-born animals to be released onto federal lands in Arizona and New Mexico. This is just one of several contrasts with the gray wolf reintroduction effort in Wyoming and Idaho, which used wild wolves transplanted from Canada. For Mexican wolves, "we knew from the beginning, before they were ever released, that there were three major challenges," says David Mech, a noted wolf expert with the U.S. Department of Interior and a board member of the International Wolf Center in Ely, Minn. First, survival rates in the wild are lower for captive-bred wolves, which must learn from scratch how to avoid humans. Second, "there were no areas for release that were totally wild," Mech says. Instead, they all contained livestock--and plenty of wary ranchers. Third, there was strong anti-wolf sentiment in the proposed reintroduction areas and, Mech notes, "those human attitudes were very difficult to overcome."

Some residents outside the reservation have been steadfast in their opposition to the reintroduction program, however. To date, fierce resistance from New Mexico's ranchers has stymied new wolf releases in that state. In Arizona, ranchers living near the reintroduction zone fault the government for not reaching out to rural communities and building support there.

"I think the federal government failed from the very beginning," says Sam Luce, who's been running cattle for more than three decades near the small mountain town of Alpine, Ariz. "They told us that they were going to release these wolves where there were

no cattle. Then they turned around and released them within three miles of my ranch. That was the kind of deception that started their program."

Jan Holder agrees that the government failed badly at communicating with those directly affected by wolf recovery. Holder is a rare breed--she and her husband are Arizona ranchers and wolf enthusiasts. "If educational programs had been put in place from the beginning, if people on the land better understood wolf behavior, there would be a lot more live wolves out there," she says.

At least 46 Mexican wolves have died since reintroduction began. In addition to those that died of natural causes, 23 wolves were killed illegally, nine were killed by cars and three deaths remain unexplained. Another three wolves were euthanized for allegedly threatening people or killing livestock.

Conservationists argue that at least some of the latter group of wolves have been unfairly targeted, since wolves will often scavenge off carcasses of cows that have died from old age or other natural causes. In response, wildlife agencies are considering incentives for ranchers to remove dead livestock. That's because the government can't actually force removal, says Terry Johnson, endangered species coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. "Both Arizona and New Mexico have laws precluding anybody but a livestock owner from screwing with a livestock carcass in any way, shape or form. In addition, there is no federal authority to require a livestock permittee to do anything with carcasses."

In the face of all these challenges, the estimated population of Mexican wolves in the United States has fluctuated between 40 and 60 for the past three years. Not only are there far fewer wolves here than in Wyoming, Idaho and Montana--where more than 1,000 animals now roam free--but the project is far from its original goal of having a self-sustaining population of at least 100 Mexican wolves on the ground. And political opposition nearly brought new releases of captive wolves to a halt.

Despite the challenges, there's ample reason for hope. Funding for the wolf program has steadily grown, from $579,227 in 1998 to nearly $2.5 million this year. Wolf proponents also scored a substantial victory in February 2005, when a federal court rejected the Bush administration's plan to reduce wolves' protective status from endangered to threatened. Defenders of Wildlife was the lead plaintiff among nearly 20 groups suing to stop the change.

In addition, a multi-agency Mexican wolf management team has recommended relaxing the 'hard boundaries' around the reintroduction area. When wolves roam outside these boundaries, they're recaptured and hauled back--an obvious hindrance to wolf recovery.

"This latest recommendation is heartening on one hand," says Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator with the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity and author of *Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West*. "The disturbing part is that something first recommended in 1999--and repeatedly recommended since then--will only be draft language suggested by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by 2007. The timeline gives one reason to wonder."

Still, many wolf advocates are guardedly optimistic--and looking to the future. "Wolves are a vital part of the American landscape--they benefit us both ecologically and economically," says Craig Miller, Defenders' Southwest representative. "The recovery of Mexican wolves in the Southwest is off to a slow start, but it's on the way and they are here to stay. The question is whether we're going to allow wolf populations to reach ecologically effective levels and recover them on a grander scale." That "grander scale" involves restoring wolves to the Grand Canyon region, the southern Rocky Mountains, the "sky islands" of the Southwest and northern Mexico.

It's a tall order. But back on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, Cynthia Dale is just happy to see the return of an animal rooted in Apache heritage. "A former tribal chairman told me that he used to hear wolves when he was a child," she says, "and that the things that were here when he was a child should be here for his grandchildren."

Tucson-based freelancer Tim Vanderpool wrote about nature-friendly communities in the fall 2005 issue of Defenders.