Guest Column: Writers on the Range

Ending federal protection for wolves takes the West backward

By Michael Robinson
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Thirty-five years ago, President Richard M. Nixon delivered a 17-page environmental policy speech to Congress. He also signed an executive order to end government poisoning of predators and rodents, noting that the poisons had caused "unintended losses of other animals." But the speech and the poison ban are barely remembered now, in part because Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan issued executive orders reversing Nixon.

But a second Nixon proposal from that same day in 1972 changed the West by protecting and restoring some of what makes the region unique. Nixon proposed legislation to "make the taking of endangered species a federal offense for the first time" and to "permit protective measures to be undertaken before a species is so depleted that regeneration is difficult or impossible."

Democrat Rep. John D. Dingell of Michigan held exhaustive hearings on Nixon's proposal, focusing much attention on the plight of predators. Of them all, gray wolves had suffered the most. After three decades of trapping and poisoning on behalf of the livestock industry, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had finally killed the last U.S.-born wolf in the West in 1945, in southern Colorado.

Rep. Dingell had experience with the hearings he was holding. As a young man he had worked in Rocky Mountain National Park, where rangers were shooting down hundreds of overpopulated elk. The congressman had sponsored two other endangered species protection measures that became laws in 1966 and 1969, but neither stopped the Service from poisoning rare wildlife. The Endangered Species Act that Nixon signed into law on Dec. 28, 1973, ended up blocking reauthorization of most poisons because of their effects on endangered predators and scavengers. The Act also led to reintroduction programs for wolves.

In order to protect species before recovery comes too late, and to ensure that unique ecosystems aren't sacrificed, the Endangered Species Act requires the Service to designate a species as endangered when it is "in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range," and not just when the last few animals are dying out. Now, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to put the species back in harm's way by removing wolves from the endangered species list throughout all of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, a sliver of Utah, plus the eastern third of Oregon and Washington. It deems only a small fraction of that vast region as significant range for wolves.

Once wolves are delisted, the government's predator control arm in the Agriculture Department, Wildlife Services, will undoubtedly increase aerial gunning of wolves, locating them though their radio collars. And once bald eagles and grizzly bears follow wolves off the protected list, the Agriculture Department will resume widespread poisoning as well: The Endangered Species Act's protections will no longer apply. Along with state-permitted hunting, these measures would reduce the 1,200-plus wolves now alive to 600 or fewer.

Inbreeding already threatens Rocky Mountain wolves at their current numbers and portends lower reproductive rates in increasingly isolated future populations. Since typically only two wolves in a pack breed, fewer pass on their genes than the population as a whole. Predator control already restricts where wolves can live: Only one wolf since the 1995 reintroduction is known to have successfully migrated from central Idaho to Yellowstone. But Fish and Wildlife Service refuses to conduct a population viability analysis before delisting.

The return of wolves has enlivened landscapes. In Yellowstone National Park, for example, wolves have reduced elk browsing in creek beds, and now cottonwoods and beaver and songbirds are coming back. Wolves leave carrion from their kills for scavengers such as bears, eagles and badgers. Wolves also defend against pandemics in prey animals, because they are likely to kill a sick bighorn, moose or deer before that animal infects another.

The extensive public lands where wolves would be essentially banned deserve the same benefits. Instead, under delisting, widespread poisoning could once again threaten every scavenging animal.

“The time has come for man to make his peace with nature,” President Nixon proclaimed on Feb. 8, 1972. Slaughtering hundreds of wolves and poisoning tens of millions of acres is not what he or Rep. Dingell had in mind. Two courts ruled in 2005 against the Fish and Wildlife Service’s last effort to delist wolves throughout most of the nation. This latest proposal also deserves to die.

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