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As Southwest Wolf Recovery Effort Struggles, Northern Rockies Packs Multiply -- a Tale of 2 Populations

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GILA NATIONAL FOREST, N.M. -- On a rise above Copperas Creek, a flash of white captures Michael Robinson's eye. In the shadow of a ponderosa pine, a single deer antler lies atop the turmeric-hued soil. "Wolf food," he says, bending down to take a closer look.

All that's missing, says Robinson, a conservationist with the Center for Biological Diversity, are the wolves. This rocky, pine-scattered ridge lies in the heart of the Blue Range Wolf Reintroduction Area, a 7,000-square-mile wild haven for Mexican gray wolves, which were reintroduced here 12 years ago after gaining federal protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1976.

Yet despite evidence of ample prey here, and an open invitation from the Fish and Wildlife Service to inhabit the Gila, no wolves occupy this part of the forest. In fact, only 15 wolves are found in the New Mexico portion of the reintroduction area, which extends several hundred miles west into southeastern Arizona.

About 1,000 miles north, in the northern Rockies, the story of the Mexican wolf's larger cousins is a far different one.

In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem -- comprising parts of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming -- gray wolves are flourishing after FWS reintroduced them in 1995. Today, about 1,700 gray wolves roam the northern Rockies region compared to a handful in 1994, enough for FWS to lift federal protections last year in Montana and Idaho, leaving only Wyoming's population on the Endangered Species List.

The divergent stories of Mexican and northern Rockies wolves raise troubling questions for FWS's gray wolf recovery program -- arguably one of the riskiest and most controversial species reintroduction efforts in U.S. history, and one being closely watched by environmentalists, private property owners and ranchers, most of whom dislike wolves and distrust the government's program for restoring them to the wild.

But for the people closest to the program -- the wildlife officials charged with protecting wolves and the biologists who must help the predators establish a sustainable population -- the No. 1 question is this: Why are Mexican wolves still struggling in the Southwest 12 years after the first animals were released into the wild, while wolves reintroduced to the northern Rockies ecosystem three years earlier have made a successful comeback?

The reasons are many, experts say, ranging from diverging policy decisions to geography and economics.

The forgotten wolf?

Gray wolves lucky enough to call the northern Rockies home claim several distinct advantages over their southern counterparts, biologists say.

For one, they roam freely across millions of acres of habitat, an area rich in prey and largely absent of defined boundaries. Much of the wolf's recovery zone is within Yellowstone National Park and two large, federally protected wilderness areas in central Idaho.

"Yellowstone is like Disneyland for wolves," said Maggie Dwire, assistant coordinator for the Mexican wolf recovery program.

As a result, wolf numbers in the Rockies have risen steadily, and indications are the wolves are colonizing new territory far beyond the formal reintroduction area: Gray wolves recently spotted in Oregon and Colorado, for instance, are thought to be migrants from the northern Rockies population.

Experts say those wolves owe their freedom to the northern Rockies reintroduction rule, which allows the animals to wander freely and establish new territory, as long as they do not attack livestock. Wildlife officials can shoot wolves that repeatedly prey on livestock, whether in the Southwest or Rockies.

"I mean, two monkeys with a pickup truck and a case of beer could have reintroduced wolves to the northern Rockies," said Ed Bangs, FWS's Western gray wolf recovery coordinator, who oversees the northern Rockies reintroduction program. "There was just unbelievably good habitat here, because it was protected 100 years ago."

But in the Southwest, Mexican wolves are not so lucky.

If Yellowstone is the Disneyland of gray wolf country, then the Gila National Forest is more like Oz. Gray wolves that wander beyond the official recovery zone, encompassing 4.4 million acres in Arizona and New Mexico, are captured and shipped back to sanctioned territory.

Benjamin Tuggle, director of FWS's Southwest regional office and the senior regulator overseeing Mexican wolf recovery, acknowledges that confining wolves to the recovery area has hamstrung reintroduction efforts.

"That highly managed action has been one of the things I think over time has restricted our success," he said.

The entrance sign for the Gila National Forest holds another clue to the more precarious existence of the Mexican gray wolf: "Welcome to Gila National Forest -- Land of Many Uses." Here, grazing, hunting, logging and other economic activities coexist with wildlife protection across the predator's range, dramatically raising the likelihood of conflicts.

"In Yellowstone, there's no competition because they're in a national park," said Tuggle. "We don't have that luxury here."

And while northern Rockies wolves have achieved a kind of celebrity status, thanks in large part to Yellowstone ecotourism and widespread media attention, the Mexican wolf reintroduction program operates in relative obscurity.

"People don't even know New Mexico is a state," said CBD's Robinson, noting that New Mexicans are sometimes asked by fellow Americans if they must have a visa to travel. "This is a part of the world that people aren't paying attention to," Robinson said of the rugged terrain here, "whereas in the northern Rockies, all eyes were on that program. They were determined to do it right."

Others, including Eva Sargent of Defenders of Wildlife, say the Mexican wolf recovery effort is hampered by the lack of a formal FWS strategy with clear goals for recovery and delisting. "There's no defined end point, and there's no game plan," she said. "It's kind of like we're working on a puzzle and we don't have the picture on the box."

But perhaps the most important difference between the two programs -- and a daunting obstacle to FWS's Southwest recovery effort -- is that Mexican wolves are reoccupying an area that is now home to thousands of cattle. So, while wolves in the northern Rockies can go weeks without even seeing a cow, wolves in the Southwest are surrounded by bovine -- particularly in the Gila, which supports more cattle than any other part of the wolf recovery area, including parts of the Apache National Forest on the Arizona side of the border.

Living with wolves

Jess Carey, wolf incident investigator for New Mexico's Catron County, which covers 7,000 square miles dominated by the Gila National Forest, has in his computer 3,830 photographs of cows and pets believed to have been attacked by wolves, along with images of wolf tracks and other evidence that the predators are causing trouble in his district.

On a gray January afternoon, Carey scrolls through some of the photos in his home office, in a log cabin in a small subdivision a few miles outside Reserve, the county seat. Most of the pictures are of cows, the majority of them attacked from the rear -- a typical angle of attack for wolves, which tend to chase their prey rather than ambush them -- but a few are of dogs and horses, and one shows a cat.

"That's living with wolves," he said, pointing toward a picture on the screen showing a black cow with bleeding wounds on its flank.

Carey notes that not all of the injured livestock photos involve confirmed wolf attacks. Of 193 complaints he has received, 118 turned out to be wolf-related incidents, with 109 involving livestock and nine involving pets, according to Carey's records.

FWS estimates that between 1998 and 2007, wolves were involved in 123 confirmed cattle depredations. But Carey suspects that the number could be much higher, noting that many attacked animals are never found. "Out in this country, it doesn't take but a few days for the carcass to disappear," he said.

In Carey's view, the government's decision to return Mexican wolves to their native habitat ignored the inconvenient truth that cattle -- and people who rely on livestock for their livelihoods -- still inhabit southwestern New Mexico. According to a 1998 paper in Wildlife Society Bulletin by David Parsons, FWS's first Mexican wolf program coordinator, during the 1990s, federal lands in the Blue Range reintroduction area supported about 82,600 head of cattle. That is more than the number of deer and elk combined.

"There is no fairness with this wolf program," Carey said. "It's so one-sided in favor of the wolf."

And while most ranchers with documented wolf kill problems have lost only a few animals over the years -- one study found that livestock account for about 4 percent of the diet of Mexican wolves -- those losses add up, Carey added. "It multiplies and multiplies, and pretty soon, you don't have enough money to live on," he said. "Can't they recover the wolf without destroying the people? Because that's what this program is doing."

Catron County, population 3,543, is the third poorest county in the 48th poorest state in the union. With the decline of logging in the 1990s -- due in part to lawsuits brought by the Center for Biological Diversity and other groups to protect another endangered species, the Mexican spotted owl -- ranching and elk hunting are now the pistons of Catron's economic engine.

Many locals view wolves, which eat both elk and cattle, as one more threat to the economic wellbeing of the area.

Ed Werheim, a Catron County commissioner who was once a rancher, said he knows three ranchers who have gone out of business so far, and more are considering it. "In this area, there are 80 or 90 ranches," he said, sitting in the second-floor conference room of the county office building in downtown Reserve, with a view of the largely empty street below. "If we lose half of them, that's a big loss in income and tax revenue for the county."

'The reality of doing business'

With the loss of a single cow estimated to set a rancher back $1,000, it is understandable that those who make a

living raising livestock would be opposed to wolf reintroduction, said Bangs, the Western wolf recovery coordinator.

"It's easy to understand if you raise livestock, you're not going to want wolves around," he added. "Some may tolerate them better than others, but there's no upside."

While many ranchers in the northern Rockies initially fought the reintroduction of wolves, some have come to accept that wolves are now part of the landscape, and they are increasingly cooperating with FWS to manage their herds to reduce predation risk, Bangs said.

"The ranchers up here, you always get the extremes, but they've been pretty open to trying stuff" to reduce depredations, Bangs said. "I think they realize wolves aren't going anywhere, and it's just the reality of their business that they're going to have to deal with it. The discussions here tend to get more reasonable."

Finding the same kind of acceptance in the Southwest appears to be a long shot.

Just last month, opponents of the Mexican wolf reintroduction program placed an ad in the Silver City Daily Star announcing a fundraiser for the "litigation and media outreach funds of the Gila Livestock Grower's Association and the Americans for the Preservation of Western Environment in their efforts to end the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Program."

Tom Buckley, a spokesman for FWS's Southwest office who has also worked closely with the northern Rockies wolf reintroduction program, said he believes anti-wolf sentiment is more entrenched in the Southwest, and in the Gila National Forest in particular.

"There have been similar attitudes with certain groups here and there sprinkled around the [northern Rockies] region," he said. "But overall, it hasn't been as ferocious as it has been here" in the Southwest.

A poll conducted in 1998, the year the first Mexican wolves were released into the Blue Range reintroduction area, found that overall New Mexico and Arizona residents supported reintroduction. But in rural areas like Catron County, where ranching is the economic mainstay, solid majorities said they were opposed to bringing wolves back.

"This has been a ranching community since the 1800s," said Werheim, who recently helped found Americans for the Preservation of Western Environment to help give rural communities a stronger voice in policy decisions. "There's no protection for humans. Do rural people down here have any say-so over what's going to happen to them? I don't think every creature that lives on this earth should be protected to the point where they're saved from extinction at the expense of the people."

Catron County also has a long history of opposing federal control of lands within the county's borders: In the 1980s, the county made headlines as a center for the "Sagebrush Rebellion," an unsuccessful effort to force the transfer of federal lands from the Forest Service and other agencies into private hands.

Acknowledging the program's impacts on ranchers, FWS has at times taken a more aggressive stance toward wolves that repeatedly prey on livestock, including the highly controversial "three strikes" rule, which held that a wolf was to be permanently removed or exterminated if it killed three or more head of cattle in a year. The agency later rescinded the "three strikes" rule after environmental groups sued, claiming the policy was holding back recovery (Land Letter, Nov. 19, 2009).

Under the new policy, FWS can still remove or kill wolves that attack livestock, but the agency will give more weight to a wolf's genetic importance and other factors in making its decision.

'A different kind of ranching'

Peel away the layers of emotion -- either for or against wolves -- and what you find is a fundamental difference in values.

"It's very emotional, and it's very easy to get very personal, very polarized -- 'You don't believe the way I do, so you're a deceptive, lying idiot,'" Bangs said. "These are difficult issues. They're not about wolves, they're about human values."

And that is why losing a cow to a wolf is a much bigger deal to most ranchers than losing a cow to, say, a lightning strike or locoweed, he added.

"It's a question of what's an acceptable loss," he said. "Again, it's about values."

At the same time, there are on-the-ground differences that may heighten ranchers' antipathy toward wolves in the Southwest.

Grazing is a seasonal activity in the northern Rockies, while many Southwestern ranchers graze cattle year-round, resulting in more opportunity for livestock and wolves to cross paths -- putting both at greater risk. About 69 percent of the Blue Range recovery area is permitted for grazing, and about half of grazing allotments host cattle year-round.

"It's a different kind of ranching," Tuggle said. "I think that has a whole lot to do with it."

In one study, Bangs compared rates of wolf-livestock conflicts in the Great Lakes, northern Rockies and Southwest regions, and found that depredation rates were higher in the Mexican wolf recovery area.

"For every wolf on the landscape, you have more problems [in the Southwest] than you do up here," said Bangs, whose office is in Montana. "Calves are only available to wolves a few months out of the year here."

The sheer abundance of cattle, combined with the confinement of wolves to a 7,000-square-mile recovery area, make for increased chances for conflict, Tuggle noted.

"Those wolves are trying to feed their family, but you're compressing them in a far more limited area, and there are

fewer options the wolves can exercise," he said. "These wolves don't understand boundaries. They go where the prey is."

The close proximity could also help explain why Mexican wolves are killed illegally more often than wolves in other regions. According to FWS, illegal taking is the single greatest source of wolf mortality in the Southwestern population.

Fewer cows?

While many ranchers question the wisdom of returning wolves to a landscape now dominated by cattle, not all oppose the reintroduction program.

Gene Simon, who in his 90s still runs cattle with his wife, Elisabeth, along the Mimbres River in Faywood, N.M., about 35 miles southeast of Silver City -- and south of the core recovery area -- believes wolves should be appreciated for their important role in the ecosystem, and that ranchers should learn to live with the predators.

"It kind of irritates me that some people think all ranchers want to kill all the varmints," said Simon, sitting at his kitchen table with his dogs, Tuffy and Leroy, underfoot. "Because some of us aren't like that. I think too many of them are reading 'Little Red Riding Hood' too much."

Simon, who turned 94 on Monday, acknowledges that the landscape has changed since the arrival of European settlers in the 1800s. But with a thoughtful approach to management of wolves and livestock, the two can coexist, he said.

"Wolves have a right to live here, too," said Simon.

The Simons once ran 800 cattle on the 57,200-acre Ponderosa Ranch near Lake Roberts, within the Gila National Forest, during the 1970s, but moved to the flat lowlands of the lower Mimbres River Valley after concluding that the Gila National Forest was no place to make a living raising livestock.

"The main thing is geography. It was the kind of country that couldn't produce quality calf crops, and you have to spend a lot of time checking on your cattle," he said. "It's just no bueno for a high calf crop, so it wasn't economically feasible." In the Mimbres Valley, he has seen much greater success: Last year, 100 percent of Simon's cows birthed calves.

Not surprisingly, Robinson, whose organization supports a federal buyout of grazing permits to reduce the cattle population, believes the solution to wolf-livestock conflicts is to shift cows and calves away from wolf habitat.

In the Beaverhead area of the Gila National Forest, for instance, "there are deer, elk and wild turkeys, but there are a lot more cows than anything else," he said.

The cattle-to-wolf ratio strikes Robinson as particularly unbalanced in New Mexico.

"How come there are wolves in Arizona that have maintained packs for 10 years and haven't been destroyed [because of predation]?" Robinson asked, walking along Copperas Creek. "There's much more [cattle] stocking here."

In Arizona, the gray wolf population went from 29 to 27 animals last year, while the New Mexico population took a much bigger hit, dropping from 23 to 15 wolves.

But livestock grazing has been a central part of local culture for more than a century, and many residents see a decline in ranching as not only a loss to ranchers, but to entire communities.

What is at stake, Carey said, is not just livelihoods, but a way of life. "Can you imagine losing something you've had all your life, and not being able to pass it on to your son or daughter?"