

THE HUFFINGTON POST

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY

It's Time to Return Wolves to the West Coast

Noah Greenwald
Endangered species program director
Center for Biological Diversity

Wolves in California? It's an idea whose time has come -- again.

Wolves were once common along the West Coast, from the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state through Oregon to the far reaches of Southern California. As a keystone predator, wolves played a vital role in calibrating the wild places they lived, including controlling prey populations like deer and elk.

But as people moved in, wolves were forced out.

Thankfully, the tide is turning back in wolves' favor. Nearly 60 wolves have moved into Oregon and Washington in recent years. And, in late December, one of those wolves made its way into northern California -- sparking new hopes that wolves may eventually recolonize some of their historic habitat in the Golden State.

That's why this week, the Center for Biological Diversity and other conservation groups petitioned for gray wolves to be protected under the California Endangered Species Act. Wolves deserve a future in California without being shot and trapped out of existence. We've been down that road before.

Wolves were once abundant across much of California with early European explorers documenting wolves as far south as present-day San Diego and Los Angeles. All of them were wiped out in the late 1800s and early 1900s, often by government-funded extermination programs to accommodate the livestock industry. The last wolf in California disappeared around 1924.

Americans' attitudes toward wolves have changed dramatically in recent decades. We've come to understand that these smart, social animals are integral to the wild places where they live. In Yellowstone National Park, for instance, wolves have forced elk to move around more, allowing streamside vegetation to grow, benefiting beavers, songbirds and other species. Elsewhere, they've kept coyote

populations in check, allowing more room for foxes. In California, this may benefit the highly endangered Sierra Nevada red fox.

Still, wolves in the lower 48 today occupy just 5 percent of their historic habitat. Wolf restoration has been a success in some areas of the U.S., but the job isn't complete.

Wolves were returned to the northern Rocky Mountains in the mid-1990s in one of the most important chapters ever written for the Endangered Species Act. There are now more than 1,500 wolves in that region and the population has spilled over to Oregon and Washington where, between the two states, the fledgling population now includes about nine packs.

The conversation about wolf restoration in the West changed in December when the young male from Oregon's Imnaha pack arrived in California. Although California is the most populous state in the West, there are still hundreds of square miles of excellent wolf habitat in the northern part of the state and the Sierra Nevada.

Some in the livestock industry have already come out against wolves in California for fear of losing sheep and cows. But government figures from places in the West where wolf packs exist today show that losses to wolves are minuscule compared to domestic dogs, coyotes, disease and even bad weather.

It's time to bring wolves back to California and the West Coast -- at least in the remote places where there's good habitat full of plenty of prey, including deer. In returning wolves to the landscape, we return a sense of the wild, something that's been lost as we've cut down forests, paved valleys and created a society that's increasingly insulated from the natural world. Restoring that wild essence restores something in us, too -- just ask anyone who's heard the howl of a pack of wolves on a frozen morning in Yellowstone.

It's a job that can be done. Wolves are resilient creatures who ask us for just a little tolerance in order to survive and thrive. Along the West Coast, where we needlessly drove them to extinction a century ago, they deserve that much.