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Death of Yellowstone's Most Famous Wolf Is a Troubling Sign of Things to Come

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The alpha female of Yellowstone's Lamar Canyon pack may have been the most famous wolf in the world. Endlessly photographed and admired by thousands of visitors to the national park, this matriarch of Yellowstone -- often known by her number, 832F -- made the cover of *American Scientist* and was discussed at length in the pages of the *New York Times*.

With a gorgeous gray coat and fearless spirit, she was a true rock star from the wolf world. Sadly, a year ago this Friday, 832F crossed the invisible boundary of the national park, entering Wyoming, and was gunned down by a hunter.

Wolf hunting is legal now in Wyoming and several other states because politicians in Congress -- not the scientists in charge of wolf recovery -- stripped away Endangered Species Act protections in five states in 2011. Now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is trying to take away protections for nearly all wolves across the rest of the lower 48.

If this plan goes through, scores of wolves around the country will suffer the same tragic fate as Yellowstone's most famous wolf.

The result, after 40 years of working to return

wolves to the American landscape, will be that these beautiful animals are left to eke out a living on just a few slivers of land -- and never far from guns that kill and antiquated attitudes that see wolves as vermin to be exterminated.

The deaths of wolves like 832F are also a loss to science. She was one of a few that wore a \$4,000 radio collar outfitted to track her movements by satellite -- and one of a growing number of collar-wearers to have been shot after wandering outside of Yellowstone. Doug Smith, the park's well-respected wolf biologist, bemoaned the death of such wolves earlier this year, stating the "loss of collared wolves is where the rubber meets the road -- it hurts us the most."

Yellowstone's wolves -- reintroduced in the mid-1990s -- have been tracked for years and are among the world's most studied canines. Because of them we know much more about how these intelligent animals form familial bonds, much like ourselves, and play an out-sized role in shaping ecosystems.

Because of the park's research we know that Wolf 832F was the granddaughter of two wolves from the Druid Peak pack, which was one of the original packs captured in Canada and transported to Yellowstone and subsequently the subject of many National Geographic films. We also know that her great-

grandparents through her grandfather were the alpha pair of another of the park's founding packs, the Rose Creek pack.

This kind of detailed family history can only be obtained through decades of careful research and monitoring -- research that is now being undone by thoughtless and cruel hunts sanctioned by all three of the states surrounding Yellowstone National Park: Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

Wyoming classifies wolves as predatory animals that can be killed by any means and without limit in more than 80 percent of the state, and in parts of Idaho, there are no limits for when or how many wolves can be killed. Not to be outmatched, Montana nearly doubled the bag limit on wolves this year, extended the hunt season to allow killing of pregnant females and refused to listen to pleas by park biologists to create a safety buffer just outside the park's boundaries to protect straying research animals.

These hunts are a throwback to the not-so-distant days when wolves were ruthlessly persecuted and nearly wiped out from the entirety of the lower 48.

Today wolves live in only about 5 percent of their historic range and have less than 1 percent of their former numbers.

Despite these dismal figures, the Obama administration has proposed to remove protections for wolves across most of the country. With numbers going down from hunts and protections gone, wolf recovery that is broadly supported by a strong majority of the American public, has cost taxpayers millions, benefits ecosystems, and is a tremendous Endangered Species Act success story will be flushed down the drain.

The death of Wolf 832F is one moment in this larger tragedy that's playing out at the behest of a small minority of Americans who continue to hold prejudicial, outmoded views of the big, bad wolf.

This past June in Yellowstone, I was fortunate enough to see the three remaining wolves of the Lamar Canyon pack. The pack survives without its matriarch, but the loss of an alpha is always devastating. In this case the pack has splintered, and just a few animals remain. Nonetheless they put on a thrilling show, chasing a bison calf and swimming the Lamar River.

Without continued protections and a shift in attitude by the government agencies that control wolves' fate, our chances of seeing them will become very rare indeed -- and the world a poorer place.