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Editorial: Making war on wolves

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Yellowstone National Park's best-known wolf, beloved by many tourists and valued by scientists who tracked its movements, was shot and killed Thursday outside the park's boundaries, Wyoming wildlife officials reported. The wolf, known as 832F to researchers, was the alpha female of the park's highly visible Lamar Canyon pack and had become so well known that some wildlife watchers referred to her as a "rock star." The animal had been a tourist favorite for most of the past six years.

The feds want your comment on a plan to strip protection from these endangered creatures. Comment!

They're intelligent, majestic and, owing to the blood lust of *Homo sapiens*, never far from extinction. Yet to biologists and ecologists worldwide, the best case for saving wild wolves is their role as predator of some species and, paradoxically, shepherd to others: By stalking abundant elk, moose and other forest browsers, wolves unwittingly enhance the growth of crucial vegetation that gives foxes, beavers, songbirds, pronghorn antelopes and other critters a chance to survive.

Today, though, the survival most imminently threatened is that of the American gray wolf itself. Early in June an arm of the Obama administration pleased the politically influential livestock industry — plus hunting interests still smarting over gun control bills — by proposing that the wolves no longer need protection under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Until Sept. 11, citizens can submit comments to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We hope you'll join the fray (details below) and tell the feds how premature and reckless that policy reversal would be: Continuing today's level of protection would give wolves a chance to widen their territories and continue to recover — as bald eagles, alligators, brown pelicans and falcons were allowed to do when they, too, faced obliteration.

Thanks to federal protection that actually dates to the mid-1960s, wolves have begun to rebound from near-extinction — although today they roam less than 5 percent of their ancestors' range. Stripping away that protection likely would freeze in place — and limit forever — this fledgling recovery. Expansion of packs to areas bulging with potential

wolf habitat in the Pacific Northwest, California, the Southern Rockies and some Northeastern states would be virtually impossible.

This proposal, if enacted, would free the administration from passionate political clashes between environmentalists and livestock growers in several states. But it also would leave the wolf's recovery not only unfinished, but seriously imperiled: The Center for Biological Diversity, one of many national environmental groups fighting the administration's proposal, says the isolation of too many packs in small, disconnected locales promotes dangerous inbreeding; for lack of genetic variety, wolf litters grow smaller — as do pup survival rates.

Some 2 million gray wolves once roamed North America. By the mid-1900s, though, they had been hunted almost to oblivion in the 48 contiguous United States. A half-century of preservation efforts — federal protections chief among them — have rebuilt that population to about 6,000 in the Upper Midwest and Northern Rockies. Alaska's vast hinterland has another 8,000 or more, living without endangered-species protection.

That "lower 48 states" head count, of course, doesn't include the more than 1,000 wolves killed now that Wisconsin, Minnesota, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana have legalized wolf hunting. A group called Keep Michigan Wolves Protected is trying to block hunting scheduled to begin later this year in that state, too.

How can states legalize the hunting of such rare treasures? In a precursor to today's across-the-board proposal, the administration unwisely released those states from federal wolf protection rules in recent years. Some of the killings to date have been barbarous. An Idaho trapper, Josh Bransford, became an Internet pariah after he posed, smiling, in front of a wolf caught in a leg-hold trap; rather than put out of its misery an animal standing in a circle of blood-reddened snow, Bransford used it as his photo prop.

Wolves rarely threaten humans but sometimes do attack livestock: Environmentalists calculate that last year wolves killed 645 of the 7 million cattle and sheep in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. Ranchers who lose livestock to wolves receive government reimbursements.

That compensation helps balance what can be a good equilibrium. We've noted before that in some states the gray wolf has become a routine and accepted player in humanity's interaction with nature. Other states, though, encounter a familiar collision of two forces: the desire of humans to control what they see as their environment alone, and potential extinction if wolf populations fall so low that disease can exterminate them.