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High Noon for the Gray Wolf

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Op-Ed Contributor
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TUCSON — IN December 2011, a wild gray wolf set foot in California, the first sighting in almost a century. He'd wandered in from Oregon, looking for a mate. In October 2014, for the first time in almost three-quarters of a century, a gray wolf was seen loping along the forested North Rim of the Grand Canyon, in Arizona. She had walked hundreds of miles, probably from Wyoming or Idaho.

The return of these animals to the homes of their ancestors — however fleeting — was a result of their 40-year protection under the Endangered Species Act.

OR-7, or "Journey," as schoolchildren named the first wolf, had been born to the Imnaha pack, the first one in Oregon for many decades. When he wandered south, his brother, OR-9, wandered east. Shortly after he crossed into Idaho (where wolves are not protected), he was shot dead. OR-7 lived on, after his repeated incursions into California (where wolves are protected), to sire a litter of pups just north of the state line. He became the subject of a documentary — in California, even a wolf can be a star.

The story of the Grand Canyon wolf, though, may be over: Three days after Christmas, it appears, she was shot and killed in Utah by a man media outlets have called a "coyote hunter." (A DNA test is pending.)

For almost two centuries, American gray wolves, vilified in fact as well as fiction, were the victims of vicious government extermination programs. By the time the Endangered Species Act was passed, in 1973, only a few hundred of these once-great predators were left in the

lower 48 states. After numerous generations of people dedicated to killing wolves on the North American continent, one generation devoted itself to letting wolves live. The animals' number has now risen to almost 5,500, thanks to their legal protection, but they still occupy less than 5 percent of their ancient home range.

Since 1995, the act has guided efforts to raise wolves in captivity, release them, and follow them in the wild. Twenty years ago this month, the first gray wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park.

But this fragile progress has been undermined. Since 2011, the federal government has moved to remove federal protection for gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains (Idaho, Montana and Wyoming) and in the western Great Lakes (Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan), the two population centers. Management of the species was turned over to these states, which responded with a zeal that looks like blood lust.\

Relying on the greatly exaggerated excuse that wolves threaten cattle and sheep, the states opened their doors to the killing of wolves. (In some states, bait can be used to lure the animals to their deaths; in Montana, private landowners can each kill 100 wolves each year; in Wisconsin, up to six hunting dogs on a single wolf is considered fair play.) Legions of wolf killers rose to the challenge, and the toll has been devastating: In just three and a half years, at least 3,500 wolves have been mowed down.

There's been an outcry from conservationists, ecologists and people who simply like wolves, but this has not stopped the killers. Some say wolves are a threat to their livestock investments (despite the existence of generous rancher-compensation programs in all wolf states save Alaska); others invoke fear of wolves; still others appear to revel in killing. Online, you can find pictures of wolf carcasses held up proudly as trophies and men boasting of running over wolves with their cars. Judges have started to step in. In September, a federal court decided that wolf management in Wyoming — which had allowed people to kill as many wolves as they wanted, throughout 84 percent of the state — should be returned to the federal government. In December, also in response to a lawsuit, another federal court reinstated protections for wolves in the western Great Lakes. These decisions should make clear that the states alone simply can't be entrusted with the future of our wolves.

In Washington, the threats persist. The Fish and Wildlife Service is considering a proposal that would strip federal protection from almost all gray wolves in the lower 48 states, not just the ones in the Rockies and the Midwest. Meanwhile, right-wing Republicans in the new Congress are champing at the bit to remove the wolves from protection under the act — politics trumping science.

President Obama should direct the Fish and Wildlife Service to retain protection for wolves; if it doesn't, they could be wiped off the face of the American landscape forever. A unified wolf-recovery plan for the nation is required. Not only do wolves play an important role in keeping wilderness wild, but they were here long before we were, and deserve to remain. Not for nothing was the environmentalist Aldo Leopold transformed by the sight of a "fierce green fire" in a dying wolf's eyes.

I’ve seen wild gray wolves only once, as they trotted across a dirt road in front of my own family car in a New Mexican forest. There were three of them on the road, no doubt a wolf family, and three of us in the car: my husband, my daughter and me. In the back seat, my little girl was engrossed in a picture book and didn’t look up fast enough. I want her to have another chance; I want her to keep living in a world where something beautiful and wild lurks at the edge of sight.

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