



A WEST WITHOUT WOLVES

The Livestock Industry Hamstrings Wolf Recovery

Michael J. Robinson

In the early twentieth century, the livestock industry lobbied for a government-sponsored campaign to eliminate wolves from the West. Today, the livestock industry is the major obstacle to wolf recovery. Cases in the northern Rockies and the Southwest illustrate how wolf management remains highly biased in favor of stock growers, even on public lands. Wolf predation was once a significant ecological force in many western ecosystems; public lands livestock grazing is at odds both with full wolf recovery and with ecosystem restoration.

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Wolves were exterminated from the American West by a concerted campaign mounted by federal hunters and funded with local, state, and federal revenues. Using poison, traps, and bullets, the government pursued each wolf with the avowed goal of wiping the species off the face of the Earth.

The livestock industry was the sole beneficiary of, and the greatest political impetus for, this campaign. Today, the livestock industry stands at the heart of the opposition to wolf recovery and has blocked, hampered, and sabotaged reintroduction programs throughout the West. Unfortunately, the industry's political clout has profoundly shaped wolf recovery programs that are supposed to be guided by science.

The Northern Rockies

Wolf reintroduction in the northern Rocky Mountains of Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho was contested by the livestock industry and its supporters in Congress for over two decades. Under the Endangered Species Act, critical habitat for a listed species is supposed to be designated, and the species protected from being killed—whether it is reintroduced or recovering through natural recolonization. However, because of the power of the livestock industry, the plan to reintroduce wolves to parts of Idaho and Wyoming resulted in a compromise that designated the wolves as an “experimental, nonessential” population. This designation meant there would be no special protections for wolf habitat and that wolves that preyed on livestock would be killed or removed from the wild. Provisions were even made to allow ranchers themselves legally to kill wolves rather than waiting for government agents to show up and do the job.

The fact that cattle require huge quantities of water means they will always be vulnerable to wolves in the American West. For in this largely arid region, water and water-loving vegetation are so scarce, and scattered over such wide areas, that cattle must be similarly spread out, and that makes protecting them from wolves uneconomical; thus, as their forebears did, ranchers rely on federal agents to kill or remove wolves. Domestic sheep, much less numerous in the West than cattle, are even more vulnerable to predators, especially when

Gray wolf, Montana.

flocks are not well protected. Thus, although wolves are a federally listed endangered species, their containment and control by the federal government constitutes one more subsidy that taxpayers provide the livestock industry in the West. (Some ranchers would no doubt happily dispense with this subsidy, as long as they were free to kill wolves at will, including putting out poison baits for them, as was common in the nineteenth century.)

Since gray wolves were released into Idaho and Wyoming in 1995, the federal government's "Wildlife Services" has executed numerous "control actions" because of wolf-livestock conflicts, killing a few dozen wolves either known or suspected of attacking cows or sheep.¹ Particularly egregious has been the capture or "lethal control" of wolves on public lands. Privately owned livestock grazing on public lands clearly take priority over endangered gray wolves, restored at public expense. In addition, somewhere between ten and twenty wolves have been killed illegally in the reintroduction areas.² In most of these cases, the perpetrator was never identified or charged.

Gray wolves that migrate naturally from Canada into Glacier National Park and surrounding areas of northwestern Montana—animals that were supposed to have complete protection under the Endangered Species Act—have likewise suffered at the hands of federal government hunters whenever livestock have been killed. As a result, their numbers are not likely to reach the threshold of ten breeding pairs set out in the official wolf recovery plan. So the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now proposes lowering the bar on wolf recovery by counting wolves in Idaho and Yellowstone toward recovery objectives in Montana, to remove the species from federal protection entirely and assuage the intense opposition of the livestock industry.

The Southwest

In the Southwest, Mexican wolf reintroduction began in 1998, almost two decades after the last five individuals were removed from the wild for an emergency captive breeding program. The Mexican wolf, a separate subspecies from the gray wolf inhabiting regions to the north, originally roamed throughout Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, as well as northern Mexico. It, too, was extirpated from the United States by the federal government. Although the Mexican wolf is the most imperiled mammal in North America, it was designated "experimental, nonessential" like its kin in Idaho and the Yellowstone region, in an attempt to buy off livestock industry support for reintroduction.

It didn't work. Soon after the first eleven wolves were released, five were shot, two disappeared, and the remainder were recaptured for their own protection. The livestock industry cheered the killings, and the New Mexico Farm Bureau and Cattle Growers Association filed suit to remove the wolves but were rebuffed in court.

Over the next two years, government management of the Mexican wolves in conformance with their diminished protected status did even more damage than had the poachers. In 1999, the first released Mexican wolves to reproduce successfully in the wild were recaptured from the Apache National Forest in Arizona after they killed a couple of cows on national forest lands. In the course of that recapturing, three of the wild-born pups died from parvovirus. According to the veterinarian who necropsied them, the pups were already in the process of overcoming the disease at the time of capture, but the stress of that event likely caused them to succumb. After the survivors were rereleased

into the Gila National Forest in New Mexico, two of the surviving pups dispersed from the pack at a younger age than is normal for wolves, and one is missing and presumed dead. Biologists do not know whether their period of captivity altered their behavior.

Another pack of Mexican wolves also preyed on cattle on the Apache National Forest, but in this case the cattle were illegally present, having been ordered out by the Forest Service because of severe overgrazing. There was so little forage present that deer and javelina had already been displaced. The rancher failed to remove his cattle, and Forest Service officials failed to enforce their own order—which they later rescinded. Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, unable to force the Forest Service to uphold its own decisions, managed to draw the wolves away to another (overgrazed) allotment on the Gila National Forest. But the wolves had become habituated to cattle, and a week after they discovered and scavenged on a dead cow in the Gila, they began killing cattle again. As a result, seven wolves were trapped, and one pup and a yearling disappeared; both likely died.

A third family of wolves didn't kill livestock at all. But they were also recaptured after scavenging on a dead cow and horse left out on the forest. It was feared that the wolves might learn to prey on livestock after they had tasted beef. In the course of the government's trapping effort, the adult female's leg was injured in a leghold trap and had to be amputated. The pack was rereleased into the Gila, but again, a previously tight family unit broke apart soon after. Two pups were subsequently trapped and returned to cages.

Stock Growers' Appropriation of Western Ecosystems

The conflict between the livestock industry and wolf recovery is more deeply rooted than the seemingly simple question of how to protect stock from predators. For even though a handful of ranchers—representing a tiny minority of the industry as a whole—have forsworn killing wolves and pledged themselves to living with the species, their cattle still displace elk, deer, and other native prey animals. Each blade of grass eaten by a cow means that much less for elk, and each cow shipped to market represents the removal from the ecosystem of hundreds of pounds of biomass that would otherwise take the form of deer, elk, moose, or pronghorn—all of which wolves might otherwise eat.

And when wolves prey on any cattle or domestic sheep, whether they belong to the most recalcitrant predator hater or to a "New Age" rancher, the government's response is the same: removal or killing of the wolves.

In all too many wild places, however, politics precludes recovery efforts even before such conflicts may arise. The livestock industry has so far successfully delimited not only the terms of wolf recovery but also where wolves will be allowed to roam. Thus, the southern Rockies of northern New Mexico, Colorado, and southern Wyoming have been excluded from wolf recovery consideration because the Colorado Wildlife Commission, an appointed body dominated by ranchers, browbeat the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service into omitting this region. (Activists then persuaded Congress to mandate a habitat evaluation study of Colorado, which revealed that the state could support over 1,100 wolves, but even so the federal agency will not act on its own study and propose recovery.) As a result, wolf recovery on the limited terms proposed by the government will resemble small islands of predators surrounded by lethal "rangelands" dominated by the livestock industry.

The ongoing toll on predatory mammals from the livestock industry's federal killing campaign has skewed one of the fundamental relationships that shapes ecosystems. Wolves provide carrion for other animals, including bears, eagles, crows, magpies, raccoons, skunks, and wolverines. As scavengers, all of these species were decimated in the original, completely uncontrolled wolf poisoning campaign and its follow-up iteration as a coyote poisoning campaign. Today, with poisoning more limited but with wolves still absent from almost all western landscapes, these carrion eaters have lost one of their more reliable original providers.

Wolves kill coyotes, evidently regarding them as competitors. Coyotes similarly kill foxes. The diminutive kit fox of the western deserts and plains is imperiled today partly because of coyote predation. Biologists have speculated that the absence of wolves allows excessive coyote exploitation of kit foxes.

Predators, of course, also influence their prey species. As poet Robinson Jeffers noted, "What but the wolf's tooth whittled so fine / The fleet limbs of the antelope?" Indeed, the speed and keen eyesight of the pronghorn antelope, along

with the fortitude of elk and moose, the sense of balance of bighorn sheep on mountain ledges, and the alertness of deer, evolved through predators' culling from the gene pool animals without such survival attributes. Today, with the absence of many predators and the diminishment of others, that predatory force has been profoundly altered. Will the deer, elk, and bighorn of future centuries sport the same traits that for millennia have helped define their very beauty to our species?

What we need are vast, wild landscapes in each type of western ecosystem, free over long periods of time from cattle and sheep, while well stocked with every native predator, including—and perhaps especially—wolves. Without such areas as scientific controls, many of the complex ecological relationships on western landscapes may remain forever closed to our perception and understanding.

In the face of the vast damage done to the American West by livestock production, predators would serve to help heal the natural landscape, to bring ecosystems back toward homeostasis. The systematic killing of predators keeps our otherwise wild places forever artifacts of our own civilization.

On public lands in the great western ecosystem, livestock will not have priority. The grazing of livestock will and must be subordinated to the natural order of the bison and the predator.

—Former secretary of the interior Bruce Babbitt, speaking at Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, January 2001