

Mexican Wolves in Colorado, More Than Political



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On April 23, 2016, the Denver Post published a Guest Commentary on Mexican wolves by the Defenders of Wildlife and Earthjustice. The commentary characterized the recent debate about introducing endangered Mexican wolves into Colorado as political and not based on science. To be sure, the proponents of wolf reestablishment are passionate, but too often that passion overshadows objectivity and neglects consideration of the full range of legitimate viewpoints and consequences of an active wolf introduction program. We say “introduction” and not “reintroduction” because the best available science does not support the contention that the Mexican wolf was the wolf historically common to Colorado.

The authors stated that wildlife commissioners “*would prefer a plan that keeps Mexican gray wolves out of needed recovery habitats, leaving the species on the brink of extinction.*” The recovery habitats they refer to are in southern Utah and Colorado. That statement is both misleading and exaggerated as we will explain. Only ten percent of the historic range of the Mexican wolf was in the United States. Specifically, they were found in extreme southern Arizona and New Mexico. The remaining ninety percent of the wolf’s habitat was in Mexico. It is worth noting that another Mexican wolf advocacy group, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), acknowledged in its 2012 lawsuit against the Secretary of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that “*Historically, the Mexican wolf lived in forest, and possibly desert, regions of the Republic of Mexico and southern New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas.*”

Encouragingly, Mexico has recently expressed interest in helping recover this subspecies and ongoing analyses suggest that Mexico has sufficient natural resources to make a significant contribution to a recovery effort. Regrettably, the guest commentary completely ignored that fact. It appears that the authors put having wolves in Colorado (even if they are the “wrong” wolves) above recovering the unique Mexican wolf within its historic range via a true bi-national effort.

In 2009, CBD filed a petition to have the Mexican wolf listed as a unique subspecies or distinct population segment. If proponents of introducing Mexican wolves into Colorado prevail, that now-adopted distinction will ultimately result in Colorado having to contend with both endangered Mexican wolves and delisted gray wolves from the greater Yellowstone area - a complicated management headache at the very least.

The authors also claimed that a loss of genetic diversity in Mexican wolves is a “recipe for extinction.” Interestingly, data from the Arizona Game and Fish Department show that the Mexican wolf population grew at a rate of 20 percent annually from 2010 to 2014. Despite that fact, the authors alleged that “... *the wild lobo is losing ground again, backsliding toward oblivion due to political pressure.*” According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, there were 2 packs of Mexican wolves in the U.S. in the wild in 1998. By 2014, the number of packs had risen to 19. Those figures do not reflect a subspecies “*backsliding toward oblivion.*” Inaccurate and unfounded statements like those of the authors fail to create an environment for informed and constructive debate.

The authors went on to overgeneralize the concern about Mexican wolf genetic diversity by failing to point out that for some species and populations of vertebrates there are often other factors that play a larger role in the long-term persistence of populations. In fact, a recent article by UCLA scientists in the journal Current Biology calls into question the importance of genetic variation in the long-term persistence of some small populations. The authors wrote that despite a severe bottleneck about 30 generations ago that reduced the Channel Island fox population to fewer than a dozen individuals, it appears that “*under some conditions, genetic variation is not absolutely essential for the persistence of endangered populations.*” Applying conservation genetics to the Mexican wolf in a categorical, one-size-fits-all fashion is scientifically inappropriate.

The recent push from the Defenders of Wildlife, Earthjustice and other environmental groups to release more captive adult Mexican wolves into the wild is very misguided. Doing so is likely to reduce landowner and state support for the entire recovery program because captive-raised wolves released to the wild frequently get into conflicts and have to be recaptured or are destroyed as a result. Of 85 confirmed nuisance Mexican wolf incidents from 1998 to 2012, nearly 64% of those were caused by captive-raised wolves or wolves that had spent a significant amount of time in captivity. Simply releasing more wolves from captivity into the wild is not a panacea as is suggested by the authors. It is well documented that wild-born wolves are more successful in reproducing and avoiding conflicts than naive captive-born released animals. As the wild population grows and its composition shifts to nearly all wild-born wolves, fewer wolves are being destroyed or removed from the wild population.

The authors also implied, without providing any supportive evidence, that wolves are important to have in Colorado to help maintain healthy ecosystems. We are unaware of any scientific studies that indicate Colorado needs another large predator in order to restore balance to our natural systems. That might be a more defensible argument in situations where hunting is not allowed and natural predators are scarce. But in Colorado, hunting is a very effective management tool that helps strike a balance in big game numbers between available habitat and social tolerance. In addition, hunting has funded the state’s wildlife management programs for many species of wildlife, both hunted species and nonhunted species of special conservation concern. The authors’ statements of advocacy for having wolves in Colorado entirely ignore the potential costs and consequences.

It is true that some surveys indicate many Coloradoans support having wolves in our state. Unfortunately, the costs of living with predators are not borne by most of our citizens. Agricultural producers and sportsmen will bear the brunt of the cost. Conversely, the benefits will largely accrue to those who advocate for introducing wolves. Those advocates continue to downplay the costs to others and have failed to recommend or support any mechanism to offset those costs. A recent “pay for presence” approach has been adopted for the Mexican wolf in Arizona and New Mexico and it shows considerable promise. The approach pays ranchers if they implement measures to safeguard livestock and provides additional funding to compensate for livestock losses. Unfortunately, we have yet to hear the Defenders of Wildlife (a partner in the Arizona and New Mexico program) or any other proponent of wolves suggest anything of the kind for Colorado.

Accusing the Parks and Wildlife Commission of playing politics for not promoting wolf introduction ignores the responsibilities of the Commission. The Commission serves all the citizens of Colorado, not just those who demand wolves. The Parks and Wildlife Commission believes that effective and long-lasting fish and

wildlife conservation requires collaboration, cooperation, and compromise. It serves no constructive purpose to ignore the voices of those who disagree with introducing wolves. There is a substantial lack of social acceptance for wolves in this state among those most likely to be negatively impacted. Using the courts and media to force wolf introduction on these groups of Coloradoans is simply unfair.

A more productive conversation (which includes truly listening to those with whom you disagree and not dismissing their concerns) would include all the potentially-affected portions of our society and would explore mechanisms to address their concerns. Again, why aren't the authors proposing such an inclusive and constructive approach rather than seeking to force a wolf introduction on unwilling members of our society?

Finally, the authors conveniently ignore the potential ramifications of introducing an endangered subspecies into Colorado, especially when Colorado is outside of the historic range of the subspecies. Extreme actions like the one they propose erode public support for the entire Endangered Species Act (ESA). We fail to understand the logic of advocating for the introduction of an endangered animal outside of its normal range when such an action does not appear necessary. It also concerns us that such advocacy has the potential to not only undermine public support for that particular species, but also to imperil the future conservation of many other species that need the protection of the ESA. In our view, this call to action is strikingly self-serving and shortsighted.