

Please Pass the Wolf Bane

Gray wolves in the Northern Rockies are marked for death



By Brad Bergstrom
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Early this March, President Obama's new Interior Secretary Ken Salazar moved quickly and rather unexpectedly in announcing he would green-light an 11th-hour proposal by the Bush Administration to remove Endangered Species Act (ESA) protection from the gray wolf in the Northern Rocky Mountains (NRM). What made it especially shocking is that the new administration, which has touted its commitment to science-based policy decisions, approved the same plan that a federal district judge had rejected 5 months earlier as being scientifically indefensible, thus guaranteeing a new round of litigation.

The gray wolf had been protected under the ESA everywhere in the lower 48 since 1974; they only survived in northeastern Minnesota, where 35 years of protection have seen their numbers increase many-fold to about 4,000. The wolf is not just any endangered species; after all, bald eagles and sea otters won't eat your dog or your cow, and these cuddlier poster children of the ESA weren't in the first place persecuted to the point of widespread extirpation out of sheer revulsion that they existed. But since Aesop, wolves have always had that rap, and they always will. Their recovery in Minnesota has happened despite that handicap, and their premature removal from protection in the Northern Rockies—where they've only been recovering since a reintroduction in 1995—is a sop to the age-old prejudice.

Salazar, a western rancher himself, was in such a rush to delist the wolf, that he ignored his lead agency's own recent finding—and court rulings—that a delisting under the law cannot be piece-mealed by cherry-picking states to include and neighboring states to exclude in the rule because they aren't ready. Rather the ESA mandates conserving actual ecosystems within their natural boundaries. Even DOI's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which is authorized under ESA to list, monitor, manage, and delist endangered species, thinks that Wyoming's state management plan will not allow wolves to survive (and thus they've excluded that state from the delisting rule). That they think Idaho's stated goal of killing 700 of their current population of 800 wolves is OK, tells you just how bad Wyoming's plan is! And if any of Wyoming's still "protected" wolves should cross into Idaho, killing them there won't violate the new FWS rule.

FWS officials apply the “trust us” palliative to conservationists’ concerns that most of the current 1,600 NRM wolves may be killed shortly after ESA protections are officially removed on May 4. That Idaho and Montana have “promised” to maintain 500 and 400 wolves, respectively, does not alter the fact that if each state indeed culled their populations down to 100, FWS would be powerless to stop them under this rule. Then the only recourse to ensure that the \$30 million expended on NRM wolf restoration in the past 15 years wasn’t a total waste would be for FWS to re-list and start all over again.

Conservation biologists and geneticists widely agree that a meta-population numbering in the thousands, with free movement and genetic exchange from its center to its far-flung corners, is vital to the health and long-term persistence of a species. Population viability analyses indicate a high likelihood of the wolf once again going extinct in the NRM if it loses ESA protection now under the state management plans as proposed. The court ruled in October 2008, and even FWS acknowledges, that the Yellowstone National Park (YNP) wolf population is genetically isolated and if it stays so will suffer inbreeding effects within decades. FWS’s answer is to haul wolves around the region in the backs of pickup trucks to force genetic exchange. But such intensive management is not currently budgeted in any state plan or even the federal plan. Besides, conservation geneticists have recently found that it is absolutely critical for wolves in their natural habitats to make these “dispersal decisions” themselves. It turns out wolves become genetically adapted to specific ecosystems and a pre-selection of which wolves are the best candidates to make and survive the journey linking one ecosystem to another can only be done naturally. Perhaps most importantly, a population that requires such intensive and invasive management to ensure its basic survival is in no sense of the word—and certainly not in the legal sense of the ESA—recovered.

The restoration of wolves to the Yellowstone ecosystem in a little over a decade has been a remarkable accomplishment, not just because it returned the only large native animal missing from the world’s first national park, but because the re-flourishing of a lost ecosystem was so rapid and so unanticipated. Merely by making the elk herds nervous, wolves initiated a trophic cascade that saw willow and cottonwood shoots emerge from overbrowsing to re-establish a riparian zone complete with beavers and beaver-pond commensals, including fishes, crustaceans, otters and many more species that had all but disappeared.

This ecosystem restoration, which is a key purpose of the ESA, was observed when wolf densities reached about 16 per square km in YNP. If wolves at this density were to disperse across the 277,000 ha of suitable habitat in what FWS defines as the NRM Distinct Population Segment (DPS) identified in their delisting rule, they would number 17,000, not the few hundred that are likely to comprise the population after delisting unleashes an endless campaign of shooting and trapping. And since key dispersal corridors are not protected from wolf harvest in the state plans, most areas of suitable habitat in the NRM DPS will likely never be populated at all, much less by an “ecologically effective” density that is capable of restoring ecosystems across the region.

It is estimated that 350,000 wolves populated the western states and Mexico before white settlement and the gray wolf was one of the most widely distributed of all North American mammal species. Today its numbers in the region are half of one percent of that total, occurring in a small fraction of the former range. Less than a third of the area FWS defines as the NRM DPS is populated by wolves (which is in itself a small fraction of the original range in the West), and in the unoccupied majority, the rule will effectively allow any and all wolves to be killed. The powers that be do not want the ecological success of wolf reintroduction to spread any further. Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, which is dying for some wolves to cull the excess elk reducing the habitat to nubs, will just have to do without and now may well have to violate the sacrosanct prohibition of hunting within a national park.

What are those "powers that be" that can so overpower logic, science and the ESA? Other than that age-old prejudice, look toward the disproportionate representation of the sparsely populated western mountain states in our republican form of government, the disproportionate power of the livestock ranching and trophy hunting lobbies within those regions, and the "Sagebrush Rebellion" style resentment of the federal government in those public-lands-rich states (Idaho is 63% federal public land—more than any other state). It was at the behest of such interests that the gray wolf was completely obliterated in the West by mid-20th century, by government-paid bounties and by government agents, even in our national parks.

Today, 41% of the West's total land area is grazed public land (including state and local), and that vast area produces only 2% of the nation's beef. Forty percent of the federal grazing permits are controlled by 3% of the permittees, most of whom are wealthy, wealthy enough to make substantial political contributions. Many of these wealthy ranchers have been paid some of the \$1 million in public and private compensation for wolf depredation of livestock since the 1995 reintroduction, and government hunters have spent more of your tax dollars killing hundreds of wolves in the NRM to further protect the ranching "way of life." In fact, the recent increase in the rate of wolf killing (allegedly a response to increased depredation) is even cited by FWS officials as a reason for the haste in delisting.

It's been estimated that 60% of our federal lands in the West are overgrazed by permittees, herding their private cattle onto public lands at below-market leases. Not only is corporate-welfare ranching ruining the range, but it is arguably preventing widespread ecosystem restoration via another route, namely by pushing back hard behind the scenes against the return of the West's top predator, which is the public-lands grazer's Enemy #1. In nature, a population of herbivores whose overabundance destroys their own food source is brought into balance by predators. Wolves are only doing their job. If public-lands cattle grazing were to end tomorrow, the consumer would never notice it, the taxpayer would get to keep a little more money, and a vast ecosystem might regain its "call of the wild" and begin to be restored to its original richness.

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