

# Wolf Recovery In Yellowstone

By Norm Bishop

Gray wolves, effective predators on large mammals, were native to Yellowstone. They were extirpated by 1927, when national policy was to exterminate wolves on all public lands. An intensive study from 1975 to 1977 and sporadic sightings (nine possible 1980-1986) suggest that no viable wolf population lives in the park.

The wolf's ecological niche in the park is vacant – a departure from the purpose stated in the park's 1973 master plan to perpetuate the park's natural ecosystem. Management policies for resource management in national parks are to maintain and perpetuate their natural integrity. The policies encourage reintroduction of natural species extirpated by humans, where adequate habitat exists.

The gray wolf is listed as endangered in the contiguous states except Minnesota under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). A Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan was produced by an inter-agency team in 1980. A revised plan is in final review. The plan proposes reintroduction of an *experimental* group of wolves into the Yellowstone area. The 1982 amendments to the ESA allow *experimental* populations of endangered species to be reintroduced with added management flexibility to contain the population and remove problem animals. The plan recognizes that compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act requires an Environmental Impact Statement, with public participation, before any significant recovery action is begun.

Following a management pattern similar to one that has evolved to recover and manage the threatened grizzly bear, three management zones would be set up to facilitate wolf recovery. Management Zone I would be a unit of more than 3,000 square miles containing key all-year habitat to sustain 10 breeding pairs of wolves, with less than 20 percent of the land devoted to livestock grazing. There, the first management priority, along with perpetuation of the natural ecosystem, including other native species, would be wolf recovery.

Management Zone II would be a flexible buffer area where wolves can occupy some key habitat, but where management preference would be given to livestock grazing and other land uses. Problem wolves would be controlled.

Management Zone III is where wolf-human conflicts would be minimized. If wolves pose a problem to humans, they would be controlled. Other established uses take priority over wolf recovery.

When Yellowstone's experimental wolf population has grown to include 10 breeding pairs, probably in 10 packs of 5-16 wolves (50 to 160 total), and those 10 pairs have lived in Yellowstone for 3 consecutive years, they can be reclassified. Delisting wolves will be contingent upon their being protected by states and managed as game animals or furbearers.

The Yellowstone recovery area proposed in the draft Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan would be set in the center of a vast tract of park and wilderness – the largest intact ecosystem in the temperate zone of the earth – 2.2 million acres in the park, 3.6 million acres of national forest wilderness, and 2.7

million acres of undeveloped wildlands. It already serves as the core of a grizzly bear recovery area, and contains a natural complex of other predators: black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, and coyotes.

L. David Mech, one of the nation's foremost wolf authorities, said of Yellowstone, "This is just magnificent wolf country."

In part because of the proposed Yellowstone recovery area's large size, remoteness, and integrity, there is low likelihood that wolves will prey on the few cattle and sheep that are grazed seasonally on the periphery of the recovery area.

In contrast, on Minnesota wolf range, 1,200 wolves are interspersed with 12,230 farms with 234,000 cattle and 91,000 sheep. From 1977 through 1986, the highest cattle losses reported there were 4.5 per 10,000, and the highest sheep losses claimed were 26.6 per 10,000. As a result, 15 to 59 wolves were trapped per year (38 average) in Minnesota wolf range.

In Yellowstone there are tens of thousands of elk, thousands of deer and bison; hundreds of bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, and moose. All these species are natural prey for wolves, and will supply ample food for them. Alternative prey – countless snowshoe hares, twenty species of rodents, abundant waterfowl and grouse – are also available in Yellowstone.

Although grizzly bears, black bears, mountain lions, and coyotes all have demonstrated that they will attack human beings, there are no authenticated cases of healthy wild wolves attacking modern people in North America. Wolves are shy, and avoid people.

The absence of a viable wolf population is the single

greatest departure from the objective of maintaining a natural ecosystem in Yellowstone. Indeed, wolves are the only one of five threatened or endangered species in the park for which there is no recovery program. The presence of wolves would provide a needed empirical test of their effects on their several species of prey, as well as insight into the interrelationships among wolves and other predators in the park. Detailed studies of those effects must accompany studies of the wolves. From studies elsewhere, it seems likely that wolf kills will offer a more stable spring, summer, and fall source of protein essential to grizzly bears in Yellowstone.

In the draft recovery plan, and in the park's comments on the draft plan, concerns of nearby residents and commercial interests are considered carefully, with proposals to provide public information, means to protect the interests of hunters, outfitters, and commodity interests, to control depredating wolves, or those that may become problems, and to compensate ranchers for stock lost to wolves.

Wolf recovery in Yellowstone need not interfere with public use of the park, or preclude legal use of wilderness for recreation or multiple uses such as grazing, timber harvest, oil and gas extraction, big game hunting, or animal damage control programs. Adjustments have already been made in those activities to accommodate grizzly bear recovery.

Overwhelming support for wolf recovery in Yellowstone was shown in 1985 by a random survey of park visitors (McNaught, U. of Mont.). Yellowstone NP has funded, through the University of Wyoming, a random survey of attitudes of Wyoming citizens toward wolf reintroduction. Preliminary results show very strong support among members of two Wyoming conservation organizations, and opposition among stockgrowers, who fear they might be impacted economically by the presence of wolves in Yellowstone. Support for wolf recovery is widespread in the American conservation community.

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*Drawing by Peggy Herring.*