

# Public Education Pays Off At Great Smokies In Smooth Sailing For Red Wolf Release

By Napier Shelton, Robert Miller, Karen Ballentine and V. Gary Henry

Public support can spell the difference between success and failure of a resource management project, especially one that could be controversial. It is instructive, therefore, to look at public education programs that engendered support. One such success story has to do with the information effort preceding and accompanying the release of red wolves in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM).

The goal of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) recovery plan for the endangered red wolf is 220 individuals established in the wild in three areas of the Southeast (and 330 in captivity). An earlier plan to restore red wolves at the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) Land Between the Lakes in Kentucky and Tennessee was suspended because of public opposition, primarily from agricultural, hunting, and animal rights groups. Learning of this experience, the USFWS and conservation groups conducted an intensive public education program around the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in coastal north Carolina, and subsequently carried out successful red wolf restoration there.

A similar approach was taken at GRSM. For nearly two years before the first red wolf release, in November 1991, the National Park Service (NPS) and the USFWS jointly carried out a broad public education effort to explain the reasons for and goals of the project, aimed at allaying any fears and gaining support.

The primary audience was park neighbors, most of whom live on small acreages, in small towns near the park, or in the cities of Knoxville, TN and Asheville, NC. Because of the rough foothill topography, most farms are small and most farm owners have jobs elsewhere. Tourism is a major and increasing component of the economy, and there is a growing population of retirees. Hunting remains an important part of life for many people here.

Extensive planning went into the public information program. Representatives from USFWS, park management, resource management, public affairs, and interpretation brainstormed to identify interest groups, sensitive points, appropriate media for conveying messages, and timing of efforts. Lists of groups to be contacted were developed, but the persons who were to contact specific groups were decided upon only as the effort developed.



Klm Delozier, Great Smoky Mountains National Park wildlife biologist holding up a 6 week old pup of the first litter to be born in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 100 years. May 1991 photo.

## The Communication Effort

The public information program began with briefings of the Tennessee and North Carolina congressional representatives and governors' offices by the USFWS Red Wolf Coordinator and regional director. The superintendent, USFWS coordinator, and NPS resource management and science personnel, in various combinations, also talked to NPS and USFWS officials in Washington, DC and the region, local officials, farm bureau heads, and heads of state and federal land management agencies. Contacts with these key officials were followed by presentations to civic, school, conservation, and other groups by NPS public affairs and interpretation personnel, with input and assistance from the superintendent, USFWS project personnel, and others.

The park public affairs officer and resource management/environmental education interpreter, with assistance in some cases from the Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere Cooperative (SAMAB) and NPS staff developed various tools for communicating information about the red wolf project. Among these were a slide program, brochures, poster, periodic updates, video (in cooperation with station WBIR-TV in Knoxville, TN), traveling exhibit, a wayside exhibit, and teacher's guide (including lesson plans) to the video and poster.

The video/poster/teacher's guide package was sent to 800 schools, libraries, nature centers, and other requesters. In addition, 7,000 posters were distributed. The 30-minute video, "Front Runner," and an earlier short video piece presented the background, plans, and early activities of the red wolf project, including the temporary release of a red wolf family, reasons for the project, and viewpoints of various people. These latter included local farmers who feared the presence of red wolves would result in livestock depredation. An update of the video incorporating developments after permanent release of a second red wolf family later was produced. Because of the demand for the video/poster/teacher guide package, an additional 1,000 videos and 3,000 posters have been produced.

## Program Progress Updates

Media representatives have been kept informed through press releases, press conferences, a red wolf newsletter, and media briefing packages. Park visitors learn about the project through campfire programs and other personal services, park newspaper articles, the wayside exhibit, the brochure that is available at visitor centers, and the traveling exhibit, which is on display at a visitor center when not traveling.

Continuing communication with park neighbors occurs through newspaper articles

*Continued on page 19*

## **Red Wolves** continued from page 18

and television programs, through the schools and civic club meetings, and at special events in the community, where the traveling exhibit often is displayed and talks given. For example, a booth exhibit is manned and talks presented throughout the annual 5-day Wilderness Wildlife Week in Pigeon Forge, TN. We also include wolf information at teacher workshops, elderhostels, and other sessions at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. The red wolf newsletter now goes to a mailing list of some 350 individuals and organizations.

In addition to all the talks and use of media tools, a communication committee meets periodically. Representatives from the park, the USFWS, conservation groups, the Tennessee and North Carolina wildlife agencies, the adjacent USFS national forests and districts, the state and local Farm Bureaus, and others are invited to attend these meetings and react to planned red wolf activities.

### **Superintendent's Role Important**

A very important element in the communication effort from the project's start was the personal interest and involvement of the GRWM superintendent. He made this a top priority, participated in early planning and top-level meetings, chaired communication committee meetings, and was active in major decisions. Many other GRSM staff members, besides the two principals mentioned earlier, have contributed to the communication effort. The NPS regional office has been supportive but not actively involved, leaving this to the park and the USFWS.

SAMAB also has helped, primarily through financial assistance by a member—the TVA—in developing and disseminating the video/poster/teacher's guide package. Station WBIR-TV has been interested and supportive throughout, producing and airing the video and pre-project and ongoing news updates. The NBS affiliate in Asheville, NC also aired "Front Runner." The Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Association (GSMNHA) contracted for production and provided some of the funding for the first red wolf brochure, using money from the Pt. Defiance Zoo in Tacoma, WA. The association also sells art prints and administers a livestock indemnity fund.

We estimate the time spent on the communication effort between 1990 and early 1993 for the NPS was 1.25 work years divided mostly between two people at a total cost of \$46,200. Considerable additional time was contributed by three USFWS employees. Out of pocket purchases by the NPS, USFWS, and TVA in the Great Smokies area are estimated at \$50,850. Additional contributions include the \$24,500 cost to WBIR-TV



One of the red wolves released permanently into the Cades Cove area of Great Smoky Mountains NP in the Fall of 1992.

to produce the Front Runner program; sales from a red wolf print by artist Steve Jackson, and a \$25,000 indemnity fund consisting of contributions from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the National Parks and Conservation Association, and the Jackson print sales.

### Results and Evaluation

We have been pleased and somewhat surprised at the nearly unanimous public support for the red wolf project. The only groups voicing opposition have been local and state Farm Bureaus on the Tennessee side of the park, and their opposition has been low key. They follow the policy of the National Farm Bureau, which is to oppose any restoration of predators. The wolves have taken some domestic animals in the Cades Cove area at the park, but this has aroused little expressed concern, other than that of the owner of the

livestock taken. The owner was compensated from the fund operated by the GSMNHA.

We attribute the success of the education effort to the following:

- Thorough advance planning
- Close targeting of audiences
- Commitment of the park superintendent
- A team approach
- Cooperation and coordination among the participants
- Objective, honest, consistent presentation of scientific information
- Initiation of the program well in advance of the first wolf releases
- Numerous personal contacts with individuals and groups
- Use of a variety of effective media
- Involvement of partners, such as the press, WBIR-TV, SAMAB, and the GRSM Natural History Association

In addition, certain pre-existing conditions probably contributed to the program's success:

(1) the biology of the red wolf, which is smaller than the gray wolf and usually takes smaller prey; (2) the absence of wolves from the southern Appalachians since the turn of the century; (3) the relatively small economic importance of livestock in the area; (4) earlier press coverage of peregrine falcon and other restoration in the park; and (5) generally good relations of the park with its neighbors.

The success of red wolf restoration in the Smokies now depends on the animals themselves--whether they can live and reproduce in the park environments over the long term. Public interest and support seem assured.

*Shelton recently retired as a writer-editor with the Wildlife and Vegetation Division, Washington Office, NPS; Miller is Public Affairs Officer at Great Smoky Mountains NP; Ballentine is an interpreter who works as a liaison with the Resource Management Division, Great Smoky Mountains NP; Henry is the Red Wolf Coordinator, UFWFS, Asheville, NC.*