

WOLF RECOVERY IN UPPER MICHIGAN

Regional partnerships key to natural wolf recovery at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and beyond



BY BRIAN KENNER

IN RECENT YEARS, AS SEEMINGLY ENDLESS controversy has been swirling around wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone, something has been happening elsewhere in the lower 48 states perhaps at least as significant for the wolf in North America. Without benefit of an environmental impact statement, congressional or public hearings, national media attention, or direct human intervention, wolves have returned to the Michigan Upper Peninsula (see map, page 27). In early 1995, Michigan Department of Natural Resources winter surveys confirmed a population of 80 wolves, with a minimum of twelve packs (each consisting of at least a breeding pair). This is a significant increase from 57 wolves in 1994, 30 in 1993, and 21 in 1992. The habitat is believed to be capable of supporting a population of 300-500 animals, indicating that continued significant population increases are likely.

Wolves were essentially extirpated from Michigan via direct persecution by 1960 (except for the isolated Isle Royale population). Fortunately, travel corridors from remaining populations in northern Min-

nesota and Canada endured, as did large tracts of sparsely populated North Woods habitat with abundant prey (deer, beaver, and small game). Occasional reports of individual wolves persisted to 1989, when a pair of wolves was found in the western Upper Peninsula. That pair produced pups in 1991 and 1992, thus becoming the first known pack in Michigan since the 1950s. Other packs soon established territories in the western Upper Peninsula—the result of dispersion from populations in northern Minnesota and northern Wisconsin. Wolves have also been found in the eastern Upper Peninsula, most likely Canadian dispersers crossing the ice of the Saint Marys River, which joins Lake Superior with Lake Huron.

To what can this dramatic recovery be attributed? While undoubtedly many reasons exist, the results of a 1990 survey of Michigan's human population provided one answer. The study found surprisingly high support for wolf recovery, particularly among hunters and trappers. Not surprising was the less enthusiastic response from farmers, but a majority of all respondents supported wolf recovery as long as it came about naturally without expenditure of large amounts of tax dol-

lars and did not cause undue public lands use restrictions. Public attitudes have changed significantly in 20 years—the people of the Upper Peninsula now seem willing to live with the wolf.

How do the National Park Service and Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore fit into the wolf equation? Pictured Rocks (35,000 federal acres, 35,000 nonfederal) is part of an expanse of largely protected habitat stretching across the central Upper Peninsula from Lake Superior to Lake Michigan and including a national forest, a national wildlife refuge, commercial timber lands, and state forest lands. The last known pack and verified pup production in Michigan prior to 1991 was in 1956 within what is now the park (established in 1966). Observations and other evidence

(scat and tracks) are now fairly common within and near the lakeshore, and in October 1994 a local resident reported seeing an adult wolf with two pups within the lakeshore boundary.

The NPS is cooperating with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and other agencies to monitor wolf activity. Thus far, most effort has been directed toward the western Upper Peninsula, but the recent increase in sightings and evidence of pack establishment in the central and eastern parts of the peninsula demand more effort in those areas. In 1995, the National Park Service, through a challenge-cost share grant, purchased radio collars for the natural resources department trapping team to collar wolves near the park to determine pack size, movements, home range and reproduction in the north central Upper Peninsula. Unfortunately, trappers have not yet been able to capture any wolves in the park area, but more effort will be focused there in 1996. Habitat assessments of historic deer yards (areas of winter congregation) are needed, as are studies of seasonal deer movements. To

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facilitate integration of resource data with other agencies and regional level analyses, Pictured Rocks has been building its GIS database. Also, NPS representatives are actively involved with the Michigan Gray Wolf Recovery Team, a group that is working hard to develop a recovery plan to ensure full recovery to a sustainable population. The recovery team was established in 1992 with early evidence of packs forming, and has found itself in the awkward, yet not unpleasant, position of trying to keep planning efforts in step with a rapidly recovering population.

Education is, of course, key to the recovery. Active wolf support and education groups have sprouted up in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to serve a vital role in keeping public attitudes positive. Their volunteer outreach programs have proven quite successful. National Park Service interpreters and rangers will be joining these groups to direct more effort to public education programs, particularly during the critical deer hunting season when hundreds of anxious hunters are roaming the woods (hunting is legal in Pictured Rocks).

While the outlook appears pretty sunny for the wolf in Upper Michigan, dark clouds also loom. Diseases such as sarcoptic mange and canine parvovirus may have significant impacts on the population; mange is believed to account for substantial mortality. Habitat loss through development and fragmentation is also a concern; a United States Coast Guard proposal to maintain shipping through the Saint Marys River in winter via ice-breaker is considered to be a significant threat to movement between Canadian and Upper Peninsula populations. Perhaps the greatest threat is the possibility of a change in public attitudes. The Michigan Militia and antigovernment sentiment are strong in the Upper Peninsula; any protective action by a public agency that may be perceived as heavy-handed (particularly road closures) could cause a serious antiwolf backlash. Although farming is not a common livelihood in most of Upper Michigan, livestock depredation is

also a concern. The recovery team recognizes the need for quick assessment and effective response to depredation claims, and is seeking funding from nongovernmental organizations for a reimbursement fund.

While the wolf is perhaps the definitive *charismatic megafauna* and can be dismissed as an example of politicized endangered species issues, its return to the Michigan Upper Peninsula is important for several reasons. First, it demonstrates a positive, fundamental change in attitudes



in an area where long-established antipredator sentiments die hard. This change can be built upon to broaden knowledge and gain support for other environmental issues. Second, it provides some evidence of overall ecosystem health for a large chunk of land near the country's industrial heartland (within 350 miles of both Chicago and Detroit). Third, it forces state and federal agencies to go beyond happy policy statements about "ecosystem management" and "preserving biodiversity" to actually taking positive, cooperative management actions across boundaries to benefit both human and natural environments. Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore intends to be an active partner in this endeavor.

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