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The Role of the National Park Service
in the
Restoration of the Mexican Wolf to Big Bend National Park

Big Bend National Park is nationally significant as the most representative protected area of Chihuahuan Desert Topography in the United States.

It is a land of dramatic contrasts: a mountainous topographic island laying buried in a sea of its own eroded alluvium; austere panoramas of open expanses of cactus and scrub brush, broken by rugged exposures of rocky terrain, towering pinnacles, and deeply etched canyons. Sediments laid down by ancient seas have been lifted, fractured, and broken apart, and later intruded and covered in places by thick layers of molten rock. For eons, erosion has carved these rocks into impressive landforms, exposing an outdoor classroom for geologic appreciation.

The Rio Grande, meandering through this portion of the Chihuahuan Desert, has cut deep canyons with near vertical walls through three mountain ranges, and provides a ribbon of moisture through dry, open desert. In doing so, the river provides a moist habitat for diverse populations of flora and fauna.

The Chisos Mountains, a cool, moist, topographic island rising to 7,835 feet above sea level, is a refuge for relict populations of late Pleistocene woodland species. Between river and mountain, the open desert slopes and plains support a vast array of typical Chihuahuan Desert species. This unique combination of topographic extremes and corresponding diversity of habitat, support a multitude of plant and animal species, many of which occur nowhere else in the United States, and a few of which occur nowhere else in the world.

The establishment of Big Bend National Park was authorized by an act of the 74th Congress (49 Stat. 393), on June 20, 1935, which provided that "...lands...as necessary for recreational park purposes...are hereby established, dedicated, and set apart as a public park for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." The act also stipulated that the provisions of the National Park Service Organic Act of August 25, 1916 (39 Stat. 535), apply, "...which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Since Big Bend has been designated an International Biosphere Reserve, it has taken on increasing importance as an internationally significant research area. With this designation, the area is recognized for its biological research and environmental monitor-

ing potential. It's further purposes include integrating social, physical and biological sciences to foster harmonious relationships between humans and the environment.

In 1976, the Mexican Wolf was officially listed as an endangered species under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. The purposes of the Endangered Species Act are to provide a program for the conservation of threatened and endangered species and to conserve the ecosystems upon which they depend. The Act establishes the policy that all Federal agencies "...shall utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of this Act." The Act also requires the Secretary of the Interior to "...develop and implement plans...for the conservation and survival of endangered species."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan in 1982. This plan recognizes that recovery of the species is dependent upon it's re-establishment in suitable habitats within it's historic range.

The National Park Service has affirmative responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act to promote the conservation of all Federally listed threatened, endangered or candidate species within park boundaries and their critical habitats. Active management programs will be conducted, as necessary, to perpetuate the natural distribution and abundance of threatened or endangered species and the ecosystems on which they depend. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service are the lead agencies in matters pertaining to Federally listed threatened and endangered species. The Park Service will cooperate with those agencies in activities such as delineation of critical habitat and recovery zones on park lands and will participate on recovery teams.

In February 1992, a Statement for Management for Big Bend National Park was completed after extensive public review and comment. The major purpose of this Statement for Management is to identify and communicate management concerns and issues. Although the Statement for Management does not prescribe changes in management and use, it does serve as a basis for future planning and research.

The issue of restoring the Mexican Wolf to Big Bend drew the highest number of public review responses. Approximately 68 individuals and 6 interest groups wrote to urge the park to support efforts to restore the Mexican Wolf to Big Bend National Park. In addition, copies of petitions containing over 6,000 signatures and 18 signed landowner statements were received from the Mexican Wolf Coalition of Texas in support of restoration of the Mexican Wolf. As well, there was comment from those opposed to any restoration efforts.

The Statement for Management recognized the issue of restoration of extirpated wildlife species, such as the Mexican Wolf, is not only a difficult science issue, but also one that can impact adjacent

landowners. Presently, there is generally insufficient knowledge of habitat adequacy, effects of reintroduction on existing ecosystems or neighboring lands. Additionally, park management recognizes the need for research into prey and habitat suitability. Social and economic impacts must also be considered. The National Park Service supports assessing these issues through the Environmental Impact Statement process.

It is clear that the National Park Service has responsibility under the Endangered Species Act to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the lead agency in assessing the potential for Mexican Wolf reintroduction at Big Bend National Park. However, National Park Service policy on the restoration of native plants and animals also establishes criteria to guide that effort.

1. Adequate habitat to support the species either exists or can reasonably be restored in the park, and if necessary, on adjacent public lands and waters, and once a natural population level is achieved, it can be self-perpetuating.
2. The species does not, based on an effective management plan, pose a serious threat to the safety of park visitors, park resources, or persons or property outside park boundaries.
3. The subspecies used in restoration most nearly approximates the extirpated subspecies or race.
4. The species disappeared, or was substantially diminished as a direct or indirect result of human-induced change to the species population or to the ecosystem.

Is Big Bend National Park a feasible candidate for Mexican Wolf reintroduction? Many reputable scientists believe Big Bend would provide excellent habitat for Mexican wolves. The operative word in the statements from these scientists is "believe." Indeed, one noted individual, Dr. Roland Wauer, former Chief, Natural Resource Management for the National Park Service, has been quoted to say there is "no biological problem" and that "wolves are the biggest piece we're missing from the ecosystem." I greatly respect Dr. Wauer, especially when you consider his Big Bend background, his National Park Service experience, and well-respected scientific credentials. But, I find his comments simplistic, implying that all we have to do is "bring a truck load of wolves down to the park, let them loose, and everything will return to the way it was." I am sure Dr. Wauer really believes to the contrary. Conclusion of reintroduction can only follow a biologically based evaluation of the suitability of habitat available in Big Bend National Park and surrounding areas; and, if biologically suitable, a thorough assessment of the impacts of a reintroduction through the National Environmental Policy Act process.

I believe the nomination of Big Bend National Park as a potentially feasible reintroduction site in Texas is inevitable. The actual reintroduction of the wolf in Big Bend is problematic and highly dependent upon biological and socio-economic considerations that must be closely scrutinized to assure no mistakes are made. This is a species that can not afford too many more mistakes.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has undertaken an orderly process of assessing potential release sites in New Mexico and Arizona. These assessments will provide an adequate array of sites from which to select the initial release site. An Environmental Impact Statement will be initiated soon in preparation for the planned experimental release. I hope you agree with me that the experimental release must be expeditiously pursued as it is absolutely critical to the continuation of the recovery process and long-term survival of this critically endangered species. The assessment of yet another candidate site in Big Bend would impose additional costs and a lengthy delay in plans to reintroduce the Mexican Wolf to the wild. In short, let's focus our energies and resources on the Arizona-New Mexico equation. Let's learn all we can from that experimental release. Let's identify habitat needs, analyze socio-economic impacts on neighbors, and most importantly, build a population base that can potentially be reintroduced in other suitable habitats. The proposed experimental release signals only the beginning of the reintroduction process. This process will require extraordinary patience and care.

It is my belief that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is on the right track. We support their efforts and will participate in the Environmental Impact Statement process. In the meantime, the National Park Service will work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to identify research gaps at Big Bend that will be required to answer key biological questions regarding habitat suitability, prey base availability, and relationships with other predators. Perhaps we can begin some level of biological investigation staging for the appropriate time in the future when Big Bend might be considered as a potential reintroduction site. When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is ready to study the Big Bend equation, the National Park Service will be ready.