Final Position Statement

Wolf Restoration and Management in the Contiguous United States

Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) were once distributed throughout most of North America, except possibly the southeastern U.S., where a different wolf species (*Canis rufus*) may have once lived. Wolf taxonomic theory continues to develop and the scientific debate on speciation will continue. We refer to 'wolves' as those designated as *Canis lupus* across North America, and include wolves of southeastern Canada and the eastern U.S., that some have recently referred to as *Canis lycaon*. By the 1970s wolves were deliberately extirpated from Mexico, nearly all of their historic range in the contiguous U.S., and parts of Canada and Alaska in deference to other social objectives, primarily livestock production, enhancement of big game populations, and human health and safety. In recent years, wolves have recolonized suitable habitat (e.g., typically areas with limited human development that are not used for intensive livestock production) throughout Alaska and Canada. Those areas now support >70,000 wolves. Conservation of those secure wolf populations includes: monitoring, law enforcement, public outreach, research, and regulating human-caused mortality through public harvest, defense of property by the public, agency control to reduce livestock depredation and predation on wild ungulates, and mitigation of the potential threat to human health and safety.

In this position statement we address wolf conservation and management in the contiguous U.S. Wolves were listed throughout the contiguous U.S. by the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA). Wolves were restored by a combination of natural recovery and translocations in the Northern Rocky Mountains. In 2011, there were >1,700 wolves in a 3-part meta-population in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming; eastern one-third of Oregon and Washington; and a small part of northern Utah. Wolves recovered naturally in the Western Great Lakes. In 2011, there were >4,500 wolves in a 3-part meta-population in Minnesota (the only area in the contiguous U.S. where wolves were not extirpated): Wisconsin, Michigan, and parts of surrounding states. Both distinct population segments (DPS) of wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes are well-connected southern extensions of the wolf population in Canada. Wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains, except in Wyoming, were delisted by Congress in 2011 when it reinstated the 2009 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) delisting rule that had previously been overturned in federal court. Wolves in the Western Great Lakes were delisted in 2007, but were returned to ESA protections in 2008 by court order. In January 2012, the FWS announced that the Western Great Lakes DPS of wolves had fully recovered and was healthy, leading to these wolves again being delisted. The wolf population in the southwestern U.S. resulted from translocations. For the past decade, the Southwest has contained about 50 wolves in a single isolated wild population, but several hundred others are maintained in captivity, all originating from only 7 founders. Recovery efforts in the Southwest are continuing but additional efforts over a larger area will be needed to achieve recovery. Suitable habitat exists in other areas of the Southwest and in Mexico. Wolves will continue to disperse naturally beyond the Northern Rocky Mountain, Western Great Lakes, and Southwest populations, but currently there are no other established populations.

While some areas of suitable habitat exist elsewhere, attempts to reestablish viable wolf populations outside of the Northern Rocky Mountains or Western Great Lakes through natural recolonization or by translocation will be more challenging due to human modification and fragmentation of once suitable historic habitat and no, or very limited, connectivity to larger secure wolf populations. Wolf restoration in the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes succeeded because of connectivity between secure wolf populations, there were large blocks of suitable habitat that could support persistent packs, agency management minimized conflicts, and adequate tolerance by local residents was achieved. That combination of conditions is uncommon elsewhere. Wolves do not need wilderness or protected lands to thrive, but they do best and there are fewer wolf-human conflicts in large blocks of wildlands that are not used for intensive livestock production.

The ESA played an essential role in restoring wolves to the Northern Rocky Mountains, Western Great Lakes, and Southwest; however, this legislation is not the most effective tool for long-term management of biologically recovered wolf populations or to conserve wolves in some areas where establishment of a self-sustaining population is unlikely. Thus, restoration and conservation of wolves beyond these three regions could be best achieved by localized efforts by states and tribes. Wolf conservation requires a variety of management efforts that range from protection in areas such as national parks, enforcement of the federal ESA to enhance recovery of listed populations, state and tribal management of resident wolf populations, and discouraging wolves from areas where wolf presence is not desirable due to unacceptable levels of conflict with humans. Wildlife management agencies should consistently inform the public that there are areas where wolves have been restored and where some might be restored in the future (e.g. Cascade Mountain Range in the northwestern U.S.), but that in the majority of vacant historic range, wolf populations will never be restored to biologically sustainable levels.

Scientific inquiry can help provide accurate information about wolf biology and the likely effects of various management options. Science should be an important part of the complex process that human society uses to make decisions about wolf conservation and needs to include the human dimensions of wildlife management. While The Wildlife Society continues to advocate for the appropriate use of science in wolf conservation, it recognizes that all branches of government and many others with expertise (i.e., stakeholders) are involved in making decisions. Scientific expertise and data, however, should be clearly distinguished from advocacy positions and different human values in debates about wolf conservation.

The policy of The Wildlife Society regarding wolves in the contiguous U.S. is as follows:

1. Recognize that wolves occupy an important ecological niche and should be conserved in portions of their original range in North America where suitable habitat exists, natural ecological processes are desired, conflicts are minimal or can be minimized through management actions, and there is adequate public tolerance for wolf restoration.

2. Recognize the existence of wolf-human conflicts (e.g., domestic animal depredation, competition for wild ungulates with big game hunters, and concerns about public health

and safety due to attack, diseases, or parasites) and that many wolf populations will require active management to be tolerated by local residents.

3. Encourage continued work with Canada and Mexico to maintain adequate connectivity with U.S. wolf populations and to support wolf conservation in all appropriate areas of North America.

4. Promote habitat conservation that sustains adequate space for the life history characteristics of wolves and their wild prey, including the establishment and management of areas (e.g., parks, National Wildlife Refuges, wilderness, and natural areas) where natural processes, including natural wolf population structure and predator-prey dynamics, would be encouraged, and where limited human-wolf interaction is likely.

5. Support wolf restoration and delisting, when appropriate, under the ESA in the Northern Rocky Mountains, Western Great Lakes, and Southwest and strongly encourage professional state and tribal wolf conservation programs to maintain viable wolf populations in those areas.

6. Encourage inclusion of the concerns from all stakeholders in wolf conservation issues and dissemination of scientific information regarding wolf conservation and management.

7. Encourage scientific agencies and organizations to clearly distinguish biology and science from issues that have an ethical, political, or legal foundation when establishing positions or providing information on wolf conservation and management.

8. Encourage adequate public and private funding to support wolf conservation, management, and damage control.

9. Recognize the ESA has limitations regarding wolf conservation and in many areas state and tribal agencies can be more efficient and cost effective in the conservation and management of wolves than maintaining federal-level protections.

Approved by Council May 2012. Expires May 2017.