

Photos: Jim Brandenburg/National Geographic Society

Recovery plans to reestablish wolf packs in the wild have diverse groups trapped together in an emotional snare of politics, economics and law

By DIANE D. EDWARDS

For thousands of years, the wolf has been admired, hated and feared in a conflict over the predator's rightful place in human society. Continuing that drama is the slow return of the wolf, with helping human hands, to remnants of its native habitat in the United States.

Once, 24 subspecies of the gray wolf, or *Canis lupus*, roamed North America, making the wolf and its howling a common sight and sound through the last century. But wolves and humans clashed, and the animal lost. By the time the first werewolf movie was filmed in 1935, there were essentially no wolves left in the United States, except for Alaska territory. With bullets and poison, bounty hunters hired by ranchers and the federal government had exterminated wolves until only a few notoriously evasive individuals like Three Toes and Old Snowdrift remained in the early 1900s.

Today in the lower 48 states, fewer than 1,300 have regrouped in pockets of wilderness (see map), and those are thought to be Canadian natives that headed south or their offspring. Now, some humans are calling for more wild wolves, while others are trying to keep the predator from their back doors.

Current and planned wolf protection programs—anchored on federal laws that protect species in danger of extinction—have a unified goal of increasing the number of wild wolves. But pursuing each program are packs of conflicting opinions, legal maneuvering and economic factors that are complicating such protection efforts.

“Clearly, the wolf . . . epitomizes, and suffers from, the dichotomy of man's emotions [about wild animals],” says Gilbert M. Grosvenor, National Geographic Society president and one of a cross-sectional

group attending a wolf symposium last month in Washington, D.C. The meeting, sponsored by the Washington, D.C.-based Defenders of Wildlife, focused on so-called “wolf recovery projects.” Mandated under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (which requires recovery plans for any animals listed as endangered), the controversial programs are the overall responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency's administrators, according to several symposium speakers, have been criticized by environmentalists, ranchers and biologists alike for their wolf recovery efforts.

As it now stands, the federal recovery program for one gray wolf subspecies, the eastern timber wolf, has three objectives: save the two wolf populations in northern Minnesota and on Lake Superior's Isle Royale, plus establish a stable population of about 100 wolves at a third location (most likely in Wisconsin or Michigan). Another recovery plan is being compiled for the Northern Rocky Mountain subspecies. Not all planning for the various wolf recovery projects is complete, but there are several programs either under way or being considered.

Most established is the program in Minnesota, the only state other than Alaska where the wolf, because of a stable population, is not considered “endangered.” Instead, Minnesota wolves (there are an estimated 1,200 of them) are listed as “threatened”—meaning the animals cannot be hunted for sport, but livestock-eating wolves can be eliminated under very strict rules.

The state's wolf control program—which is not under Fish and Wildlife Service purview—is considered a model project by many, but the road to recovery has been rough. An estimated 250 to 400 wolves are killed illegally each year in the state. And decisions on how to control

“bad” wolves came only after eight years of litigation, culminating in a U.S. District Court decision in 1984.

According to lawyer Brian O'Neill of Minneapolis, “the political experience in Minnesota . . . centered around the courtroom.” But, he adds, “the courtroom served as a forum for getting all the groups [with different opinions] together.” Helping swing public attitudes in favor of the wild wolf in Minnesota are plans for the International Wolf Center being built in economically depressed Ely, where tourists will be shown both the predatory and family-loving sides of the Eastern timber wolf.

Public opinion in Minnesota regarding recovery programs has had more time to settle than that in other proposed recovery sites. But Stephen R. Kellert of Yale University, who conducted surveys of public attitude toward wolves and other wildlife in Minnesota and elsewhere, concludes that “a deep-grained bias against predators” found mostly among ranchers, farmers and hunters in all potential recovery areas must be accommodated before recovery programs will be successful.

There is no doubt that the wolf is a predator, and likely to remain so. A major question is: How many wolf kills are acceptable? Another is whether they can be stopped without hindering recovery. There are 12,000 farms within the Minnesota wolves' range, says Fish and Wildlife ecologist Steven Fritts, who recently completed a five-year study of wolf depredation on livestock. On those farms are an estimated 230,000 cattle and 90,000 sheep, as well as thousands of turkeys raised in outdoor pens.

Fritts told those at the symposium that Minnesota wolf kills inexplicably peaked in 1981, with about 100 cows and calves and 240 sheep killed. Ordinarily, he says, about 10 animals are killed each year by wolf packs. Although owners of the animals are compensated by the govern-

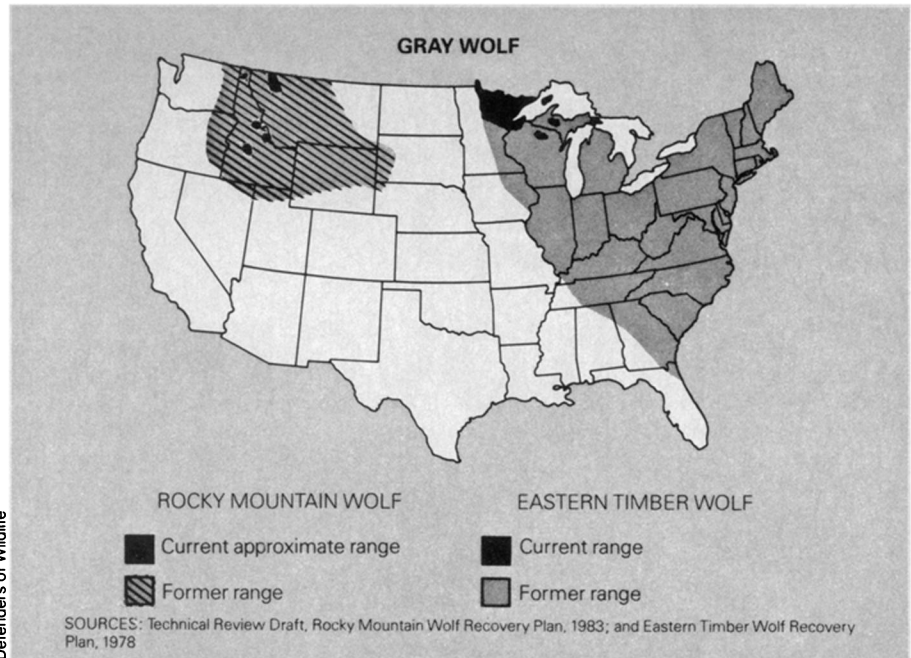
ment for their losses, the money doesn't soothe the savage feelings of those who have lost valuable stock animals. As Montana sheepgrower Joe T. Helle of Dillon said at last month's meeting, "we [ranchers] don't have to feed your wolves. . . . We like to market our own livestock at the proper time."

Despite the lessons learned from the Minnesota experience, a Northern Rocky Mountain wolf recovery project still in the planning stages has ignited an even larger bonfire of resistance from logging, hunting and agriculture interests, as well as state politicians, say scientists and environmentalists. In the tri-state area of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, there are two sites considered by biologists at the symposium to be prime locations for recovering the wolf subspecies: Yellowstone National Park and nearby public lands in Montana and Wyoming, and Montana's Glacier National Park and Bob Marshall Wilderness Area.

Currently there are no more wolves in Yellowstone Park, where poison and bounty hunters once were used to eliminate the animal. Biologists, who seek an "ecological wholeness" in the natural preserve by reintroducing the missing wolf, say they have set a goal of 10 breeding pairs (only one pair of wolves in a pack of three to 25 produces offspring). Where those wolves come from is a question debated between those who want wolves shipped in, and those — like Fish and Wildlife Director Frank H. Dunkle — who support a slow, natural migration of wolves down the Continental Divide from Canada and Glacier Park in northwestern Montana. In 1979, scientists radiotagged the first wolf in Montana near the Canadian border. By 1985, a pack of 12 had moved into Glacier Park from Canada, crisscrossing the mountains and covering a territory of over 2,000 square miles, according to biologist Robert Ream of the University of Montana in Missoula.

Just as the western landscape differs from that of the Eastern timber wolf's territory, so do some of the local

Wolves like these from the Arctic are both loving parents and feared predators.



Gray wolf territories in the 48 contiguous states have shrunk considerably since settlers began using land populated by wolf packs. An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 wolves still roam Alaska, where the animals are not considered threatened or endangered. But elsewhere in the United States, fewer than 1,300 gray wolves from two subspecies live in four or five northern states, whose wolf populations apparently were started by animals from Canada.

factors impinging on wolf recovery. Larger herds of livestock, for example, are less protected and allowed to range more freely in huge pastures, some of which are federally owned. (Wolves apparently killed two cattle May 8 near Glacier Park, the first such kills reported in the state in decades.)

With deer as the wolf's preferred meal, hunters in the area are equally concerned, fearful that a favorite source of sport and food may be depleted. "If the wolf is in the prey system, there will in the long run be fewer prey," says L. David Mech, a wolf expert with the Fish and Wildlife Service. "But the situation is nowhere near as dire as portrayed." Biologists also expect wolves to have minimal effect on the grizzly bear and on the 30,000 elk living in Yellowstone Park.

However, it isn't what the wolf does

inside a park that worries nearby residents like Helle, who says it is the wolf's killer instinct, not its right to avoid extinction, that angers those opposed to current recovery plans. In Italy, where wolves live within a few miles of downtown Rome, local shepherds use watchful eyes and trained dogs to protect their relatively small flocks. But in the United States, research on specially trained guard dogs, tracking systems and even fluttering plastic flags to frighten wolves has had mixed success in controlling predation.

Details of the Rocky Mountain wolf recovery project will come after more meetings between federal and local officials, as well as a probable environmental assessment report, says Dunkle. But out of the controversy may come an acceptable compromise allowable under the Endangered Species Act: a rarely used designation called "experimental population." Recently applied for the first time to a predator (a red wolf population to be released this summer in North Carolina), an experimental population is defined as one at a specific site that cannot be hunted — yet individual problem animals can be removed or destroyed.

Will the Genghis Khan image of a thrilling wolf hunt be replaced by an appreciation and tolerance of the wolf? While lawyers on both sides of the recovery issue hint at prolonged legal battles, biologists speak of a new "wolf fever" stirring romantic notions of the wild wolf. A Latin proverb warns *Homo homini lupus*: Man is a wolf to man. Yet how human are we willing to be to the wolf? □