Maintaining Protections for the Gray Wolf

Few animals evoke the wild like wolves. Majestic, rangy and highly social, wolves play a crucial role in driving evolution and helping calibrate nature's complex relationships.

Once — before bounties, a federal extermination program and expansive human settlement — wolves roamed freely throughout most of the United States. Scientists estimate there were once some 2 million of the animals living wild in North America.

By the 1960s, when wolves were finally protected under a precursor to the Endangered Species Act, they had been exterminated from all of the contiguous United States except a portion of Minnesota and Isle Royale National Park.

Protection under the Endangered Species Act helped wolves tremendously. But now, with recovery incomplete, many wolves may be prematurely removed from the endangered species list, and others persecuted even while ostensibly protected, the gray wolf is in renewed danger.

BACKGROUND

Gray wolf recovery under Endangered Species Act protection was a success in significant but limited regions. While it lasted it ensured, for two of the three gray wolf populations in the contiguous states, steady increases in numbers and distribution, along with benefits to their ecosystems. In the Great Lakes, wolf populations grew from a few hundred in the 1970s to around 5,000; they expanded their range from Minnesota to Wisconsin and Michigan. In the northern Rocky Mountains, natural migration from Canada and reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho led to more than 1,700 wolves across Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Washington and Oregon. In the Southwest, just five surviving Mexican gray wolves were saved between 1977 and 1980 and bred in captivity; some of their progeny were reintroduced and now number a few dozen in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico.

Despite these substantial gains, the job of wolf recovery is far from over. Wolves need connected populations for genetic sustainability, and natural

ecosystems need wolves; yet today wolves occupy less than 5 percent of their historic range. But progress has been arrested with the premature delisting of wolves in the northern Rockies and Great Lakes region, with no plan for recovery in broader areas and insufficient protections from local pressures to hunt or "control" wolves back to the brink of extinction.

In April 2011 Congress attached a rider to a must-pass budget bill that stripped Endangered Species Act protections from wolves in all of Montana and Idaho, the eastern third of Washington and Oregon, and a small portion of northern Utah — an unprecedented action that, for the first time in the history of the Act, removed a species from the endangered list by political fiat instead of science. Wolves were delisted in Wyoming, as well, in September 2012. The Fish and Wildlife Service also removed protections from wolves in the Great Lakes region. Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Minnesota and Wisconsin have begun public wolf hunting and/or trapping, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating with state agencies, is expanding its program of trapping, radio-collaring and releasing, then aerial gunning the pack-mates of these collared wolves — a program that, while wolves were protected by the Act, had been limited to those that preyed on livestock.

In the Southwest, Mexican gray wolves are undergoing inbreeding depression from small numbers, federal removal of genetically valuable wolves, and the Fish and Wildlife Service's refusal, despite scientists' urgent pleas, to release wolves into the wild. The inbreeding depression is lowering litter sizes and pup survival rates.

Now recovery for wolves across the country faces a new threat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is preparing to remove federal protections from gray wolves that remain on the endangered species list, excepting Mexican gray wolves.

Since the original wolf recovery plans were written in the 1980s, we've learned much more about wolves' behavior, ecology and needs. We know, for example, that returning wolves to ecosystems sets off a chain of events that benefits many species, including songbirds and beavers that gain from a return of streamside vegetation — which thrives in the absence of browsing elk that must move more often to avoid wolves — and pronghorn and foxes that are aided by wolves' control of coyote populations.

A mere 5,000 to 6,000 wolves occupy only about 5 percent of the animals' historic range. Establishing wolf populations in remaining habitat in the Pacific Northwest, California, Northeast, southern Rocky Mountains and elsewhere would secure a future for wolves and allow wolves to play their valuable ecological role in more of their former range (see fig. 1).

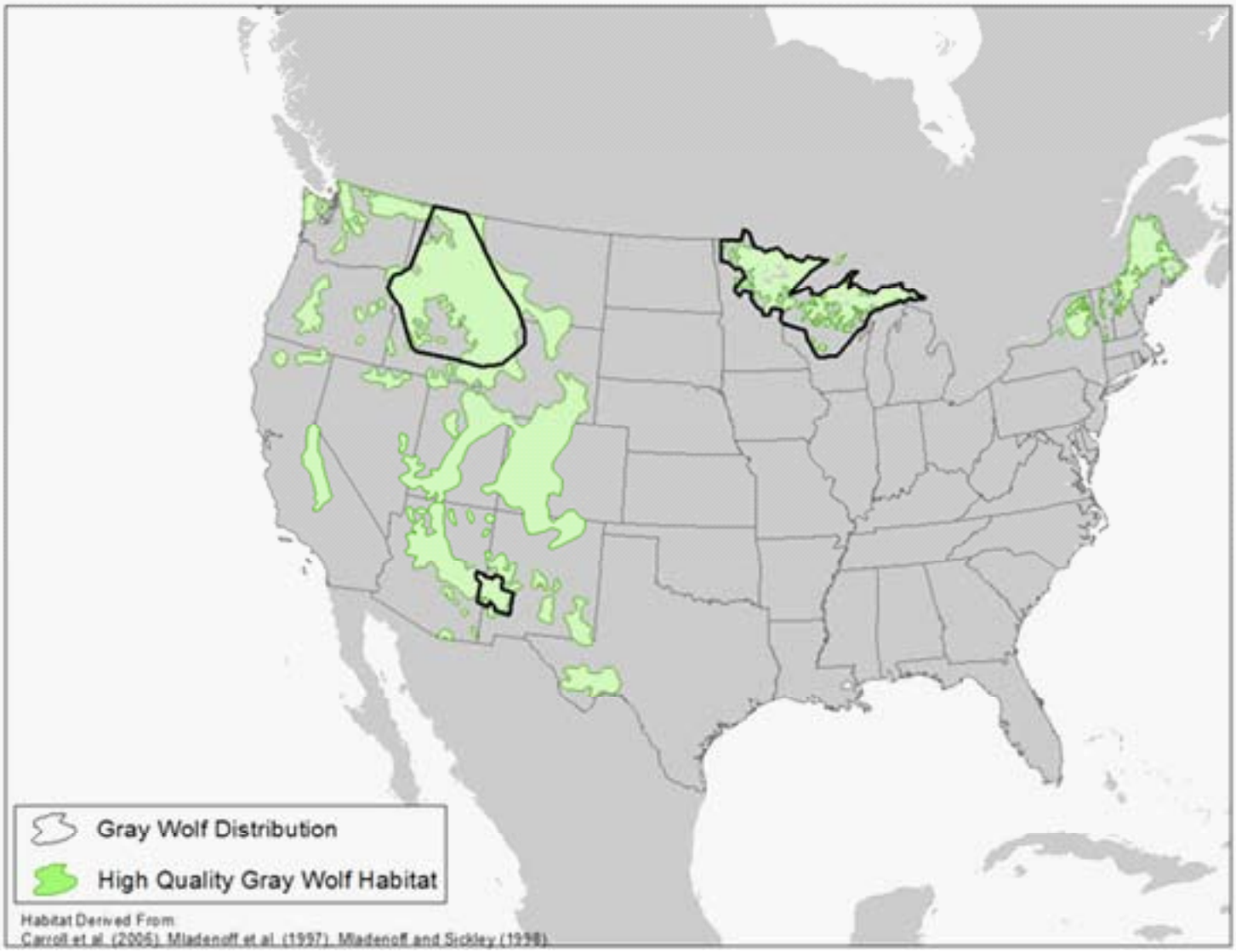

Figure 1. Existing gray wolf habitat in the United States.

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More information on gray wolves can be found on the Center for Biological Diversity's website: http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/gray_wolves/index.html.