

Owlcation

Reintroduction of the Gray Wolf: Pros and Cons

MRS. MENAGERIE • UPDATED: APR 19, 2024 12:24 PM EDT

How the Gray Wolf Became an Endangered Species

For eons, the native species of North America evolved into an entirely self-sustaining balance of predator, prey, and supporting habitat. This ecosystem thrived for countless ages without any intervention from humans.

In 1872, the first national park, Yellowstone, was established to preserve the natural environment and wildlife in this spectacular part of America. However, as early as 1884, an official eradication of large predatory species was put into effect by the state of Montana. It was decided that wolves and other predators—including mountain lions, bears, and coyotes—killed too many game animals, such as elk, buffalo, and pronghorn. The state offered \$1 per wolf killed.

The U.S. Biological Survey

In 1914, the U.S. Biological Survey was founded—a federally funded program whose main goal was to eradicate the wolves in Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding areas. The U.S. Biological Survey is still around today but has been renamed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Wolves were hunted, trapped, and poisoned, using strychnine on carcasses.

In 1926, the last two wolves in Yellowstone National Park were shot while feeding on a buffalo carcass. It is documented that the wolves were almost entirely eliminated from Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho by 1927.

Humans Created the Need for "Wildlife Management"

By 1935, biologists were already reporting an imbalance in the ecosystem. Overpopulation of grazing animals caused a significant decline in the new growth of native plants and trees. This, in turn, was causing erosion and a population reduction in birds, beavers, and other species dependent on trees and plants for food and habitat.

Federal and State funds were used to regulate the number of elk, deer, and bison by shooting or trapping them. At one time, the Paradise Valley (just North of Yellowstone National Park) held one elk herd with over 35,000 individuals.

The Federal Endangered Species Act

In 1966, the idea of wolf reintroduction was first presented to Congress by biologists. These scientists believed that because the ecosystem had developed with natural predators, it was destabilized without them. This imbalance resulted in over-grazing and significant habitat destruction in only 40 years—a drop in the bucket regarding nature and its evolution.

In 1973, the Federal Endangered Species Act was brought into existence; the gray wolf became protected under this new law in 1974.



Wolf Reintroduction in Yellowstone: A Complex Issue

Despite the controversy, the reintroduction of the gray wolf in Yellowstone National Park was approved in 1995, and

14 wolves from Canada were brought and released in three park locations. Almost 75 years after the last two wolves in Yellowstone were shot, the gray wolf was back. Over the next year, approximately 60 more wolves from Canada were brought and reintroduced in Yellowstone and central Idaho.

In 2000, U.S. Fish and Wildlife reported that the goal of establishing 30 breeding pairs of wolves in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming had been met. Based on this information, the USFWS claimed the gray wolf population was recovered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Many scientists and environmental groups disagreed, saying there were not enough breeding pairs for healthy genetics, and the wolves could not be considered fully recovered. The debate continued into the next decade.

On and Off the Protected List

In March 2008, the gray wolf was de-listed, and hunts were planned. Several environmental groups [sued the government](#), and in July of the same year, the U.S. District Court granted a preliminary injunction placing the wolf back on the protected list. The hunts for the fall of 2008 were suspended.

In March 2009, the gray wolf was [de-listed a second time](#). This time hunts commenced in Montana and Idaho, killing a total of 258 wolves.

Again, wildlife advocates sued the federal government, and again protections were restored to the wolves in August of 2010. The fall hunt for 2010, which had doubled the previous year's quota, was canceled.

"Research" Hunts and Federal Gray Areas

So far in 2011, "research" hunts have been used as a way to get around federal protection. Additionally, Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer encouraged Montanans to [shoot packs of wolves](#) guilty of preying on livestock or "hurting elk herds," regardless of the law. (In parts of Montana, it is legal to shoot wolves to protect livestock.) Federal agents (paid with U.S. tax dollars) have been authorized to shoot over 1,000 "problem" wolves in the last few years.

A Different Point of View

Not everyone missed the wolves. Hard-working livestock owners, of which there are many in Montana, battled one less obstacle in the absence of these adept predators. Additionally, for hunters (and women), the new abundance of game animals had become a dream come true. The aforementioned Paradise Valley became a prodigious elk hunting mecca hosting over 3,200 hunters annually.

For decades, Gardiner, Montana—a town within the northern boundaries of Yellowstone National Park—held the unique "Late Elk Hunt" for six weeks in January and February just to control the size of the local elk herd. This was, and still is, a significant source of revenue for the state through hunting licenses as well as increased tourism. The controversy over the pros and cons of wolf reintroduction was now in full motion.

How Can Humans and Wolves Better Coexist?

This emotionally charged argument has continued for decades. To some, it is as straightforward as "anti" and "pro" wolf. The "anti" is supposedly the ranchers trying to protect their livestock and livelihood from an ever-increasing threat, the hunters choosing to take their hunting trips elsewhere, or the businesses losing revenue because fewer hunters means less business. (I happen to fall into this last category myself.)

The "pro" wolf groups are mostly wildlife advocates and environmental groups such as Earthjustice and Defenders of Wildlife, who fear that if the wolves are not federally protected, they will surely be mismanaged, over-hunted, and sadly exterminated a second time.

Should the Gray Wolf Be on the Endangered Species List?

There is, however, a third school of thought. Some scientists who started as advocates for keeping the gray wolf on the Endangered Species List have changed their tune over the past decade. The recent opinion seems to be that the wolves have recovered to the point that they, like other wildlife, need to be managed by local programs and not protected by federal law. If they continue to be protected under the Endangered Species Act, the result will be human/wolf conflicts continuing to escalate until the wolf comes out with the short end of the stick.

These scientists assert that wolves have a minimal impact on elk populations, based on a 2010 study released by Idaho Fish and Game. According to this and other studies, the elk numbers have not been substantially reduced. Rather, the migration patterns of the elk are changing as they attempt to avoid wolf-populated areas.

Additionally, they dismiss the rumors of "bigger, more aggressive wolves" as an exaggeration. Still, they are proponents of delisting the gray wolf. Instead, they suggest protection programs like those currently used to manage bear populations. (This is another topic for a lengthy discussion.)

Is State-Level Management the Answer?

Some conservationists, such as The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, propose responsible state-level management involving:

- an established minimum gray wolf population, monitored by federal agencies such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife;
- monetary aid for ranchers who lose livestock; and
- regulated, fair-chase hunting (i.e., no poisoning or trapping) of wolves in numbers based on U.S. Fish and Wildlife reports.

Revenue from hunting licenses could be used to help fund state wolf management programs. If the wolves are delisted, federal funds will no longer be available.

What Is Happening Now?

This ongoing, decades-long battle is exceedingly complex—a mess we brought upon ourselves a century ago when we decided to take it upon ourselves to "manage" mother nature. In the Montana Capitol, a 2018 resolution urging the removal of the Gray Wolf from the Endangered Species List—known as the [Manage Our Wolves Act](#)—passed the House with 99 of 100 votes. As of 2017, there were an estimated [900 wolves in Montana](#).

In late 2020, the Trump administration removed the gray wolf from the endangered list, announcing that the species’ [“exceeded all conservation goals for recovery.”](#) This legislation resulted in the killing of more than 500 gray wolves in Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, a hunting spree that also disrupted a long-term Yellowstone research project to better understand how wolves contribute to and impact ecosystems.

A U.S. District Judge [partially reversed this decision](#) in February 2022. However, the ruling only covers 44 of the lower 48 states and does not cover the northern Rocky Mountains of Idaho, Montana, or Wyoming.

This content is accurate and true to the best of the author’s knowledge and is not meant to substitute for formal and individualized advice from a qualified professional.