The Mexican Grey Wolf Plan

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There is a plan to return to the wild some captive grey wolves, offspring of a single female captured in Mexico in 1980. (Fish & Wildlife Serv. 1982, Bednarz. 1988). The location suggested is the White Sands Missile Range in south central New Mexico. (Bednarz, 1989). The Range is roughly 100 miles north-south and thirty miles east-west. Running north through the Range for about seventy miles is a narrow mountain range, the San Andres. Further north are the Oscura Mountains, which are lower and not as precipitous as the San Andres (Neher and Bailey, 1976).

Fig. 1. Location of White Sands Missile Range.

The original recommendation suggested an area of at least 5,000 square miles. The Range contains 3,200 square miles, and was found to be the largest area of federal land in the former range of the Mexican gray wolf.

The foothills of the mountains are a lovely black grama grass range with sideoats grama on the better sites, while the flats are gypsum deposits that support alkali sacaton on stabilized portions. Some areas are sand dunes, such as are found on the integral White Sands National Monument. The pinyon-juniper type (about 613,000 acres in extent) is important as wolf habitat since it supports the deer herd, and the small antelope herd (Neher and Bailey, 1976: Bednarz, 1989).

This wolf no longer occurs in the United States, and may be found in small numbers (ten-fifty) in the mountains of northern Mexico (Fish and Wildlife, 1982). It has been classified as a rare and endangered species in the United States.

Fig. 2. Locations of the San Andres and the Oscura Mountains.

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The wolf has long been considered a terrible predator intent upon destruction. So why try to reintroduce such an animal? The Endangered Species Act requires that any particular species in danger of extinction be fully protected and all possible means used to safeguard and increase the species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is charged with this task.

A pregnant wolf captured in northern Mexico in 1980 gave birth, was bred back to one of her sons, then bred again to another captured wolf who was probably another of her sons (Fish and Wildlife, 1982). Today, there are about forty grey wolves held in zoos and Fish and Wildlife Service breeding stations. In addition there are, mostly in private zoos, captive grey wolves. Most of these have changed drastically over the years until they no longer resemble the wild grey wolf. Still, in a pinch, some of these wolves may be used in the breeding program to increase the gene pool available (Fish and Wildlife, 1982).

Inquiry by the Fish and Wildlife Service found most zoos are not interested in grey wolves. Only two have volunteered to help in raising and breeding the grey wolf but only for a short period of time and only for release. For the Fish and Wildlife people, time is running out, especially since the Rare and Endangered Species Act must be reapproved by Congress in 1994. If the wolf is to be released into the wild, it must be soon (Parsons, 1991). Should the attempt fail, a few will be kept in pens by the government to preserve the gene pool.

Studies of wolves have been a popular avocation for years. The early studies concentrated on the northern or white wolf in Canada and Alaska and most of our information on wolves comes from these studies.

Mr. McBride (1980) is my authority for the following description of the habits of the Mexican grey wolf. Since the 1930's, the grey wolf in Mexico has lived on an almost exclusive diet of beef, with an occasional horse or colt thrown in. Mexican cattle will try to protect a calf, so the wolf does not waste energy trying to cut out a calf from a herd, it goes for the yearlings. With the large supply of beef at hand, the grey wolf does not appear to eat rodents, it makes one meal from one steer. Even if last night's prey is still alive, the grey ignores it and goes after fresh animal. The grey chases an animal, tears out a big piece of hide and flesh from a hind quarter, usually on the inside. After a few bites from those enormously powerful jaws, the steer can no longer run.

McBride,(1980) who lived and worked against the wolf in Mexico for several years, describes the wolf's uncanny ability to avoid traps. There were few wolves in Mexico even in the early 1980's but they took a terrific toll. One 74 pound female wolf killed 110 steers and heifers in a two year period. Another killed 18 steers in a month.

The Fish and Wildlife people understand this and plan to make every effort to prevent a grey wolf from leaving the White Sands Missile Range to kill local livestock (Bednarz, 1989; Parsons, 1991).

They hope the range will be large enough and furnish enough native prey so the wolves will stay on the range. Elaborate plans have been made to fit each wolf with a radio-collar so it can be monitored (Parsons, 1991). The Fish and Wildlife people are depending heavily on methods developed in the introduction of the red wolf (actually a coyote-wolf hybred) in the eastern U.S. (Bednarz, 1988; Bednarz, 1989; Fish and Wildlife, 1982; McBride, 1980).

The grey wolf 'recovery' (i.e. planting) plan envisions taking a bred pair of wolves to White Sands Missile Range and placing them in a stoutly fenced pen. When the female whelps, this area will be home to the pups and the pups are expected stay in that area. The parents will no longer be fed a dog food-cat food mixture, but dead game animals from the area will be tossed into the pen. Since the biologists think the wolves will eat mule deer in the wild, this animal will most likely be the one fed to the wolves. As the pups grow and become stronger, live deer will be placed into the pen for the pups to chase and practice killing. After

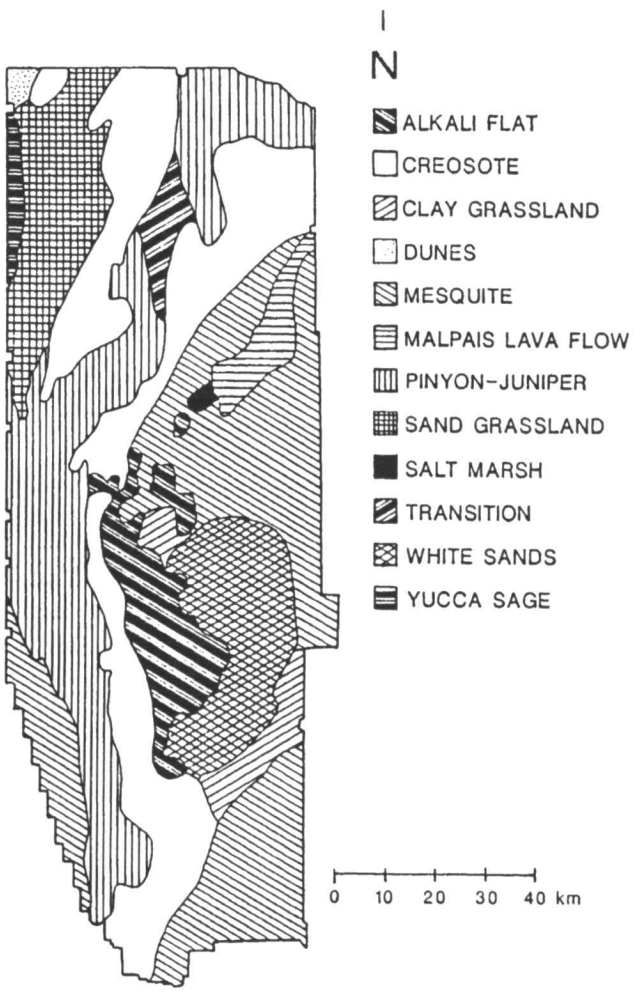

Fig. 3. *General vegetation cover map of White Sands Missile Range (D. Taylor, unpublished* data).

six months or so, when the pups are nearly full grown, the parents will be moved to another pen to raise another set of pups and the original pen will be left with the gate open so the pups can roam and find their own food (Parsons, 1991). There is a general assumption that the freed wolves will eat venison.

The effect of some fifty mountain lions on the mountains is largely ignored in the present plan. The on-going study of these lions is quite intense. Mountain lions eat deer at a rate of one deer per week. (Barker, 1946). Simple multiplication shows a harvest by lions of some 2,500 deer a year. No firm census of deer is available. However, the young lions seem to move off the Range when mature, which may indicate there is not room for additional lions. There are plans by the New Mexico Fish and Game Commission to capture and move some lions off the Range, so perhaps a little slack will develop here. If the wolves cannot or will not elect to chase the fleet deer through the rough rocky steep slopes of the mountain, and here the wolf is not at his best, then some other large herbivore will be chosen. There are presently some dozen antelope on the Range, but they stay on the open flats on the west side of the San Andres mountains and frequently drift onto the Jornada Experimental Range, forced by the herd of feral horses which has grown from about two hundred head to over one thousand three hundred head (Personal communication) which have preempted the waters on the east side of the mountain.

It seems a bit far-fetched to assume that the wolf will take the antelope as a primary food source. Wolves can run 25 mph, but the fleet antelope can easily our-run them. Another possible prey is the oryx or gemsbock, an import from Africa that has become a resident on the Range. There are about 600 oryx in the area (Personal communication). The oryx has a lovely long pair of horns with which to fight a predator and this may be one reason that the mountain lions seldom take an oryx. (Personal communication). The oryx is able to live without free water and can range far from wolf habitat. (Personal communication and an undated study of gemsbock on the Range.).

There are perhaps 25 bighorn sheep on the spires of the mountain, certainly not in wolf habitat (Bednarz, 1989). That leaves only one large herbivore, the feral horse, which occurs in great plenty, is easy to catch and kill. Due to threatened tourist boycotts by wild horse organizations, the horses continue to multiply.

An important impact of the grey wolf introduction plan that has been largely ignored is that of the effect upon the vegetation. Wolves do not eat much vegetation, yet an effect may be there. It is generally agreed by wildlife scientists that the Mexican grey wolf will not tolerate coyotes within its range (Fish and Wildlife 1982 and Personal Communication). The mainstay of the coyote diet is rodent; mice, rats, ground squirrels. These small herbivores eat green grass and weeds when they are available, but after the grasses have dried and lost nutrients from weathering, the rodent turns to seed-caches for food. These seeds, mostly from plants like mesquite and four-wing salt bush, are laboriously collected, one cheek pouch full at a time and buried an inch or so deep. The population of rodents is limited by the coyote and weather patterns. Coyotes have been found with as many as thirty mice in-stomach.

When (if?) the planned thirty to forty grey wolves are established on the Range, wildlife technicians agree that the coyotes will be killed or driven away. This will result in a population explosion for the rodents, many more seed caches will be buried. Some caches are forgotten, some are abandoned when a rattlesnake recycles a rat into the environment. The seeds can await, perhaps for years, a proper combination of temperature and moisture for germination. Almost all brush plants in the semi-desert or desert sprout from rodent seed caches. Over time, the land may well change from grass land to brush land. This effect may be hastened by the overgrazing of the enormous horse herd.

Occasionally Man can take an action that will have far reaching effects. The reintroduction of the Mexican grey wolf may well be one such step.

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