Gray wolf
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A KEYSTONE SPECIES: WILL THE WOLF SURVIVE?

An ambitious wolf reintroduction bill aims to have paws back on the ground by 2024, nearly 80 years after *Canis lupus* was declared extinct in Colorado. By Christopher Pitts

PERHAPS NO OTHER animal represents the wilderness more strikingly, for better or worse, than the wolf. Forever untamed yet uncannily familiar, impressively powerful yet hunted to near extinction, fairy-tale villain and howl-at-the-moon hero, wolves will always mean different things to different people.

Thus, in November 2020, when Colorado put legislation to reintroduce wolves to the state on the ballot, it came as no surprise that the vote came down to the wire. The ballot initiative (Proposition 114) ultimately passed, but with a margin of less than 2% (50.9% to 49%, or roughly 57,000 votes).

For political pundits, it was yet another example of America's rural–urban divide (the proposition passed in large part thanks to the overwhelming support along the heavily populated Front Range), but the roots of the conflict go much deeper than contemporary culture wars. The fate of the wolf, it seems, remains inextricably tied to Americans' understanding of public land.

Public Land

Colorado, like much of the West, has enormous tracts of public land: some 36% of the state is owned by the federal government. Of this, just two agencies, the National Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), manage the vast majority. As the US expanded into the arid West, displacing both Indigenous peoples and native species, the development of the vast tracts of new territory became a principal concern. Core industries – mining, logging and ranching – became tied to federal and state land, and their growth was supported by an age-old Western belief: that natural resources were put on earth for us to use.

But even as the government strove to make public land suitable for these industries – by building railroads to facilitate extraction, by driving natural predators like wolves to extinction, by clearcutting old-growth forests and by slaughtering millions of bison and replacing them with cattle – another value system was coming

into being: the conservation movement. Advocates like John Muir argued for the preservation of wilderness for its own sake, for a sustainable way of life that did not necessarily result in the unbridled destruction of the environment.

This core conflict, extraction versus conservation, has been a crucial part of every major debate on land use in the West since the late 1800s. You'll see it in the continuing discussions over new national parks and monuments, endangered species, logging rights, livestock grazing, hunting and fishing, and even recreation.

So when it comes to wolf reintroduction in Colorado, the essential question is this: where is there a protected wilderness area large enough to support a healthy population of wolves? And the answer is: nowhere. The key word in that sentence is 'protected.' Unlike Wyoming and Montana, which are home to the massive Yellowstone National Park, there are few true wilderness areas in Colorado. When you're hiking through one of the many unspoiled tracts of land here, like the Flat Tops in northern Colorado, this statement may seem hard to believe, but even these areas, which are officially designated as environmentally protected, are still livestock-friendly – that is, ranchers can secure permits and leases to graze cattle and sheep here for a relatively small fee.

This means that as wolves return to Colorado, interactions with livestock are virtually guaranteed, because both groups of animals will be sharing the same public land and wilderness landscapes. Environmentalists argue that these interactions can be minimized through

prevention (the removal of dead livestock from the landscape is the easiest and most effective way to prevent wolves from becoming habituated to cattle), though ranchers tend to prefer the easier solution (shoot the wolves). The state government, meanwhile, which Colorado voters have tasked with implementing the reintroduction program, has opted for the most common compromise throughout the West: to financially compensate ranchers for any losses.

Meanwhile, the wolves themselves didn't even wait for the state's plan to go into effect: since the proposition was first put on the ballot in 2018, two packs migrated naturally into the state from Wyoming. The first, in Moffat County, mysteriously disappeared; the fate of the second, in Jackson County, has been watched closely on both sides – local ranchers have continued to lose cattle, while three of the wolves that crossed into Wyoming, where no legal protections exist, were believed to have been shot. Since wolves are naturally migrating to Colorado anyway, some people are questioning why humans need to be involved in the reintroduction at all.

A Keystone Species

The answer, conservationists say, is protection. A carefully managed pack, fitted with radio collars, will be easier to track and study. According to the first draft of the reintroduction plan, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) will release 10 to 15 wolves per year west of the Continental Divide, at least 60 miles from state borders, beginning in 2024 and extending over the next three to five years. The first release area will be along the I-70 corridor between Vail and Glenwood Springs, and will likely consist of wolves from Wyoming, Montana or Idaho.

Though the CPW plan has been roundly criticized on both sides, it is arguably better than no plan at all. Through feedback from a Technical Working Group (experts in conservation and management strategies) and a Stakeholder Advisory Group (representing the viewpoints of different impacted communities), CPW developed a strategy that aims to take all scientific, social and economic factors into consideration.

Nevertheless, some conservation groups argue that the latest iteration of the plan

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is proof Colorado does not actually want the plan to be successful, specifically pointing at the population threshold of 200, after which wolves will be removed from the state's endangered species list and the possibility of wolf hunting might be reintroduced. If wildlife management officials were serious about maintaining a healthy level of wolves, they say, that number would be closer to 750 (for comparison, France, which is much more densely settled, now supports a wolf population of over 600 in the Pyrenees).

And a healthy population level is important not only for the survival of the gray wolf. It may also have a positive impact on their southern cousin, the Mexican wolf, whose gene pool diversity has reached alarmingly low levels. Ecologists hope that the small populations of Mexican wolves will eventually interbreed with gray wolves in the southern Rockies, where there is a natural overlap of territory.

'Simply put, wolves are essential to the balance of nature.'

Michael Robinson, Center for Biological Diversity

As Michael Robinson from the Center for Biological Diversity stated: 'Simply put, wolves are essential to the balance of nature.' Apex predators do more than just control populations of other mammals, keeping them at healthy sizes and reducing disease and overgrazing. The impact of a keystone species like the wolf ripples outward and has an important impact on the entire ecosystem. In Yellowstone, for example, wolves have demonstrated that they are essential to the restoration of riparian forests, which large herds of elk had previously grazed down to nothing. The simple act of bringing wolves back to Yellowstone resulted in the reappearance of a number of different species: trees (willows and alders), animals (beavers and foxes) and a variety of birds, fish and amphibians. Wolves also keep their cousins the coyotes in check, counterintuitively helping to boost numbers of lynx, snowshoe hares and pronghorn antelope, on which coyotes feed.

The Call of the Wild

It wasn't so long ago that most Americans held a markedly different view of the wilderness. Apex predators were not only viewed as serious threats, capable of killing livestock and even people, but were often depicted as the very embodiment of evil itself – that which challenged humankind's God-given right to dominion over the natural world. Following the large-scale decimation of their natural prey in the 19th century, wolves fulfilled these expectations and turned to cattle and sheep to survive. Spurred on by government bounties, Americans subsequently eradicated the gray wolf from over 95% of its historic range in the US by the 1930s; by 1945, they were gone from Colorado entirely: hunted, trapped and poisoned into local extinction.

But public perception of the wilderness has evolved over the decades: for many of us, it's no longer something to be feared or conquered so much as a place to protect and appreciate. In more than one survey, respondents declared that humans have a moral obligation to restore endangered species to their natural habitat, arguing that animals like the wolf have as much right to live on the land as we do.

But even if Americans are more conservation-minded than ever, there is still plenty of skepticism about whether or not wolf reintroduction is a good thing, as evidenced by Colorado's 2020 vote. Ranchers, of course, have a legitimate concern over the welfare of their cattle, sheep and horses. And ranching is big business: according to the Colorado Department of Agriculture, approximately 60% of the state's $7.1 billion of agriculture-related revenue comes from livestock ($4.26 billion).

And, of course, there are those communities where the buffer between the human and the wild has increasingly disappeared – communities who know first-hand the damage a hungry bear can cause to a house, car or chicken coop, or who have lost a beloved pet to an opportunistic coyote or mountain lion. Many are right to wonder what sort of impact wolves might have on their lives. But the flip side of that question is important, too: ultimately, how will we as a species impact the long-term survival of the wolf?