

El Paso Sierra Club Group

Return of the Wolf to Texas Education Initiative

The Issue

Historically, Mexican wolves were distributed across portions of the southwestern United States and northern and central Mexico. In the United States, this range included eastern, central, and southern Arizona; southern New Mexico; and western Texas. Prior to the extinction of *Canis lupus baileyi* in the wild, the last confirmed sightings of Mexican wolves in the United States were in 1970 when two wolves were trapped and killed in West Texas. One wolf was documented on the Cathedral Mountain Ranch approximately 17 miles south of Alpine, Texas and 64 miles north of Big Bend National Park (approximately 230 miles southeast of El Paso - see picture of Cathedral Mountain on the cover of [facebook.com/returnthewolftotexas](https://www.facebook.com/returnthewolftotexas)). A second wolf was trapped and killed on the Joe Neal Ranch about 10 miles southwest of Sanderson, Texas about 60 miles northeast of the park.

The Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan is managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). At the end of 2015, the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team counted a minimum of 97 Mexican grey wolves in the wild of New Mexico and Arizona. USFWS has never conducted a comprehensive habitat analysis of the West Texas area as a potential site for reintroduction of the wolf. A 2006 study that looked at strategies for regional reintroductions of wolves in the southwest included a habitat restoration scenario chart projecting that in 2025 the West Texas area just north of Big Bend National Park will have about 70% of the potential for wolf restoration as the state of New Mexico.

Why is the wolf not on the conservation radar screen of Texas?

According to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department “Reintroduction efforts of captive-bred individuals have been difficult to initiate due to residual fears for livestock and people, as well as a lack of large, remote tracts of suitable habitat.” TPWD does not provide any scientific data to support their belief that there is no suitable wolf habitat in Texas and Carter Smith, Executive Director of TPWD, has not responded to correspondence asking the department to clarify. It is the responsibility of TPWD to oversee wildlife restoration efforts in the State of Texas in cooperation with other government agencies. For example, TPWD is currently helping to restore game fish and pronghorn.

In response to the Southwestern Gray Wolf Management Plan review of December 17, 2012 TPWD stated there are no plans to reintroduce wolves in Texas and that State law prohibits the release of wolves in Texas. **Sec. 63.102. WOLVES.** (a) No person may possess, transport, receive, or release a live wolf in this state. (5620) (b) Subsection (a) does not apply to the transportation of a wolf by a state or county official while performing an official duty or to the possession or transportation of a wolf by the owner or agent of a licensed circus, zoo, or menagerie for exhibition or scientific purposes. (5621) The code does not include details explaining if it was written to prevent a private citizen or group from releasing a live wolf. If TPWD and the USFWS agreed to a reintroduction program the law could be amended as it was in the past.

In addressing the possibility of wolves naturally dispersing or wandering into Texas from neighboring areas where wolves have been released, including New Mexico and Mexico, TPWD states that the plan outlines options for dealing with nuisance wolves that might naturally disperse into Texas. TPWD does not address the possibility of wolves not being nuisance wolves and does not discuss how any wolves that might enter Texas are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

At this time the only **hope for wolf restoration in Texas** is the possibility of successfully reintroduced wolves in Mexico dispersing into Texas. According to a USFWS (January 29-30, 2015) email from Jeff Humphrey “if wolf enters Texas from Mexico it would be fully endangered and we would not try to retrieve it”. On the other hand if a wolf entered Texas from the current recovery area “any Mexican wolves entering Texas, from

either Mexico or the U.S. Experimental Population, would be fully protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As stated in our newly revised rule (under section 10(j) of the ESA), we retain the discretion to collect any Mexican wolves that leave the expanded MWEPA (Arizona & New Mexico).”

When asked about how the USFW would respond if wolves made it into **Guadalupe Mountains National Park** Humphrey responded "I'm not certain how we'd proceed if a wolf moves into Texas from Mexico without passing through the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA). However, we noted in our National Environmental Policy Act NEPA Record of Decision the National Park Service's intention to require us to seek their permitted approval to remove any Mexican wolves from NPS administered lands. Ultimately, NPS' and our determination to retain any Mexican wolves dispersing into Guadalupe Mountains National Park would likely hinge on whether sufficient wolf habitat, including sufficient ungulate prey, exists.”

Why is Wolf Restoration Texas Important?

Returning this apex predator will greatly benefit our environment in many ways by helping to maintain the balance of nature and restoring the biodiversity of Texas. For example, scientific studies at Yellowstone National Park where wolves have been carefully monitored since they were reintroduced to the ecosystem nearly 20 years ago clearly show numerous benefits to the environment.

The return of wolves to the wilds of Texas will also help to maintain the current growth of Texas' dynamic travel and tourism industry and its important contributions to the state economy. Texas is a premier destination for domestic and international travelers where travel totaled an estimated \$70.5 billion in 2014 supporting 630,000 jobs across the state. Reintroduction of wolves to Texas will positively impact ecotourism in the state and will greatly benefit Texas economically. For example, a study led by University of Montana economist John Duffield showed that visitors who come to Yellowstone to see wolves contribute roughly \$35.5 million annually to the regional economy.

Millions of Texans are proud of their natural heritage and want to restore and protect Texas habitat and wildlife.

Proposed Solution

Build a successful grassroots advocacy movement calling upon the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to lead an effort in Texas in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, West Texas communities and private land owner stakeholders, in developing a scientifically reviewed plan to return the wolf to the wilds of Texas.

We should focus on these 8 key steps for a successful grassroots advocacy campaign.

- Set SMART goals.
- Create the strategy.
- Clearly communicate.
- Use new media.
- Get fund raising.
- Build coalitions.
- Organize communities.
- Engage policymakers.

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Learn more:

Fish and Wildlife Service Mexican Wolf Recovery Program

<https://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/>

Lobos of the Southwest News

<http://mexicanwolves.org/>

Return of the Wolf to Texas Education Initiative

<https://ricklobello.wordpress.com/texas-wolves/>

<https://www.facebook.com/returnthewolftotexas/>