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Abstract

“Dogged History: The Mexican Wolf and its Near Extinction”

The past few centuries have witnessed the extinction and extirpation of an increasing number of animal species and populations. Many scholars suggest we might be experiencing the early stages of a mass extinction—the disappearance of 50 percent or more of all species worldwide. As a crucial center for global biodiversity, Latin America offers illustrative cases of the current global biodiversity crisis. The Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*) is one such case.

By the 1970s, the Mexican wolf had been reduced to a fraction of its former territory and a few survivors. Some scattered individuals endured in Durango and Chihuahua, while probably none remained in the U.S. Southwest. This was the result of decades of relentless extermination campaigns supported by the Mexican and U.S. governments. Then, in 1976, the Mexican wolf was granted protection under the new Endangered Species Act. A recovery plan was soon negotiated between the two countries and the last remaining Mexican wolves were captured in northern Mexico and moved to a U.S. facility to start a captive breeding program. By the early twenty-first century, about 100 individuals roamed small areas, mostly in Arizona and New Mexico. A few years later, wolves were reintroduced in Mexico and their small population (fewer than forty) seems to be growing. How do we understand such reversal in fortune? Why did the Mexican and U.S. governments decide to save a carnivore long considered a threat to ranching interests?

I argue that two main changes—one scientific, the other economic—help explain this policy shift. Conservation science that actively promoted the extermination of “harmful” or predatory species—among them wolves—fell into academic disrepute in the 1940s and 1950s. A new paradigm, that of modern ecology, became dominant. The novel approach emphasized the key role that predators played in every ecosystem. Additionally, continued industrialization and urbanization on both sides of the border increasingly undermined the political leverage of ranching interests in the region. In the case of Mexico, the cattle-raising frontier moved from the arid north to the tropical lowlands in the south, initiating there a period of rapid deforestation that continues to this day. This change, however, made it more politically feasible to implement a costly and long-term recovery program for wolves in its historic range in northern Mexico.