

Wolf Reintroduction in the Adirondacks

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Abstract

Descendants of the European settlers eliminated gray wolves from Adirondack Park over one hundred years ago. They should be reintroduced because they would benefit tourism in the park, increase the overall population of gray wolves, and help balance the region's ecosystem. The advantages to their reintroduction outweigh the disadvantages.

Keywords: ecosystem, Adirondack Park, gray wolves, reintroduction, tourism

Executive Summary

Currently, there are no gray wolves in most of the lower forty-eight states of the United States, including Adirondack Park in New York State. At one time, however, they could be found throughout the entire North American Continent. European settlers and their descendants wiped them out. The settlers brought with them the mistaken idea that wolves were going to kill all of the domestic livestock and wild game upon which the settlers depended for survival. This fear drove them to shoot, poison, and trap the wolves.



In the last twenty years, people's attitudes toward wolves have changed. When it was placed on the endangered species list, the wolf was looked at differently. People became more aware of environmental concerns and the wolf's role in keeping the ecosystem balanced. During this period, the suggestion was made to reintroduce wolves into areas they had once populated, including Adirondack Park in New York State.

For the wolves to be reintroduced, the Department of Environmental Conservation would need the support of people living in the area. The Federal Government and Defenders of Wildlife or other private organizations would provide the money needed for the reintroduction. Once they were reintroduced, the DEC would be in charge of managing the wolf population while the organization Defenders of Wildlife would be in charge of reimbursing farmers for any livestock killed by the wolves.

I recommend the wolves be reintroduced. While there are some disadvantages in reintroducing the wolves, the advantages far outweigh them.

2.1 Introduction

At one time, the gray wolf lived throughout much of North America, ranging from the Arctic in the north to the middle of Mexico in the South. However, when the European settlers came here, the wolves caused depredations to their livestock. This caused them to develop a general fear and loathing towards the wolves. In the end, they and their descendants wiped out all the wolves from most of the contiguous forty-eight states.



In just the last two decades, we have begun to realize the importance of the wolves on their surrounding ecosystems. There is, however, an extremely low likelihood that gray wolves will naturally recolonize areas like Adirondack Park on their own. Thus, proposals have been made for reintroducing the wolves into Adirondack Park. I believe reintroduction is a policy well worth carrying out.

2.2 Problem Definition/Historical Background

2.2.1 Extermination of the Wolves


In the early 1700s, sheep farming was started in the settled areas, and soon the wolves were causing livestock depredation. The settlers wanted to protect their sheep, so they started an eradication program. Its goal was to extirpate the wolves from everywhere, even places that didn't have livestock. Every state offered bounties for dead wolves that ranged between \$20 and \$50 per wolf (Sharpe 2001). The people ended up killing the wolves by shooting, poisoning, and trapping them. They were easy to get rid of because they are very territorial and live in packs. Once you find one wolf, you know where the rest of them are and are thereby able to kill the entire pack. In 1893, the last killing of a wild wolf occurred in the Adirondack Mountains.



The gray wolves today probably wouldn't ever recolonize Adirondack Park on their own because of the new extensive agricultural lands, busy roads, and St. Lawrence Seaway between them and the nearest natural wolf populations in Ontario and Quebec, Canada. If a lone wolf did make it to the Adirondacks from Canada, there wouldn't be any other wolves with which it could breed. This might lead the wolf to interbreed with coyotes in the area. So the only way of reaching the goal of establishing a pure wolf population would be reintroduction.

This option should be considered because Adirondack Par is missing its top predator. The gray wolf would balance the natural ecosystem by keeping the prey populations in check through producing a stronger, healthier prey base. When the wolves were removed, small, more generalized predators were allowed to increase their numbers, range, and exploitation of food sources. The coyote is a good example of this.

2.2.2 Gray Wolf

The gray wolf is often called the timberwolf because it frequently lives in the forest. It was once distributed all throughout North America from the low Arctic of Canada and Alaska to the high plateaus of Mexico. However, now they can be found only in a few northern states and occupy approximately one percent of their former home range. The gray wolf is the largest of about forty-one wild species within the dog family in North America, and it is most known for its low, mournful howl. 

They range in size from 26" to 38" shoulder height and 39" to 80" in length. They can weigh anywhere between 57 and 130 pounds. Even though they are called gray wolves, their coats can range in color from gray to brown and from white to jet-black. It has been said that

they appear to be quite similar to large German Shepherd dogs. They both have pointed muzzles, erect ears, bush tails, and moderately long legs.

The gray wolf can live approximately ten years in the wild and are very social animals that live in packs where a dominant hierarchy exists. This means that out of a pack that ranges from two to eight members, only one pair can lead. They are known as the alpha members and are the only ones that mate and bear young. When the four to five pups are born in early April to early May, the entire pack helps out in raising them. They hunt at night and feed primarily on large hoofed mammals such as deer, caribou, elk, and moose. However, they sometimes feed on berries, birds, beavers, fish, and insects.

2.2.3 Adirondack Park

The park is in northern New York State and was created in 1885 because of an act of legislature. It brought into existence a huge six million acre park, which is the largest park outside of Alaska and equals the state of Vermont in size. Then, in 1894, the New York State constitution was amended to say that some of the park must remain “forever kept as wild forest lands.” In other words, the land couldn’t be leased, sold, exchanged, or taken by any corporation, public or private, or have the timber sold, removed, or destroyed. The park has no check-in points, no tollhouses, nor ticket booths for people to register when arriving or leaving. Also, the park boundary is not fenced, blazed, or posted, but is designated on most maps. The lands inside the park look the same as lands immediately surrounding it do. It has been estimated that there are 130,000 permanent and almost 200,000 seasonal residents within the 12 counties and 105 townships while there are approximately 6 million visitors to the park annually (Sharpe 2001).



Initial studies show that Adirondack Park has areas that would meet the requirements for a wolf population. Those include areas that have few people, low density, and adequate prey density. Adirondack Park therefore is a good location for reintroduction.

2.2.4 Why Reintroduce?

Wolf reintroduction is a good idea because we have an ethical responsibility to our environment, to the wolf, and to our future generations to try to fix what was done over one hundred years ago when the wolves were wiped out. Reintroducing the wolf to where they once lived would not only protect them, but it would enrich the quality of the surrounding ecosystem. They benefit the ecosystem because they are the top predator carnivore and play a key role in preserving the diverse plant and animal life.



However, wolf reintroduction isn't as simple as just releasing the wolves where they once lived. It also means the returning of everything that the wolves did, either directly or indirectly. This process is an especially important issue because it entails a dramatic, deliberate action that must be open to public scrutiny through discussion and review. The reason for so much scrutiny is that wolf reintroduction is a permanent act that needs its population controlled intensively. Once the wolves are reintroduced there is no turning back, so the plan needs to be accepted by all sides that are involved.

2.2.5 Yellowstone National Park

Yellowstone Park has been hailed as the most successful recovery effort in the history of the Endangered Species Act, even though it took more than twenty years to restore the wolves. When the park was established in 1872, the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolves, a subspecies of the gray wolf, were native. However, between the late 1800s and early 1900s, they were being



killed for predator control. By the 1940s, it was rare to observe any wolf packs, and by the 1970s, there was no scientific evidence of a wolf population in Yellowstone. There would be an occasional wolf that would wander into the park, but there was no evidence of a breeding pair.

In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed a Northern Rocky Mountain Recovery Plan that would reintroduce an experimental population of wolves into Yellowstone. Then in 1991, Congress provided the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with funds so that it could prepare an Environmental Impact Statement on restoring wolves to Yellowstone National Park. After several years, the Secretary of the Interior signed the Record of Decision on the Final Environmental Impact Statement for reintroduction of gray wolves. This caused the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the staff from Yellowstone, and participating states to prepare for implementing the wolf reintroduction.

Not until 1995 were the first fourteen wolves, captured from Canada, reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park. Then a year later, seventeen more wolves were released. Now there are approximately 216 wolves residing in the park, comprising 24 packs with 14 breeding pairs that have produced 77 surviving pups.

Studies have shown that there has been an increase in biological diversity since the wolves were reintroduced. The wolves have even dramatically lowered the coyote population and have helped improve the aspen. The park has even noticed an increase in the number of visitors it has each year and millions of additional dollars annually due to the wolf reintroduction.

The goal of this reintroduction was to maintain thirty breeding pairs through the area. Then, once those thirty pairs reproduced successfully for three years, they would be able to

remove the wolf from the endangered species list for the area (Wolf 1999). They are currently trying to de-list the wolf because the goal was met in Yellowstone National Park.

2.3 Reintroductions

I believe that reintroducing the wolves to the Adirondacks is a wise decision. First off, they were here before we ever arrived, and we caused their downfall. So since the ecosystem benefits from the wolves, it would be a good idea to try to return them to wherever it was possible.



2.3.1 Technical

For the Adirondacks, the decision to restore the wolves is in the hands of the Department of Environmental Conservation. The DEC has always supported the restoration of native species, and they are legally responsible for managing all wildlife in the state of New York. In this case, the Department indicated that any proposal to restore the wolves must first demonstrate that the restoration would be ecologically feasible and desirable as well as socially acceptable. This means that it wouldn't support the wolf restoration without informed consent of all parties involved.

2.3.2 Management

The Department of Environmental Conservation is the agency that would control the wolves once they were reintroduced. The DEC would be responsible for them as long as they were living. This includes killing 30% to 50% of the wolf population to help control it. The restored population will continue to proliferate and colonize new areas as long as there is enough prey for them. Also, the agency will have to keep an eye on where the wolves travel because each year the five to six pups can disperse over long distances. The population must be

controlled so they don't get too plentiful or go where they shouldn't be. Scientists would put collars on all the wolves being released in order to keep track of them.

2.3.3 Financial

If the restoration proves to be feasible and is implemented by the DEC, they will have to worry about the potential management costs for monitoring, mitigation, and enforcement of regulations with regards to the wolf population. The money to reintroduce would come mostly from the Federal Government and the Defenders of Wildlife, a private conservation group, or another private organization.

In 1987, the Defenders of Wildlife responded to a rancher's concern over the possibility of losing livestock due to the reintroduced wolves in the Northern Rockies. They started a fund that has a minimum balance of \$100,000. So far out of that fund they have made payments totaling only around \$32,000 annually for wolf damage. The Defenders of Wildlife have planned on making this program and payments available to the people in the Adirondacks that might be affected (Wolf 1999).

2.4 *Disadvantages of Reintroduction*

2.4.1 Controlling population

The reintroduction of wolves is an especially important issue because it entails a dramatic, deliberate action that must be open to public scrutiny, thorough discussion, and review. So when deciding on whether or not to reintroduce, we need to remember that the wolf population would have to be extensively controlled. This means having to kill 30% to 50% of the population each year to keep it within acceptable numbers (Sharpe 2001). This fact doesn't sit well with some people who want to reintroduce the wolves, but don't want them to be killed.



2.4.2 Dispersal Distance

Another disadvantage is that the wolves have been known to disperse over distances. Each pair of mating wolves ends up producing an average of five to six pups per year. Then within two to three years most of the offspring disperse over distances of up to 886 kilometers. Even using the average minimum dispersal distance of 77 kilometers, it would take the wolves out of Adirondack Park and into half of the state of New York. One main reason the wolves disperse is the prey density of an area. For instance, if there are more deer somewhere else, there is a good chance that the wolves will go to where there is a higher deer density. It has been estimated that wolves need a supply of 10 deer per square mile in order to be supported. In 19 out of the last 20 years, the deer population has been below that average for Adirondack Park. This, then, could cause wolves to migrate somewhere that has more deer (Sharpe 2001). It has been found that deer are more plentiful on private, managed land that is within the Adirondacks than on public land, and there are more deer on private land outside the park than on private land within the park. This seems to show that there is a good possibility that the wolves would be attracted to all the deer on private land, which could mean an increase in potential for human-wolf conflicts.

2.4.3 Livestock

Wolves in the past have been known to kill farmers' livestock. However, in the Adirondacks where the wolves are going to be released, there is little or no livestock around because there is dense forest. In other reintroduction sites, there have been only less than one percent of livestock owners that have reported losses due to wolves. If a situation like that happens, there would be an insurance policy to help make up for the loss.

2.4.4 Study Results

During a study (Hutchinson 2001) it was found that the Adirondacks were suitable for sustaining a small population of wolves because of adequate prey, denning areas, and core security areas. However, they did find that the regional conditions were not good for sustaining wolves over a term as long as 100 years because they are anticipating the environmental conditions the wolves need to survive will deteriorate over the next 100 years. The areas that the wolves prefer will be developed and then human activities will cause unavoidable risk, injury, or even death. The increased development will even decrease the opportunities for wolves to move around freely, which could cause them to become displaced or alienated from their preferred areas.

2.5 *Advantages of Reintroduction*

2.5.1 Beneficial

Returning the gray wolf to the Adirondacks, in the end, would benefit the surrounding ecosystem. Since they are the top carnivore, wolves help play a key role in preserving the diverse plant and animal life and increasing the biodiversity. They do that by preying on the least dangerous animals and those most easily caught. These include the young and old, sick and injured, or weak and unfit animals. In turn, the wolves keep the prey populations healthy and more productive. They also prevent the large herbivores from becoming overpopulated. If those animals become too great in number for the habitat, they end up overusing the plants that are their food source. This destruction of the plant base makes the habitat less suitable for other species. The wolves help keep things balanced around them. For instance, what the wolf kills also provides food for bears, eagles, ravens, and other scavengers.



2.5.2 Tourism

Wolf reintroduction even has a great potential of benefiting the local communities economically. The wolves would become a tourist magnet, which would create an increase in the park's income. For example, since the reintroduction in Yellowstone National Park, there has been an increase of 75,000 visitors a year and millions of additional dollars have been generated annually for local communities. In another wolf reintroduction in Ely, Minnesota, the result was generation of 3 million dollars in annual revenues, 66 new jobs, and an addition 50,000 visitors annually (Wolf 1999).

2.5.3 Support from Residents

According to the Department of Environmental Conservation (Hutchinson 2002), there needs to be informed consent to reintroduce. According to a poll, New York residents support reintroducing wolves into the Adirondacks by a margin of 8 to 1. It also showed that 76 percent of those polled support the idea of reintroducing the wolves by saying that the wolves are part of the ecosystem and they want to save them from extinction and increase their level of survival. On the other hand, 19% of those polled opposed the idea saying that they had fears that the wolves would become dangerous to humans, livestock, and pets (Sharpe 2001).

2.5.4 Scientific Tracking

Another advantage would be that of enabling scientists to place collars on the reintroduced wolves, tracking the animals' movements. If the animals were heading somewhere inappropriate, the scientists might be able to divert them and return them to their appropriate habitat. This would also allow the scientists to study behavior patterns or note the death of one of the wolves.

2.6.1 Further Recommendations

2.6.1 Reassess Previous Studies

I believe the findings of previous studies need to be reexamined. Some studies indicated that the Adirondacks were a good location for reintroducing wolves, but the population was not seen as lasting 100 years. The studies may reveal different ways that the years of population survival can be increased. Making sure that the wolves will have an adequate prey base and habitat can do this. Review of the studies may even suggest different, useful perspectives.



2.6.2 Never Give Up

Finally, even though many reports say that reintroduction isn't feasible right now, we shouldn't give up. It took Yellowstone National Park twenty years before wolves were finally reintroduced. This means we must continue to fight for the gray wolves until they are returned to part of their original home range. One day, hopefully, we will be able to hear their low, mournful howl once again.

References



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