

Abstract

The gray wolf has been protected under the Endangered Species Act since 1974. Minnesota's gray wolf population has successfully achieved recovery levels, but continues to be protected under the Endangered Species Act. This growth in the wolf population has led to an increase in wolf-human interactions and a rise in concern for cattle ranchers and deer hunters. The gray wolf population in the United States was initially diminished primarily by social factors such as negative attitudes. There is some evidence that these negative attitudes continue to be held by those who interact with wolves most. Given this, how can recovery levels be maintained under these circumstances? **Assuming wolves will eventually be removed from the ESA, further methods of management must be employed and partnerships between the state and third-party organizations must be developed to educate the public and mediate interactions between wolves and humans.** Possible options for future management include the introduction of a strictly controlled hunting season and a comprehensive state-wide education and mediation program.

"we got to remember domestic animals by definition; we've taken the wildness out and they are not able to protect themselves. They are no match for wild animals and we have a personal responsibility..."

—Dale Lueck, Minnesota cattle farmer on his duty to protect his cattle from wolf attacks.

Management and Mediation

- **Best Management Practices**—maintaining healthy, well-fed animals, using guard animals, moving calving or lambing areas closer to the barnyard or home, and proper disposal of dead livestock carcasses
- **Controlled hunting season**— beginning no sooner than 5 years after delisting from November to February
- **Small wildlife refuges**—wolves will be protected within boundaries and lethal control permitted outside of the refuge
- **Compensation**—livestock owners should continue to be compensated for depredated cattle
- **Management resources**—aid from third party organizations, such as Defenders of Wildlife, can help improve farmers attitudes toward wolves
- **Education**—the state of Minnesota should have a comprehensive partnership with third party organizations to educate the public on wolf conservation

"I will tell you this: If I see a wolf on my property it will be sitting in my living room stuffed by the end of the week...I shot the wild animal because it was aggressive and on my property. The city and state told me they couldn't do anything, so I took action"

—M. Johnson, Minnesota resident

History and Background

Wolves were essentially wiped out in the lower 48 states, except for a small population in Northeastern Minnesota and on Isle Royale. Their extirpation was fueled by the negative attitudes toward wolves that has been held by humans for centuries. Fear, misunderstanding, and bounty hunting was the cause of the near extinction of the gray wolf in the United States. In 1974, the gray wolf became protected under the Endangered Species Act. Today, wolf populations have bounced back, and in Minnesota the population is estimated to have reached 3,000 wolves—almost twice the minimum standard of 1,600 initially set by the ESA. Wolves in Minnesota are expanding their habitat and recolonizing areas they have not inhabited in hundreds of years.

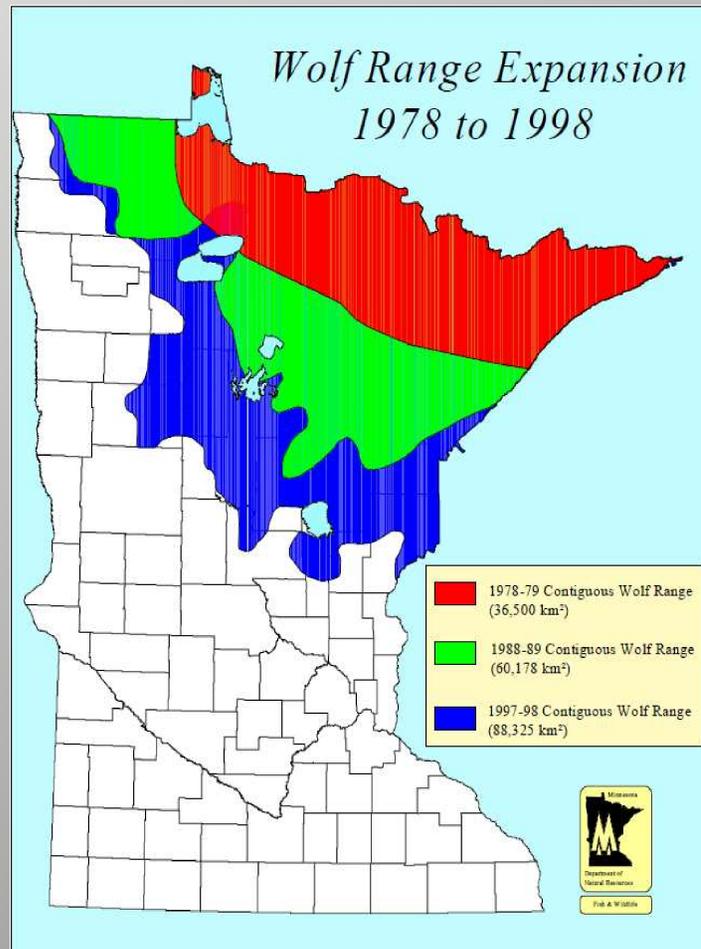


Figure 1—Gray wolf in Winter

"My future move to Ely is most definitely based on wildlife diversity, and the most important part of that is the wolf, because the wolf completes what is truly wild."

—Mike Ruzich, a Chicago resident with plans to move to Minnesota

Conclusion

Delisting is inevitable and when it occurs the state should implement methods of management that go beyond the State Management Plan. Management must be multi-faceted – it must address ecological dimensions and human and social dimensions. Options for further, future management include a system of reserves for wolves where they are completely protected – permitting they remain within the boundaries of the reserve – introducing a strict controlled hunting season once wolves have been delisted for at least five years, and considering using wolves as a means for ecosystem recovery in areas that are overpopulated with herbivores. Furthermore, the state must work closely with third-party organizations to ensure that Minnesotans are educated in wolf conservation. Education may not alter the perception of some stake-holders, but mediation in the form of management resources may ease the tension between livestock owners and wolves.