



By Whitney Tilt, Guest Writer, 2-25-08

A CONSERVATIONIST LOOKS BACK AT LOBOS

Twenty years ago, conservationist Whitney Tilt worked to build "a popular consensus" for bringing wolves back to the northern Rockies. Today, frustrated by squabbling amongst environmentalists and other groups, he believes it is important to take stock of how far the region has come with wolf recovery. He believes success and taking the animals off the federal protection list is a cause for celebration, not acrimony.

Celebrate Wolf Recovery, Delisting, And Stop Slinging Arrows

In 1987, when Yellowstone wolf reintroduction was a hope, not a reality, I was one of a small group of wildlife conservationists seeking to work cooperatively with the federal land managers and the state wildlife agencies to create a popular consensus for wolf reintroduction.

At the outset, we recognized that while recovery of an endangered species was both legally required and ecologically desirable, there was an overall need to build a popular support for wolves among the humans who would have to live with them as neighbors. We recognized that it was not sufficient merely to speak of "the national interest" or cite the faceless millions who might gain satisfaction from merely knowing that the wolf exists in someone else's back yard. Our experience told us that successful wolf recovery required the citizens of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming to be convinced that sharing the land with wolves worked in their best interest and need not result in socioeconomic loss.

Twenty years later, the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction has succeeded beyond anything we could have imaged in 1987. The wolves have proven themselves to be adaptable, resilient and generally good neighbors. Many dedicated people have toiled on their behalf. So with the news that the gray wolf is proposed to be delisted, why aren't the wolf supporters celebrating? Instead of champagne we have threatened law suits. Instead of "congratulations" and "thanks you" to ranchers, forest rangers, and environmentalists – all who played a role in the wolf's success– we get doomsday forecasts and changing agendas.

We now have wolves where the original restoration plans stated we wanted them—in and around Yellowstone National Park. We should welcome the states of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming assuming management – the goal of the Endangered Species Act is to recover species not enshrine them as wards of the federal government. Rather than inventing scenarios of how each state "might" manage wolves, let's turn our energies to working cooperatively with the states to conserve wolves in balance with other lawfully protected uses of public and private lands including ranching, hunting, off-road vehicle use, and other activities. One specific concern is funding as wolf management is expensive and could prove a major drain on already stressed state wildlife management budgets. How can we work to ensure adequate funding for our state wildlife agencies?

Here is a good use of our energies: Wolves and the people who live with wolves don't need lawsuits to determine how they will live together in the future. They need to be left alone. If a land owner feels threatened by the presence or actions of a wolf, then he or she should be allowed to protect their land and property – either by taking direct action themselves or calling for assistance. As for the future of wolves in Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding national forest lands, there is a dedicated cadre of professionals overseen by a wide range of constituencies. They don't always agree, but they manage to muddle through, in spite of the disagreements.

So give the lawyers some time off, and celebrate a milestone of wildlife management. Better yet take a rancher or local county commissioner to lunch as a small way to say thank you. America is blessed with a system of public lands and wildlife management agencies second to none in the world. Dare to trust the overall commitment of the citizens of the Northern Rocky Mountains to continue to ensure the wolf's presence in Yellowstone and dare to believe that the wolf is here to stay.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Whitney Tilt lives in Bozeman following a long and distinguished career in conservation that has taken him around the world. He is a former director of conservation for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. As a former conservation specialist with the National Audubon Society, he worked on gray wolf and grizzly bear issues in the Northern Rockies, as well as endangered species recovery efforts ranging from whooping cranes to Asian tigers from 1985 to 2002. In the late 1970s, he ranched in Teton, Idaho.

http://www.newwest.net/city/article/celebrate_wolf_recovery_delisting_and_stop_slinging_arrows1/C396/L396/