A statement about recent developments concerning Mexican Wolf recovery

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Dr. John A. Vucetich (javuceti@mtu.edu)
Assistant professor, wolf biologist, and population biologist
Michigan Technological University

The recovery of Mexican wolves has been and remains well justified from several perspectives – scientific, ethical, and social. In the late 1990s, great effort – in the face of great obstacles – led to important improvements in the condition of Mexican wolves. Despite important progress in the late 1990s, the condition of Mexican wolves has always been precarious. Now, in more recent years conditions have deteriorated substantially. Human activities have contributed importantly to the population's recent deterioration. Moreover, government agencies charged with recovering Mexican wolves seem to be ignoring the two best sources of credible scientific advice they have: 1) Mexican wolf recovery team activities have been in a state of suspended animation for about two years now; 2) Governments have ignored critical recommendations presented in the only independent assessment ever conducted regarding the Mexican wolf recovery program – a set of recommendations that were commissioned by the government.

The recovery of Mexican wolves depends critically on certain realities that have not yet been manifest.

One reality is that recovery depends on Mexican wolves being able to exist on a landscape larger than what government agencies have permitted. If the value of a viable Mexican wolf population is taken for granted, then the need for Mexican wolves to exist on a larger landscape is not scientifically or logically controversial. For not allowing wolves to exist on a larger landscape, governments charged with recovering Mexican wolves seem to be a significant obstacle to their recovery.

A second reality is that recovery of Mexican wolves depends on critically lower rates of human-caused mortality and removal. There is no scientific controversy that high rates of human-caused mortality is detrimental to wolves, and no controversy that Mexican wolves have been exposed to high rates of such mortality. This is the circumstance that motivates continued calls to change how we treat wolves that scavenge livestock carcasses on public lands and subsequently kill livestock (also often on public lands).

One proposal – pardoning death sentences to wolves that scavenge livestock carcasses and subsequently depredate on public lands – is reasonable and necessary, though it may not go far enough. The proposal is reasonable because it is a simple way to reduce the number of wolves that are killed or removed, and does so in a manner that impacts ranchers the least. Some people object to the proposal on grounds that there is uncertainty in details about how the behavior of depredation is related to the behaviors of scavenging livestock and depredating. There is uncertainty on this issue, but this uncertainty is no ground for opposing the proposal. In fact, what needs to happen is: give this proposal a trial period, and if human-caused mortality/removal is not reduced, then even more significant actions will be in order.

A sadly ironic aspect of this issue is that public lands, which belong to the public, are where wolves cause the least conflict with private economic interest and ought to be where wolves are most protected from human threats. However, our public lands have not been safe places for Mexican wolves.

The condition of Mexican wolves is dire and their fate is largely up to us. Our citizenry and our politicians have the ability to make things much better for Mexican wolves. The recovery and viability of these wolves requires more land and less human-caused killing and interference. There is no doubt that these wolves compete with some human interests. There is no doubt that living with wolves comes at some cost to a few individuals. The ultimate question is whether we are so unwilling to share some small portion of the resources we use as to prevent the recovery of a species that so many value so greatly.