Wolf needs protection

By Dan Plumley and Rocci Aguirre

THIS SPRING, conservation organizations from across the Northeast joined forces to oppose a plan by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove the gray wolf from the federal list of endangered species. As of this writing, it is not too late for the service to change its mind.

The Adirondack Council and Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve are working with the newly formed Northeast Wolf Coalition to remind federal officials that it is premature to remove protection for a species that has not yet returned to all of its former home range.

The coalition contends that the delisting proposal wasn’t based on sound science, and an independent panel of leading wolf scientists reached the same conclusion.

The scientific panel was especially critical of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s claim that gray wolves never lived in the twenty-nine eastern states. Under the Endangered Species Act, the service is obligated to encourage the recovery of an endangered species across a “significant portion” of its historic range. While gray wolves are recovering in the Rocky Mountains and parts of the upper Midwest, there is not a stable population in the Northeast or other parts of the country where the wolves once lived.

The law makes it clear that the gray wolf must be restored in viable numbers throughout its historic range before a species can be considered recovered.

In asserting that the gray wolf is “recovered,” the Fish and Wildlife Service relied on a 2012 paper written by one biologist. Based on that one opinion, the service concluded that the eastern half of the United States in the past had been inhabited by Canis lycaon, known as the eastern wolf, which it called a distinct species rather than a subspecies of the gray wolf (Canis lupus).

These questions about the wolf’s taxonomy and historic range are still being studied, and it is premature, to say the least, for the Fish and Wildlife Service to reach conclusions now, especially given the far-reaching consequences. The Endangered Species Act demands that decisions be guided by the best science available, and this is especially true in the case of the gray wolf, one of the most controversial species in the country. The science behind a delisting of the wolf must be above reproach.

One might argue that the federal government’s proposal makes little difference in the Adirondacks or the rest of New York State. Our state laws prohibit the hunting or trapping of wolves that might wander here from other places.

But it does matter. Wolves were once a top predator in the Adirondacks, and without them the environment is out of balance. Yet the state Department of Environmental Conservation has no plans to reintroduce wolves. If these predators are to roam our landscape again, they will have to return on their own, presumably from the Midwest and/or Canada.

The obstacles to natural wolf re-introduction are many: hunters, highway traffic, fences, development, and animal-control officers. If the Fish and Wildlife Service removes the protection afforded by the Endangered Species Act, the chances of wolves migrating hundreds of miles to the Adirondacks will be even smaller. They could be shot in states that lack laws protecting them. Indeed, it seems that the only time we learn of a wolf’s presence in the Midwest or Northeast is after the animal has been shot.

Complicating the picture is that hunters are likely to mistake wolves for coyotes. Studies have found that eastern coyotes have wolf DNA in their genetic makeup, blurring the lines between the two species. Many eastern coyotes are so large that hunters may have a hard time distinguishing a wolf from a big coyote. Public education is needed to protect wolves dispersing into the Adirondacks from being shot accidentally.

As a top predator, the wolf played an essential role in the ecosystem before they were wiped out by hunters and trappers in the late 1800s. Although the coyote has moved into the wolf’s former range, there is still a place for the wolf in the Adirondacks. Given the chance, wolves and coyotes will establish their own niches in the ecological landscape.

Without federal protections to help safeguard wolves pushing out of traditional strongholds in the Midwest and Rockies toward the Adirondacks, state game agencies throughout the Northeast will be hard-pressed to marshal the resources needed to educate the public on the differences between the wolf and its coyote cousin.

The Fish and Wildlife Service should keep the wolf on the endangered-species list and give it a fighting chance to spread to new locations on its own.

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