A Call to Protect the Mexican Wolves

On September 4th, President Trump signed an executive order to remove the grey wolf and the Mexican wolf subspecies from endangered species protection. This is the first stage in a much larger tragedy just waiting to happen.

The grey wolf species generally deserves stalwart defense. But as someone who has worked as a ranger for the Forest Service in Mexican wolf country, I want to focus on that issue in particular.

In the US, the Mexican gray wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*) is only found in the mountains and forests of Arizona and New Mexico, primarily in what is known as the White Mountains near the Arizona-New Mexico border. There are only roughly 300 Mexican wolves alive today in the US – up from the only four that were alive in the wild after re-introduction in 1998. In Mexico only around 40-50 remain. Most Mexican wolves were exterminated from the American Southwest by the 1930s and considered functionally eradicated in the wild by the mid-1970s before receiving protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1976. Between 1977-1980 the last Mexican wolves were captured by biologists and placed into breeding programs. The progeny of those wolves are the ones now living in Arizona and New Mexico.

The tragedy of the Mexican wolf is perhaps best known through the writing of American conservationist and US Forest Service ranger Aldo Leopold. He once worked as a ranger in the White Mountains and recorded his killing of a wolf in his classic work of environmental philosophy *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). He writes there about reaching an old mother wolf in time to "watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes" and goes on to say how it was in that moment that he realized the government's policy at that time of killing all the wolves was wrong. He continues, "I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

What Leopold later discovered was that the killing of wolves lead to an increase in deer populations. But that the deer populations would increase so much they would overeat all the vegetation they depended on. The result would be not enough food for the next generation of deer, and eventually the deer population would be destroyed. Nowadays, this interconnected system of ecological dependency is known as a "trophic cascade". Leopold was one of the first to identify this.

Wolves play an important role in natural ecosystems. They keep deer and elk populations healthy and in check. They tend to go after the weakest of the herds. And their presence even alters deer and elk migration patterns, thus altering the growth of plants the behavior of other wildlife. Some readers might be familiar with what happened when wolves were re-introduced to Yellowstone National Park in the mid '90s. The famous line often repeated in that case is about how the wolves changed the rivers.

In the case of the Mexican gray wolf, this is a species that is not only important to the environment of the White Mountains, but it is a species that is culturally and spiritually significant to the Indigenous peoples who live there. The White Mountain Apache call the wolf *ba'cho*, and their lore reveres the wolves, treating them as teachers, guides, and protectors. The wolf is also sacred to the Hopi, and both revered and feared in Navajo tradition.

The Mexican Wolf Recovery and Reintroduction Program, responsible for the present existence of the wolves, has been a decades-long collaborative effort involving multiple federal and state agencies, the White Mountain Apache, and several non-governmental organizations.

I recall while working as a ranger in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest educating visitors and locals on the importance of the wolves. But I also remember the frustration I experienced when I'd see locals with bumper stickers that had crosshairs over a silhouette of a wolf or that read "Kill a wolf, save a deer".

Sadly, there are many people in the White Mountain region of Arizona and New Mexico today who have a disdain for the wolves and would rather see them dead. This is despite Leopold having pointed out the importance of the wolves so many years ago, and despite federal and state agencies offering 100% compensation for any livestock killed.

I can only imagine that if protections for the Mexican wolf are lifted that too many people living in those areas will see it as an opportunity to carry out their deadly wishes. I shudder thinking about how many wolves will see an unjust and untimely end.

I recall seeing my first Mexican gray wolf while working in the White Mountains. It ran across a road our crew was driving along and dashed fast back into the forest. I also recall the first time I heard a chorus howl of the wolves, one night while I was camping near Mount Baldy with a childhood friend. These experiences were special to us, life memories I'll never forget. And they are experiences I hope others, including my nephew born this year, will have the great fortune to enjoy for many generations to come.

The executive order President Trump signed on September 4th does not provide immediate permission for the killing of wolves. The Interior Secretary Doug Burgum has 90 days to decide whether the grey and Mexican wolf populations should be taken off the endangered species list. Still, this is a short window for the public to voice their concerns and help prevent a repetition of the same tragedy enacted decades ago from once again coming to fruition.

The wolves were here before us. They deserve to live here still. I encourage my fellow Americans to call their Senators and Representatives and tell them: do not let the Mexican wolf, and the grey wolf species more generally, lose the protection of their Endangered Species status.