

# **The Grey wolves of Central Idaho and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem**

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Biogeography  
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When the Grey Wolf gets mentioned people around Central Idaho have an opinion, some positive, some negative. I am writing this paper to present the facts about the Grey Wolf and its habitat, not opinions. The Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus*) has been part of the world's ecosystems since it evolved, during the late Pleistocene Era, from the species *Canis etruscus*. (Nowak, 1979) The Grey Wolf was once widely dispersed throughout the continents of Asia, Europe and North America. This paper is concentrating on the areas of Central Idaho and Western Montana, in the Northwestern United States, where the Grey Wolf has been extirpated and then reintroduced by humans.

The Grey Wolf plays an important role as a top predator in any ecosystem they may inhabit. They primarily prey on larger mammals, such as elk and deer. Past studies have shown that they usually remove the sick or injured animals from the herd. (USFWS, 1994) Historically wolves have migrated, along with the herds they prey upon, with the glacial maximums and minimums on the North American continent, and is the predecessor to the modern dog. (MacDonald, 2003) The wolf was hunted until it was almost extinct in the continental United States.

In the 1930's the last of the wild grey wolves were killed in the Western United States. (Nowak, 1979) They were generally not wanted due to the West being settled by ranchers and livestock owners who did not want them killing their animals. A study done in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed the number of grey wolves declined to only a few hundred animals in Minnesota, and Michigan's Royale Isle. (USFWS, 1994)

It took only 40 years for the Grey Wolf to return to northwestern Montana, an area inhabited by more wildlife than humans. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 immediately protected these naturally dispersing populations. (ESA; 16 U.S.C. 1531-1544,87 Stat. 884) Throughout the following decade public support was strong enough for the reintroduction of the Grey Wolf to Yellowstone National Park to be considered. A plan was developed by the USFWS for the Grey Wolf to be reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding states of Idaho and Montana. (Idaho, 1987)

The initial plan was met by strong opposition from state legislators in the region and public-lands user groups, generally those with interests in hunting and ranching. The USFWS countered these opposing views by including liberal lethal control measures and a designation of these wolves as a “non-essential experimental population”, and set recovery goals as low as only 10 packs, or breeding pairs, and 100 animals in each of the three states surrounding Yellowstone National Park. (Idaho, 1987) These numbers were met with much skepticism in the scientific community because they were not based on any scientific study or population viability analysis but on the “opinions of recovery team members”. (Idaho, 1987, 2009a) The numbers were later “validated” by a survey given to biologists in 1992. (EIS 1994)

The USFWS reintroduced the Grey Wolf to central Idaho and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in 1995-1996 (Bergstrom, 2009) The goal of the

reintroduction plan was to reintroduce 30 wolves to Yellowstone and Idaho each year for the following 3-5 years, or until 10 wolf packs of at least 10 members each are established. (U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1994) The areas that they have been released and subsequent pack territories are shown in fig. 1.

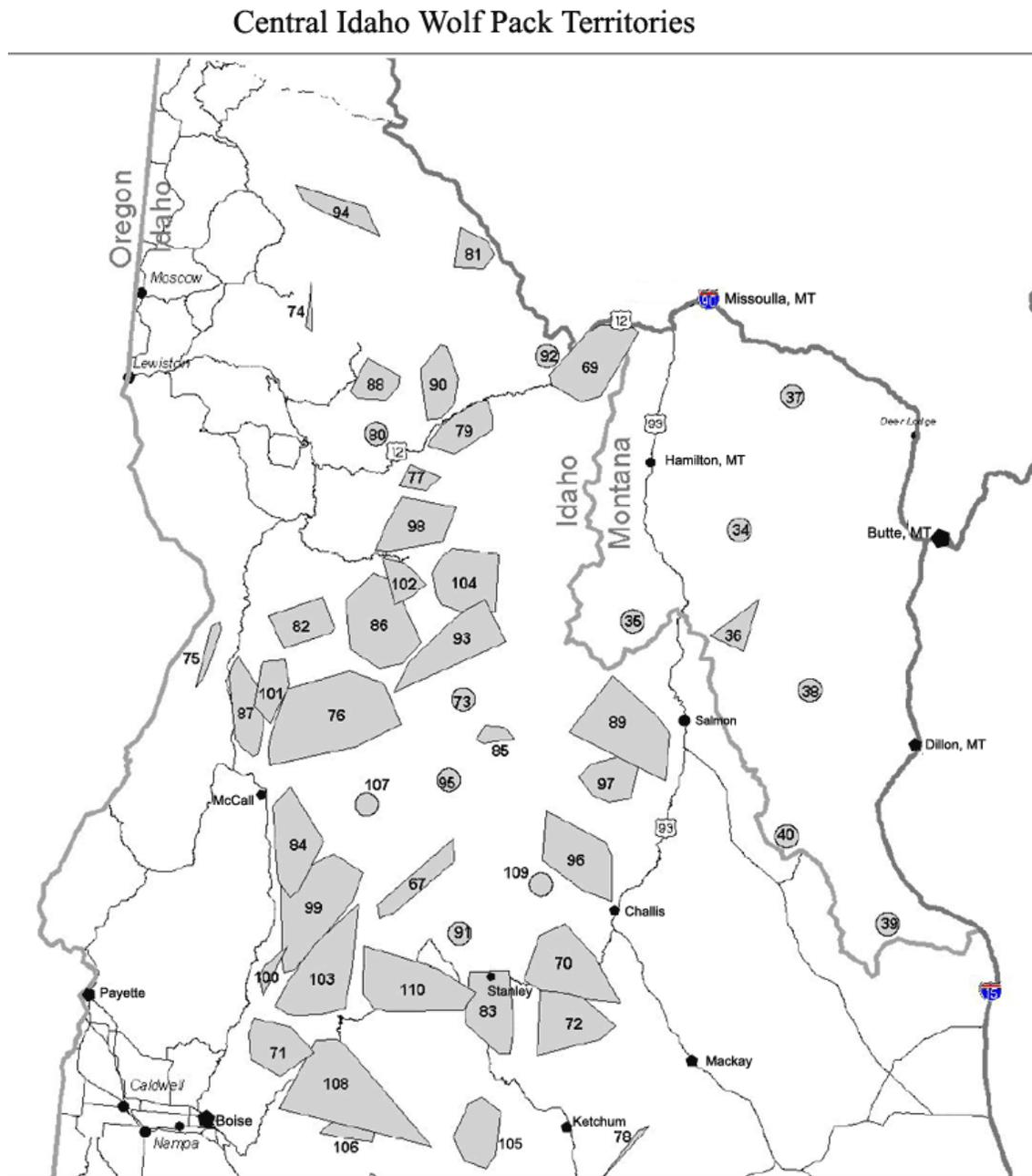


Fig.19 (Mack, 2010)

The areas targeted for reintroduction contained large populations of ungulate prey; a census prior to reintroduction showed 19,000 elk (*Cervus elaphus*) in Yellowstone National Park, (Smith, 2003) and according to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation there were 116,000 elk in Idaho at the time of wolf reintroduction. (RMEF, 1996)

The Rocky Mountain subspecies of elk residing in central Idaho and the surrounding areas have had problems of their own. In 1918 the United States Forest Service reported only 610 elk were present in Idaho's National Forest lands. These numbers were attributed to unregulated harvesting of the animal. After the 1918 report stricter regulations were implemented, along with an active transplant program. (Mangan, 2000) The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation estimates the current elk population in Idaho to be 115,000. (RMEF, 2008) These numbers suggest a thriving elk population.

Studies of elk/wolf interactions have shown that the elk in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem are spending more time in forested areas, on steeper slopes, and are at higher elevations than they were before the wolf was introduced to the area. (Creel and Winnie 2005) This would appear to be a natural predator/prey interaction, or cause and effect. The long-term effects have yet to be determined due to the short time frame since reintroduction in 1995-1996.

It has been documented that overall biodiversity in areas of wolf reintroduction, like Yellowstone National Park, has increased. The recoveries of species like the red fox and beaver in Yellowstone have been attributed to wolves. (Robbins, 2004) The wolf will kill the coyote thus keeping the population of coyotes in check and allowing for more small species to be actively present in the ecosystem. (Robbins, 2004)

A recent study of predator presence at elk mortality sites using mtDNA analysis of hair and scat samples in central Idaho has shown that the three primary predators present are black bears (*Ursus americanus*, 55.7%), cougars (*Puma concolor*; 27.9%) and coyotes (*Canis latrans*; 6.6%). The success rate for species identification was 88.5%. (Onorato, 2006) This study showed no wolf predation in the area of study. This particular study was done between 1997 and 2004 in north-central Idaho; there was prior field identification of top-level carnivores to be present in the area of study. (Onorato, 2006)

The Grey Wolf is a highly mobile predator and has been documented, by monitoring radio-collared animals, to cover large areas of territory. A particular female collared wolf was shown to have migrated to central Idaho from Canada and back again. (EIS, 1994) The movement of wolves in Idaho is shown in fig. 2 & 2a, in an Idaho Fish and Game Wolf Activity map. This map shows the territories of individual packs and the location of their activity in the state of Idaho in 2005 and 2009. When comparing the two maps it would appear that the general population of gray wolves has expanded



Fig 2

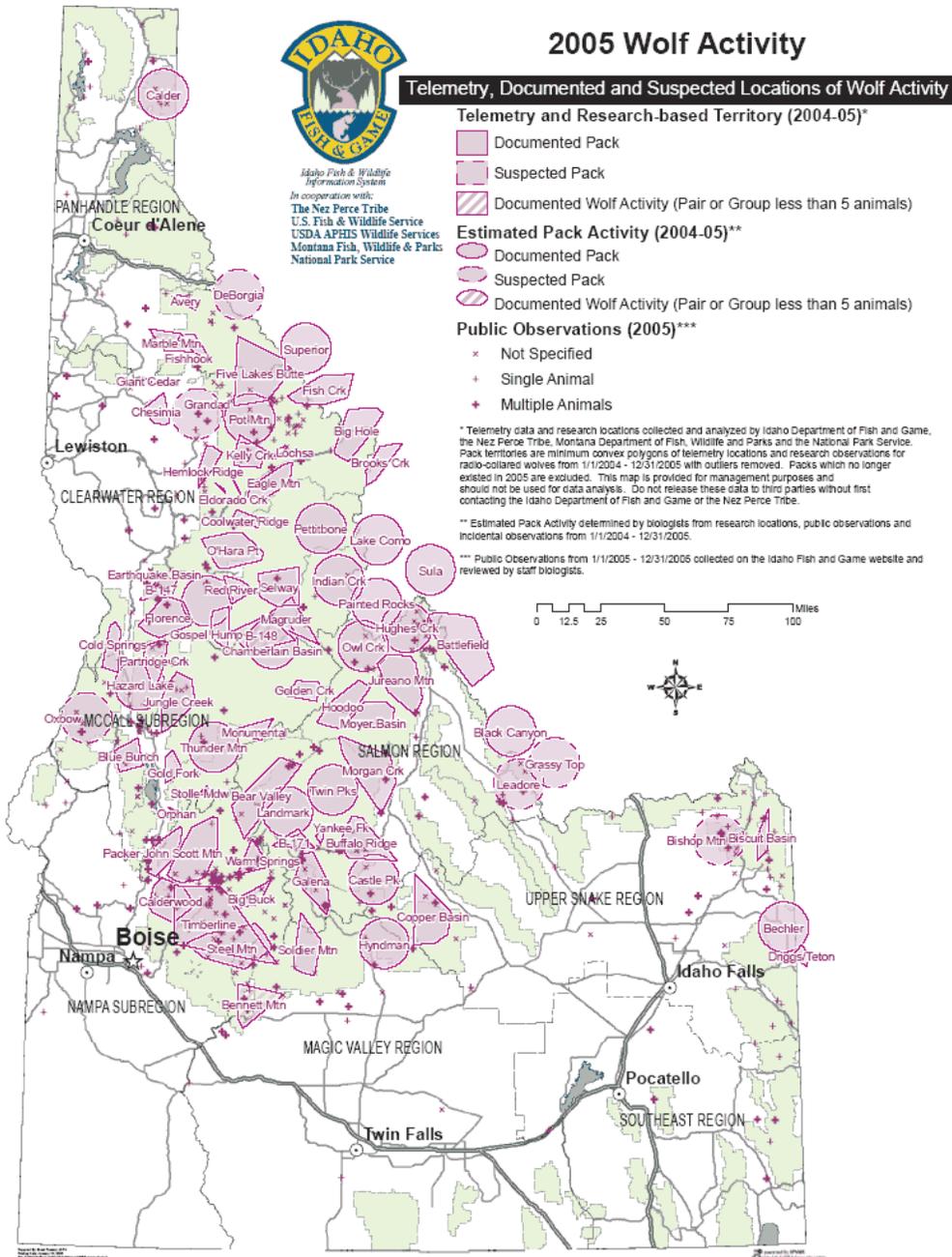


Fig 2 & 2a (IFG, 2009)

The Grey Wolf recovery program I focused on for this paper is a cooperative effort between the State of Idaho and the Nez Perce Tribe. They agreed to this collaboration to maintain the conservation and recovery of wolves in Idaho through a Memorandum of Understanding that was ratified in 2005. (Mack, 2010) This cooperative effort was designed to guide the management of conflicts between wolves and human interests, as well as stabilize the region's wolf population between 500-700 wolves. (IFG, 2009) The region is designated as the area from the Canadian border south to Interstate 84, and from the Washington and Oregon borders east to the Montana and Wyoming borders. (Mack, 2010) The landscape in Idaho is diverse and contains large expanses of uninhabited wilderness. There are three contiguous Wilderness Areas; the Selway-Bitterroot, Frank Church River-of-No-Return, and Gospel Hump Wilderness Areas encompassing nearly four million acres. The entire area being federally designated wilderness. (Mack, 2010) This vast expanse of wilderness ranges in elevation from fifteen hundred feet to just over twelve thousand feet in elevation, with annual precipitation levels varying from eight inches to almost one hundred inches. (Mack, 2010) This huge wilderness area, with little human habitation is the largest contiguous wilderness area in the lower forty-eight states.

The most current report documents sixteen previously unknown packs in 2009 but only a net increase of six documented packs in the state of Idaho. (Mack, 2010)

There were ninety-four active wolf packs documented in Idaho at the end of 2009, with an estimated year-end population of 835 wolves. There were also twenty border packs that were attributed to Montana, Wyoming, and Washington. These animals had overlapping territory in Idaho and the three states mentioned previously. Sixty-five of the overall packs were known to have reproduced; forty-nine had qualifying breeding pairs at the end of the year. Of these breeding pairs an estimated 204 pups were produced in 2009. (Mack, 2010)

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service announced the removal of the Grey Wolf from the Endangered Species list on January 14, 2009, and would take effect thirty days after the ruling, after going back and forth in court the delisting became official in May 2009. (USFWS, 2009) This resulted in the implementing of a gray wolf hunting season. The designated hunting areas in the state of Idaho are shown in fig. 3. The delisting of wolves from the Endangered Species List and subsequent hunting season in Idaho was a rapid succession. Scientists argued that the overall population of wolves did not show enough movement of individuals between subpopulations of the species. (Bergstrom, 2009)

Without this important genetic exchange among the subpopulations the Designated Population Segments have the possibility of suffering from isolation effects.

(Hedrick, 1996) Therefore under the Endangered Species Act the United States Fish and Wildlife Service had no legal or biological claim that the Designated Population Segment was legitimately defined for delisting. (Bergstrom, 2009)

Fig. 3(IFG, 2009)



Idaho Fish and Game would set the limits based on regional information with the overall limit set at two hundred twenty wolves. According to Wolf Harvest Information from the Idaho Fish and Game website there were one hundred eighty-eight wolves harvested by legal methods in 2009, leaving thirty-two remaining tags that could have been filled. (IFG, 2009) Of these remaining tags the majority were in the Lolo hunting zone, which had 14 remaining unfilled tags. Fig. 4(below)

The numbers given in the Idaho Fish and Game website were slightly different than the numbers in the Wolf Conservation and Management Progress Report for Idaho in 2009, by the Nez Perce Tribe Wolf Recovery Project. (Mack, 2010)

Biologists reported that two hundred seventy-five wolves were killed in Idaho in 2009; three of which belonged to packs that were attributed to Montana, 135 deaths were attributed to legal harvest (one of which was from a Montana pack and in their annual report). (Sime, 2010) (Mack, 2010) There were also ninety-four deaths attributed to legal landowner and agency controlled kills due to wolf-livestock depredation, with twenty wolf mortalities attributed to other human causes (including illegal take, one from Montana pack) and twenty-four wolf mortalities that could not be determined and therefore listed as unknown. There were only two wolf deaths from natural causes. (Mack, 2010)

As of October 18, 2010, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter returned responsibility for wolf management to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (IFG 2011)

The debate however still rages on, recently the governor of Montana sent a letter to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Ken Salazar, in relation to the Wolf Management plan in Montana. Here is a copy of the letter as posted;

(Wolf Crossing 2011)

February 16, 2011

The Honorable Ken Salazar Secretary U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar:

I write to you today regarding wolf management in Montana. While almost everyone acknowledges that the Northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf population is fully recovered, as the Governor of Montana I am profoundly frustrated by the lack of any actual results that recognize Montana's rights and responsibilities to manage its wildlife. Montana has for years done everything that has been asked: adopting a model wolf management plan; enacting enabling legislation; and adopting the necessary implementing rules. Our exemplary efforts have been ignored. I cannot continue to ignore the crying need for workable wolf management while Montana waits, and waits, and waits. Therefore, I am now going to take additional necessary steps to protect the interests of Montana's livestock producers and hunters to the extent that I can within my authorities as governor. First, for Montana's northwest endangered wolves (north of Interstate 90), any livestock producers who kill or harass a wolf attacking their livestock will not be prosecuted by Montana game wardens. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) wardens will be directed to exercise their prosecutorial discretion by not investigating or citing anyone protecting their livestock. Further, I am directing FWP to respond to any livestock depredation by removing whole packs that kill livestock, wherever this may occur. Still further, to protect the elk herds in Montana's Bitterroot Valley that have been most adversely affected by wolf predation, I am directing FWP, to the extent allowed by the Endangered Species Act, to cull these wolves by whole-pack removal to enable elk herds to recover. At this point, I can do nothing less and still maintain my commitment as Governor to uphold the rights of our citizens to protect their property and to continue to enjoy Montana's cherished wildlife heritage and traditions.

Sincerely,

Brian Schweitzer GOVERNOR

Is this beyond the scope of his authority? Is it in the best interest of....? All I know is that the management of the Grey Wolf in the Northwest United States will continue to be a hot button topic of debate, and I leave you to decide what your views on the subject might be. The current president Barack Obama has promised to let scientific facts guide his administration's environmental policy decisions. (Bergstrom, 2009)

For the sake of the overall health of the ecosystem I hope this is true. The issue should be what will it take for the ecosystem to be complete and intact, not how many hunters are happy or mad, or how many people get to see a wolf on vacation. If people could come together and talk rationally it would go a lot better for everyone involved. This issue seems to have trouble finding common ground, all the opinions I came across were extreme for one side or the other.

## Wolf Harvest Information

**All wolf hunts closed March 31.**

Wolf Zone	Harvest Limit	Number Harvested	Limit Remaining	Status	Season Dates	
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<b>Panhandle</b>	30	27	3	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Palouse-Hells Canyon</b>	5	5	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Lolo</b>	27	13	14	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Dworshak-Elk City</b>	18	18	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Selway</b>	17	11	6	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Middle Fork</b>	17	17	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Salmon</b>	16	16	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>McCall-Weiser</b>	15	15*	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Sawtooth</b>	55	49	6	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Southern Mountains</b>	10	10	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Upper Snake</b>	5	5	0	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>Southern Idaho</b>	5	2	3	<b>CLOSE D</b>		
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>32</b>			

\* One killed illegally before season opened.

Fig.4 (IFG, 2009)

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Wolf Crossing 2011

*Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer, has enough. Declares war on wolves and federal agencies.*

<http://wolfcrossing.org/?p=382>