1-1-2006

A Look Beyond: Wolves, Freedom and the Landscape

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Wolves, Freedom and the Landscape

by David Johns, Kim Vacariu and Margo McKnight

Pluie was a 5-year-old, gray female wolf researchers first radio-collared in Kananaskas Country, Alberta. For more than two years, they followed Pluie's travel from K country across the Crows Nest Pass into British Columbia, to the Flathead Valley, then to Glacier National Park in Montana, farther south into Montana, across the Idaho panhandle into Washington, and then back to Kananaskas. In some jurisdictions within the 100,000 square kilometers of her range Pluie was legally protected but never entirely safe. In other jurisdictions it was open season, and in British Columbia on December 18, 1995, Pluie, her mate and one pup were legally shot by a hunter.

Pluie's story represents the larger story of wolves and the wilderness needed to sustain them. How will that story unfold? The past could be the future: continued persecution of wolves in the name of protecting livestock for ranchers and ungulates for hunters. Or we could restrict wolves to isolated outdoor zoos in Yellowstone, Banff or Glacier-Waterton.

But another future is possible—a much brighter one for both wolves and people. That story is being written throughout a wildlife corridor that runs from the Sierra Madre Occidental in Sonora, Mexico, north along the Rocky Mountains to the Yellowstone ecosystem and on to the Canadian Yukon. A broad coalition is working to protect and restore the health of the land, water and wolves in this 4,000-mile-long international passage, often referred to as the "Spine of the Continent."

This work rests on a set of values and a scientific understanding of what makes for healthy natural and human communities. The values include respect for all species and the land that supports them, along with the recognition that wolves are important to natural communities in part because they regulate the numbers of many other species and how they interact. Healthy wolf populations depend on two things: good habitat with a diverse prey base, and freedom from human persecution. These two needs are best met by large connected protected areas.

Conservation plans detail the vision for healthy wild lands along the Spine of the Continent. The plans are like the picture on the front of a jigsaw puzzle box—a shared set of goals many groups work toward. From the borderlands of the Sky Islands in southern Arizona to the northern U.S. Rockies, the Wildlands Project and partners are acting to expand protected areas, reconnect landscapes across highways, and recover native species like wolves. The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) has identified similar steps. Y2Y has undertaken or inspired important work such as the TransCanada Highway overpasses, which wolves are using. Throughout the Spine of the Continent, wild areas are being developed, destroying habitat and threatening the connectivity of the whole system. For this reason, conservation groups, including the Wildlands Project and Y2Y, have joined forces to make maintaining connectivity a top priority.

Such steps are only a beginning. The destruction of several reintroduced packs of Mexican wolves in the Southwest is proof that wolves need much larger wild-land habitats to minimize contact with livestock and humans. Ultimately the survival of wolves will depend on more than recognizing we have no right to destroy other species. It will depend on the deeper understanding that our connection to wolves and wilderness is our connection to what is best in us: our capacity to care for our natural heritage and to embrace freedom for other creatures as well as ourselves.

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International Wolf Center