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## THE TIME IS RIGHT TO REINTRODUCE EL LOBO TO THE WILDS OF ARIZONA

JOEL NILSSON, Editorial Writer, The Arizona Republic

What's all this fuss over the reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf?

For the life of me I can't think of one good reason why El Lobo ought not to be allowed to roam the wilds of Arizona.

What we're dealing with are perceptions.

Perceptions that have been fueled by fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood that depict wolves as wicked -- the alliteration does indeed have a nice ring, I dare say.

Perceptions that wolves are vicious killers, and that we'd better kill them before they devour herds of livestock.

Perceptions that wolves actually stalk and attack people.

It was a combination of these myths and the natural fear of wild animals that prompted the Mexican wolf, by the early years of this century, to be hunted relentlessly to near extinction. Ranchers, professional bounty hunters and a determined campaign by the U.S. government to make the Southwest safe for cattle and sheep all had a hand in this gross injustice.

They did their job with deadly efficiency, so much so that the last known sighting of a Mexican wolf in Arizona is said to have occurred in 1970, when a lone animal wandered across the U.S.-Mexico border.

It, too, was killed.

Today, there are 137 Mexican wolves in captivity, waiting to be released into the wild. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's reintroduction program represents the

last and best hope for a species that has been on the Endangered Species List since 1976.

Now in the comment phase, a draft Environmental Impact Statement suggests that the rarest subspecies of gray wolf in the world be reintroduced onto public lands in one of two regions, to be followed by a subsequent reintroduction in the other area, if feasible. Under consideration are the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico and the Blue Range area of Arizona.

In time, the wolves would be allowed to recolonize within wolf recovery areas. The Blue Range recovery area is about 7,000 square miles and includes all of the Apache and Gila National Forests in Arizona and New Mexico.

These are the wolf's natural range, and for far too long the wolf's howl has been silent.

Naturally, ranchers aren't jumping for joy at the prospect of wolf reintroduction. They conjure up visions of wolf packs slaughtering their livestock.

This is the sort of image that strains credulity. Sure, there may be an isolated killing of a calf, but that's the cost of doing business on lands that belong to all of us. Ranchers on public lands are subsidized to the hilt as is, and it is about time they accepted the fact that their lives cannot and should not be free of all hazards known to man.

Will an eradication program for the diamondback rattlesnake be next?

In an effort to win over some ranchers and build up tolerance toward wolves, the Defenders of Wildlife has set up a \$120,000 fund to compensate livestock owners who can document a loss by a wolf attack. Since 1987, the fund has been tapped only 12 times -- hardly evidence of wolves living up to their image of vicious predators.

If more proof is needed, take a look at the reintroduction program at Yellowstone National Park and in Idaho last spring. They're success stories, and no livestock have been killed by wolves.

But myths die hard. Add to that truism the wolf as a larger than life symbol for the Endangered Species Act now under assault in Congress and in the West, and the prognosis for a well thought out recovery program nearly 20 years in the making doesn't look quite as good as it once did.

Crucial to Arizona's continued participation is support by the state Game & Fish Commission, five individuals who just might pull the plug when they meet today at 1:30 p.m. To do so would go against the wishes of most Arizonans and could sound the death knell for wolves in Arizona's wilds.

Bobbie Holaday, director of Preserve Arizona's Wolves, says commission withdrawal would set any recovery program back 10 years or more. She notes that only 20 wolves could be released at White Sands.

"Only with the Blue Range area can the FWS fulfill their goal of 100 wolves in the wild," Holaday says. "In another 10 years we might not have an animal capable of surviving in the wild after too many years in captivity."

Commissioners ought not to let this opportunity slip past.

It's time for courage and vision, time to give life to a dying species, and time to let the howls of El Lobo echo through the forests once more.