

June 1998

Third Annual Conference on Animals and the Law

Nina Fascione

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/pelr>

Recommended Citation

Nina Fascione, *Third Annual Conference on Animals and the Law*, 15 Pace Envtl. L. Rev. 483 (1998)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58948/0738-6206.1347>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/pelr/vol15/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Law at DigitalCommons@Pace. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pace Environmental Law Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Pace. For more information, please contact dheller2@law.pace.edu.

NINA FASCIONE

Good morning and thank you very much. I would like to actually thank Larry Levinson and Jill Mariani for providing this forum for us to talk about this controversial issue. Although, I am happy to say that I am sure it will be less controversial for the New York City Bar Association meeting than it is for all those hunting groups that I address upstate. I am going to talk about some of the general issues surrounding wolf reintroduction. Defenders of Wildlife is a national nonprofit conservation organization based in Washington. We have about 210,000 members nationwide including about 25,000 in New York State. We are, as I said, headquartered in Washington D.C. but we do have field offices all over including two based in New York, one at the Utica Zoo and there is also one in upstate New York in Plattsburg. We actually celebrated our fiftieth birthday this year. We have been around since 1947.

So why is Defenders of Wildlife reintroducing wolves in New York? Defenders was actually founded as an organization to work on predator restoration and we were involved very intensely with the Yellowstone reintroduction for the last twenty years. We have a full time southwestern representative who works on Mexican wolf recovery. We have been involved with red wolf recovery for years, so it really was a logical step for us, after the Yellowstone success occurred, to start looking at other areas that were identified as possible sites for wolf recovery. In the 1992 recovery plan for the eastern timberwolf, the Fish and Wildlife Service identified several areas in the northeast as potential sites for recovery, two in New England, one in eastern Maine, one on the Maine-New Hampshire border and another in the Adirondack Park in New York. New studies, including a recent study sponsored by the Wildlife Conservation Society, have indicated that natural recovery is a possibility into New England and, in fact, there have been two wolves killed in Maine

in the past several years, which have probably migrated down from Canada. Granted, two wolves does not a viable population make, but nonetheless the corridors probably exist and Defenders is, of course, fully supportive of encouraging recovery into New England. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that natural recovery will take place in New York because of significant barriers between existing wolf populations in Canada and New York such as highways on the northern side of the St. Lawrence Seaway and other barriers. So, we are actively looking at possible reintroduction of wolves into the state.

The animal that we are talking about is *canis lupus lycaon*. It is a subspecies of the gray wolf, which is also called the eastern timberwolf and it does not exist in the United States. At present, the recovery plan for the eastern timberwolf includes the animals that are based in the Great Lakes states, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the animals that are gone from the northeast. However, scientists, including the folks in the Fish and Wildlife Service, recently concurred that the animals in the Great Lake states are actually a different subspecies than the ones that used to exist in the Northeast. I should point out that wolves have been gone for about one hundred years from the northeast.

The first step in any recovery program for any species is to conduct a feasibility study which looks at the biological potential for restoration, as well as, the economic and social implications. Defenders at our Albany Wolf Conference last year pledged to raise the money for a feasibility study. We are estimating it could run about \$100,000. We held a fundraiser in New York this spring of the citizens advisory committee that is comprised of the whole gambit of stakeholders from the park. Meetings have also been held to really develop the issues that need to be examined in a feasibility study and I will talk about some of those issues.

Habitat and land use are obviously huge issues. The Adirondack Park is large. Actually, outside of Alaska it is the largest public park in the United States at six million acres or 22,000 square kilometers. Scientists estimate that it takes between ten and 13,000 square kilometers to maintain a via-

ble wolf population, so, clearly, there is enough land in the Adirondacks but what scientists need to determine is whether the particular mix in the Adirondacks of public and private land in the park is suitable for a wolf population. Red wolf recovery in the Southeast has occurred on a similar mix of public and private land, which is about 300,000 square miles of private land and 250,000 square miles of public land in North Carolina. The private landowners have a variety of voluntary agreements with the Fish and Wildlife Service to allow red wolves on their property and the red wolf recovery program has been a huge biological success. The wolves are doing very well with that area. There are approximately sixty red wolves residing in that area now.

Other biological issues that involve the land are whether or not there is enough habitat, whether or not there is enough prey in the Adirondacks and whether or not there are enough deer to sustain wolves and the hunting industry that is very important in the Adirondack Park. There are approximately 70,000 deer in the Adirondacks. If a wolf population in the Adirondacks were to reach about 150 animals they would take approximately between 1700 and 4500 deer per year. That is between three and seven percent of the deer population. Now, winter mortality in the Adirondack Park is pretty severe. It is between twelve and eighteen percent. So, we surmised that the wolf take of deer would be pretty minor and probably not be an addition to the winter mortality but rather compensatory. In other words, for the most part, deer that wolves would take would be deer that might be likely to die in the winter anyway.

Another big issue is what the road density would be. On average, Adirondack Park has about four to five kilometers of road per square kilometer. Now, estimates for what wolves need to sustain a healthy population vary but, by all estimates, this is lower. So, again, on a preliminary analysis, road density looks like it would be suitable for wolf recovery. Another issue is human density, which varies within the park from between one and seventeen people per square kilometer. The average is 5.5 people per square kilometer but, again,

this is pretty low and lower than what scientists estimate is necessary to sustain wolf recovery.

Sociological issues are obviously a huge factor, as important, if not more important than the biological factors. The crucial issue is what people think about returning wolves to the park, especially what the 130,000 people who reside in the park think about having wolves put in their backyards, and this can really make or break the effort. Last year, Defenders sponsored a sociological and attitude survey about wolf recovery in New York. It was a fairly large survey, about 1000 people. We hired a polling firm and they polled 500 New Yorkers in general, 500 people within the Adirondack Park and 200 people in New England. It was a very long questionnaire, about eighty four questions and it asked about their attitudes toward wildlife in general, the Adirondack Park, wolves in general and specifically wolf reintroduction into the Adirondack Park. The results surprised everybody, including us. It showed that eighty- four percent of New Englanders, eighty percent of New Yorkers, and a very surprising seventy-six percent of Adirondackers were supportive of wolf reintroduction into the Adirondack Park.

Sixty-seven percent of the hunters polled said that they would support reintroduction into the Adirondack Park. Now, I do have to point out two things: nineteen percent of the hunters said they are adamantly opposed to wolf recovery within the Adirondack Park and that is actually a very large percent of people who are going to vocally fight you.

At the very beginning and end of the survey we asked the same question, "do you support wolf reintroduction?" The percentage of people stayed the same, however, they more strongly supported it at the end of this long questionnaire on wolf reintroduction.

The other caveat that I have to bring out about the survey is that we conducted the survey over a year ago before we had our very large Albany Wolf Conference and before this wolf issue had hit anybody's radar screen. So, although the methodology of the survey is, I think, flawless, when people were asked this question they had not heard anything about the wolf issue. After our Conference and after the wolf issue

hit the front page of every newspaper, the opposition become more vocal. I suspect that if we redid the survey now, we would frankly get very different results because the opposition is extremely effective in terms of lobbying.

So, what are the benefits of returning wolves? Clearly, there are biological benefits of restoring the ecosystem to a more natural and complete state. We believe these are moral benefits of feeling like you have returned a predator that humans were responsible for eliminating in the first place. Also, there are very clear economic benefits of wolf restoration. For example, there have been wolf howling events held where people come to listen to the wolves howl in response to the park ranger's howl. This event has been very successful and has brought hundreds of people into the event. This obviously brings in a lot of money to the region, people eating in restaurants, people staying in hotels and people paying park entrance fees.

There have been very similar benefits in all the other areas with wolf restoration. There have been studies in the Northern Rocky region showing millions of dollars in increased tourist revenue. Cornell University did a study in North Carolina showing, again, millions of dollars in increased revenue because of people coming to see the wolves. In Minnesota, where they have a wolf center and conduct wolf howls, the same thing, millions of dollars annually in increased revenue.

Other concerns from park residents and people in up-state New York of course include whether wolves will kill livestock. Whether wolves will roam outside of the reintroduction area and kill livestock is something that needs to be looked at in a feasibility study.

However, livestock depredations from wolves tend to be pretty low. As an example, in 1996, 74 out of 232,000 cattle were killed in Minnesota, in a state that has almost 2500 wolves. So, again the rate is pretty low. In 1987, Defenders established a compensation fund to pay farmers and ranchers for livestock losses to wolves. In the ten years that we have had this fund, we have only paid about 35,000 dollars to about thirty-two ranchers for livestock loss to wolves. This is

only a miniscule amount of money if you compare livestock losses to other things like disease, coyotes and other factors. Also, we have pledged to expand this compensation fund to the Northeast.

If you are worried about pet depravation, every year in Minnesota, which again has a population of about 2500 wolves, only 3 of 24,000 dogs are taken annually.

So, Defenders has been doing some educational programs to try to alleviate these fears and let them know about the low rate of livestock/pet depravation and human safety issues which are not really an issue. We have a Utica based staff person who takes an information booth around the state to country fairs in order to provide that information.

Defenders every year for the past couple of years have sponsored the Colorado based group, Mission Wolf, which uses ambassador wolves. These are animals that people have received as pets and then could not provide for them. It is a sanctuary for these homeless wolves. They have two wolves that are friendly enough and adore traveling enough that they take around to do educational programs and we work with them. The outreach is unbelievable and I know that using these animals is a little controversial, however, I personally do not have any doubt about the benefits of using them and the educational message we can get across. Legislative support at all levels is going to be essential to moving this initiative forward.

To conclude, perhaps New Yorkers, upstate and downstate will decide that they once again want to hear the howl of the wolf in the United States. I would like to leave you all thinking about the message it would send to the world if New York State could undertake such a tremendous conservation program as returning such a large and majestic predator.