



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

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Idaho Gray Wolf Recovery - Wildlife Program, Nez Perce Tribe

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In 1995 the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) resolved to reintroduce gray wolves to their traditional habitat in the northern Rocky Mountains. State governments are the Fish and Wildlife Service's traditional partners in such efforts, but giving substance to local opinion, the governments of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming declined to participate in the wolf recovery program. USFWS remained committed to working with the states in the future, but their present non-participation created a vacuum—the Service needed to find an alternate partner to take responsibility for implementation.

The Nez Perce Tribe (headquartered in Lapwai, Idaho) was one possibility. Many of the Tribe's members were in favor of wolf reintroduction, and the Tribe itself had sought and gained the right to participate in an earlier stage of the recovery program, the drafting of the environmental impact statement. Yet the Tribe's leaders knew that further involvement would require both technical capacity and political courage. The implementation agent would have to be able to monitor and manage the wolf population across a vast, rugged, and largely roadless wilderness area encompassing nearly 13 million acres of central Idaho. And, management would have to occur in the face of strong opposition from powerful rancher and hunter organizations and from states rights advocates. Professional wildlife staff, access to appropriate equipment, and a willingness to be "wolf ambassadors" would be vital components of any implementation plan.

Instead of tackling these challenges independently, the Nez Perce Tribe had hoped to partner with the State of Idaho in the recovery effort. With that possibility no longer available, the Nez Perce became determined to gain the opportunity to manage wolf recovery themselves. To that end, they entered into partnership talks with the USFWS—but they did so with forethought and strategy. In particular, the Tribe's Executive Committee believed their staff's experience with other recovery efforts would give them expertise on the technical aspects of the wolf recovery, and they chose to view the political situation as an opportunity to strengthen external relationships. Several concrete steps followed: the Tribe signed a cooperative agreement with the USFWS, developed a Gray Wolf Recovery and Management Plan for Idaho, and gained approval of that plan from the USFWS.

While the USFWS retains ultimate responsibility for wolf recovery, the Nez Perce plan adopts an innovative team approach to accomplish the program's four key tasks—monitoring, wolf management and control, research, and education and outreach. The Tribe is primarily responsible for monitoring the wolves. Tribal biologists gather data about the wolves' movements, food habits, habitat use, and reproductive success. Wolf management and control is a team responsibility. Wildlife Services, a Division of the United States Department of Agriculture, is under the direction of the USFWS to determine if depredations on livestock are caused by wolves. After verification, tribal biologists capture and relocate the wolves to which attacks have

been attributed.

The USFWS handles law enforcement, addresses policy issues, and when necessary, authorizes lethal control measures. Research and education and outreach are conducted by an even larger group of program cooperators. The Tribe, federal agencies, special interest groups, and affected parties together conduct research and address public concerns about the effects of wolves on livestock and game populations.

After only four and a half years of implementation, the Program is a success on all fronts. From the standpoint of biology, the packs are healthy, and because the number of breeding pairs in Idaho has reached the target level, talks are underway to start the next phase of the reintroduction process—delisting.

The Tribe also has adeptly addressed the political sensitivities of wolf recovery. Through an effective combination of outreach, communication, and coalition building, the Tribe's recovery program has been able to make substantial progress in responding to livestock producers' concerns. In its work with these and other stakeholders, the Tribe has effectively coupled a neutral political position with an active commitment to answer concerns, develop solutions, and defuse conflicts—an accomplishment that has won the Nez Perce respect in many circles. Similarly, in its work with the general public, the Tribe's goal has been to educate and assuage concerns. For example, the Tribe works with the Wolf Education and Research Center, a non-profit outreach organization, to provide a broad dissemination of information about wolves, the reintroduction program, and the Nez Perce role in the wolf recovery.

Cultural benefits are another measure of the Recovery Program's successes. Being Nez Perce entails respecting and celebrating wolves, and in the future, it will even mean harvesting wolves. This aspect of Nez Perce culture had languished as local populations of wolves disappeared, but it has been refreshed through wolf reintroduction. Today, wolf legends that had been sequestered within families are shared widely in the Tribe, baby naming ceremonies include wolf names, and dancers are once again using wolf pelts as part of their regalia.

Finally, and significantly, the Gray Wolf Recovery Program has been a success in terms of tribal self-determination and tribal sovereignty. The Nez Perce were able to make a credible offer to implement wolf recovery because of the expertise, track record, and reputation the Tribe had earned in earlier wildlife management efforts. Just as these investments in institutional effectiveness and technical capacity enabled the Nez Perce to seize an opportunity for increased self-determination, its effective management of wolf recovery is now opening even more doors—proof that good governance and enhanced self-determination go hand-in-hand. The Tribe's entrepreneurial involvement in wildlife management has similarly increased tribal sovereignty. The Wolf Recovery Plan gives the Tribe a new measure of responsibility over off-reservation treaty lands (on which Indian jurisdiction is otherwise limited) and promotes sovereign, government-to-citizen or government -to- government relationships between the Tribe and private land owners, the State of Idaho, and other governmental entities.

Today the Nez Perce people draw parallels between the wolves' fate and their own. Both were deprived of habitat necessary for their traditional means of support, and both were systematically driven off their land at a great cost of life. Thus, it is not surprising that the wolf recovery is intertwined in many tribal members' minds with Nez Perce survival and resurgence. The Wolf Recovery Program is an exercise in effective tribal administration, but it is also an investment in culture, community, and nationhood.