Grey Wolves Making a Comeback

Every day we hear about species with dwindling numbers, struggling against extinction. It is not very often that we hear about a species recovering.

Grey wolves are doing just that in Wisconsin.

Today there areover 800 grey wolves in Wisconsin. That’s enough for them to be taken off the endangered species list.

Wolves are also making a comeback in Yellowstone National Park, Isle Royal, the Rocky Mountains, and other states in the Great Lakes region.

“The biology of wolves allows them to repopulate distant areas quickly,” says University of Wisconsin—Madison associatet professor of environmental studies Adrian Treves.

Treves, who studies endangered carnivores, also cites deer population recovery, forest recovery, endangered species protections and changing human attitudes as factors in the wolf revival process.

Historically, people and wolves have not gotten along. According to Treves, wolves left Wisconsin because of deforestation for agriculture and development and because of hunting. Many hunters and farmers saw wolves as a threat to game and livestock.

What people fail to realize is that wolves and other large predators are essential to the ecosystem.

According to the paper “Are Wolf-Mediated Trophic Cascades Boosting Biodiversity in the Great Lakes Region?” by Tom Rooney and Dean Anderson, wolves limit the white tailed deer population in the great lakes region. The also keep prey species on alert and moving. This allows for more woody growth in areas previously heavily grazed.

The paper also says that there is strong evidence showing behavior changes in prey animals when wolves are nearby. Deer tend to stay on the outskirts of the wolf territory. It is hypothesized that deer stay here because the overlap between packs. In these areas, wolves have a higher mortality rate because of conflicts with other packs. It creates a “buffer zone” for the deer.

Wolves also keep prey species on alert. When elk and deer sense wolf activity, they travel more and have shorter grazing periods. This allows for more woody growth in areas previously heavily grazed.

Wolves also subsidize the diets of scavengers like ravens and crows who will eat left over scraps.

Despite over 40 years of research on wolves, there is still a lot to learn about wolves effects on the ecosystem.

“The recent recovery of wolves in the Great Lakes region presents us with a unique opportunity,” says Rooney and Anderson, “a chance to understand how a top predator influences biodiversity on a regional scale. We have not yet even scratched the surface, and the most exciting discoveries still lie ahead.”

As populations continue to increase, there is more and more debate about how humans should react to the wolves. Some experts believe that hunting could be a key way to achieve optimal wolf populations. Others worry that since the population overwhelmingly has negative attitudes towards wolves, hunting would decimate the population.

The stuff in red is an optional ending. What do you think? It’s pretty good. I might add that hunting could exacerbate problems if it’s not designed scientifically with sustainability and conflict-reduction in mind.