

OLYMPIC PARK'S MISSING PREDATOR

A lawmaker and biologists consider reintroduction of the gray wolf

BY TIM McNULTY

ALIGHT RAIN HAS BEEN falling all morning. It has filtered through tiers of moss and lichens that shroud the high canopy of the Hoh Valley rainforest in Washington's Olympic National Park and the dotted spring-green beds of oxalis and vanilla leaf that carpet the forest floor. But now it's beginning to rain in earnest.

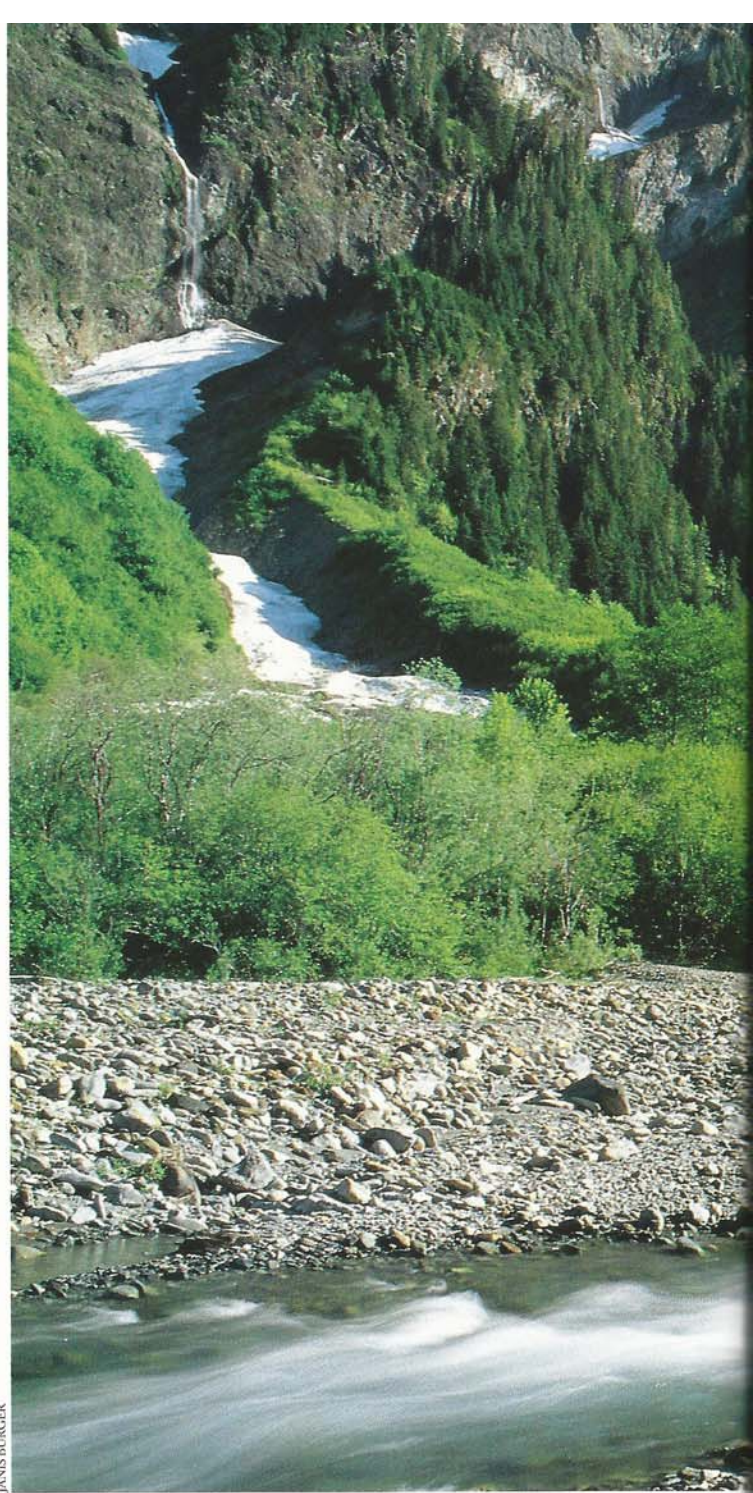
I've hiked several miles up the valley searching for the forest's most prized inhabitants, Roosevelt elk. So far they have remained elusive. On my way out, I catch some movement in a stand of hemlocks. A band of about 20 elk look up from their browse of huckleberry shoots, then drift deeper into the rainy forest. I watch their dark brown coats and buff-colored rump patches disappear among massive rainforest trees.

Roosevelt elk are the largest of North American elk, and their presence here, in the greatest temperate rainforest preserve outside Alaska, is no coincidence. These elk coevolved with the rainforest; their grazing has shaped the forest's open, parklike character, and it determines to a great extent the patterns of vegetation.

Olympic National Park protects the largest population of Roosevelt elk in the Northwest. Like the rainforest, the elk had a key evolutionary partner, one that shaped and honed their nature as keenly as they did this forest. That was the wolf.

Last January, Defenders of Wildlife President Rodger Schlickeisen and Representative Norm Dicks (D-Washington), whose congressional district covers the Olympic Peninsula, announced a proposal to study the feasibility of bringing wolves back to their former range on the peninsula. Earlier that month, Schlickeisen accompanied the congressman to Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario where they joined in a night howl with wolves. Dicks, a member of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, has long supported wolf restoration projects. He was instrumental in obtaining funds for the red wolf captive-breeding program which resulted in successful reintroductions

JANIS BURGER



in North Carolina and Tennessee, and he backed the recent Yellowstone and central Idaho wolf reintroductions. He has helped provide funds for a program aimed at restoring the Mexican wolf to the Southwest.

To jump-start the process for the Olympic Peninsula, Dicks joined with Defenders in cosponsoring an April wolf conference in Olympic Park. The conference brought wolf biologists and experts from government, universities and the private sector together with area residents and community leaders to share information and address local concerns.

Although the steep forested foothills that surround the nearly million-acre park harbor few sheep or cattle operations, the Olympic Peninsula shares a common western history of relentless persecution of predators — and systematic elimination of



wolves. The story is sadly familiar. By the late 19th century, meat hunting by early peninsula settlers had taken a heavy toll on deer and elk. But the commercial hunters who followed decimated the elk herds. Elk were slaughtered wholesale for their eye teeth, which fetched \$15 as watch fobs for members of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, a fraternal organization. By 1906, barely 20 years after the peninsula's remote western valleys were homesteaded, fewer than 2,000 elk survived on the entire 5,000-square-mile peninsula.

In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed a 600,000-acre Mount Olympus National Monument to protect the dwindling elk herds (a legacy the elk carry in their common name). It took another three decades of struggle to establish Olympic Park. But when the act creating the park was signed

Enchanted Valley on the Quinault River's East Fork is one of the places in Olympic Park being eyed for return of wolves.

into law by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938, the question of wolves in the Olympic Mountains was moot.

Little is known about the ecology of wolves in the Olympics, but the historic record shows that 19th-century visitors found wolves abundant. In 1861, ethnologist James Swan found "innumerable quantities of wolves" on Sequim Prairie, where their "dismal howlings make night hideous, and cause the traveler, who may be benighted in the woods, great apprehension." Billy Everett, who began exploring the mountains as a boy in the 1880s, told biologist Olaus Murie that wolves were numerous then. Wolves were reported common as late as 1894.



Although settlement came relatively late to this rainy and remote peninsula, settlers lost no time in launching an intensive war against predators. Here as elsewhere, it was carried out with guns, traps and strychnine-baited carcasses. Ranchers were joined in their efforts by government agents. By the turn of the century, already weakened by the population crash of their prey base, wolf numbers had plummeted.

In the winter of 1916-17 the U.S. Biological Survey (predecessor of the present U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) sent Murie to the peninsula to trap wolves. His field notes indicate he found wolf tracks around his traps on the Elwha River on seven occa-

sions, but wolves had grown extremely cautious by then, and Murie failed to trap a single wolf. At that time Chris Morgenroth, an Olympic National Forest ranger, estimated the peninsula-wide wolf population at 50.

In a 1993 progress report on a wolf investigation for the Washington Department of Wildlife, biologists Jon Almack, Scott Fitkin and Brenda Cunningham listed 48 confirmed Olympic Peninsula wolf observations between 1897 and 1929.

There is physical evidence in two of these cases. In 1919 Amos Cameron caught a male wolf in a bear trap in snow in the upper Gray Wolf River country. He reported seeing the wolf

"traveling in a pack of six following a band of elk." Its pelt has been preserved in a small museum in Sequim, where I live. In 1920 Grant Humes trapped another male wolf on the Elwha River and its skull was sent to the National Museum in Washington. Clallam County records show that bounties were paid on wolves on the north peninsula until 1929.

On a cool sunny day last spring, with fresh snow on the mountains and maples just leafing out in the valley forests, I paid a visit to the Cameron wolf's remains. I was led out back to a crowded warehouse, where the hide had been spread over a clean white sheet. Its fur was thick, a soft, tawny buff in the dusty light falling from a window. A coarse black stripe ran from the thick fur of its shoulders to its tail, and the cinnamon hue of its ears and shoulders carried lightly to its flanks and legs. The hide measured six feet from nose to tail; Cameron had estimated the wolf's weight at 100 pounds. Of the evolutionary magic that transpires between predator and prey, the wolf could no longer tell. But its pelt was beautiful. I cannot imagine how much more beautiful the living animal must have been in the wild.

IN 1934 AND 1935 noted biologist Adolph Murie (Olaus's half-brother) was sent to the Olympic Peninsula to conduct wildlife studies for the National Park Service looking toward park designation. His report made it official: the wolf was extinct on the peninsula. But within its pages, the future author of *The Wolves of Mount McKinley* — a book instrumental in changing scientists' perception of wolves — broached an idea that was new. "If liberal boundaries are given to the park," he wrote, "wolves might possibly be reintroduced to the region." He backed this up with a formal recommendation to the Park Service that wolves be reintroduced.

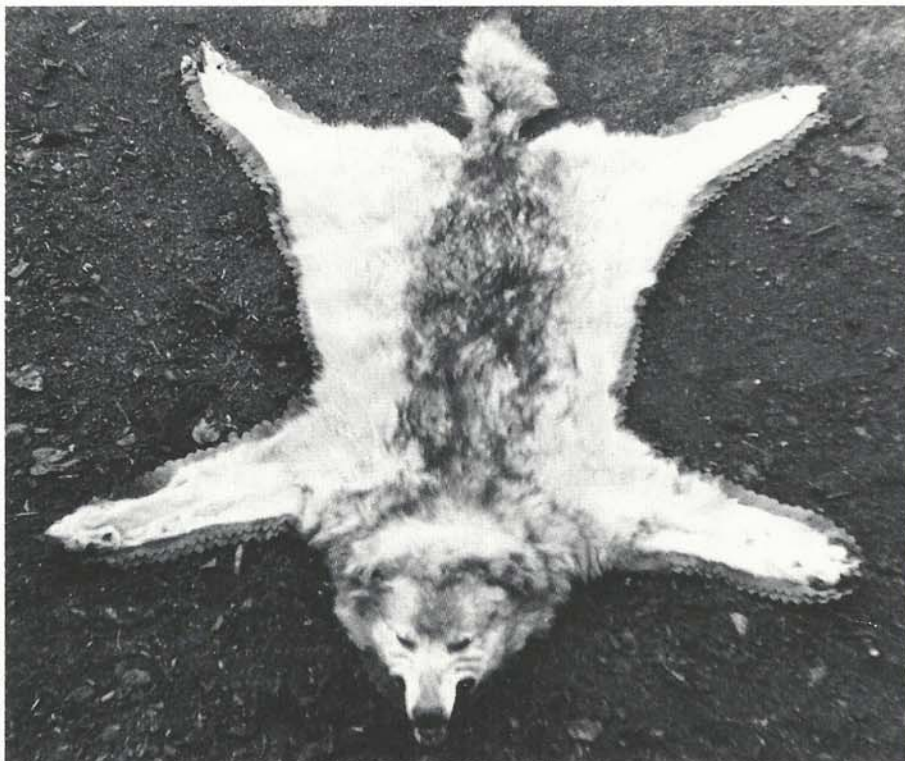
The profound change in Americans' attitude toward wildlife and the natural world that crystallized in the 1960s and 1970s led to passage of the 1973 Endangered Species Act. The act reversed our national policy on wolves by protecting the few left in the lower 48 states from jeopardy and directing federal agencies to work toward recovering viable populations in their historic ranges. In a draft management plan released the following year, Olympic National Park officials concluded that a study was needed to determine the adequacy of the habitat for sustaining a breeding population of wolves.

Peter Dratch and Cindy Swanberg, then undergraduates at The Evergreen State College in nearby Olympia, rallied to the cause. They won National Science Foundation funding and headed up a team that did a case study on wolf reintroduction in Olympic Park. Their 1975 study assessed the feasibility of reintroduction and potential effects on the two principal prey species, black-tailed deer and Roosevelt elk. On the basis of available wildlife data

augmented by pellet counts and computer modeling, the study determined that Olympic Park could support a population of 40 to 60 wolves and that wolf predation would not be the major factor contributing to deer and elk mortalities.

Dratch, now a senior scientist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, traces his career as a wildlife geneticist to the study. His co-leader, Cindy Swanberg, now a biologist with Tacoma Public Utilities in Washington, also sees the study as pivotal to her career. "Of all the projects I've worked on," she recalls, "I'm still most excited by that one."

Despite the enthusiasm with which the Evergreen study was received by conservationists in the Northwest, action toward wolf reintroduction in Olympic Park was slow in coming from



VICTOR B. SCHEFFER



G.R. BACHFROM VICTOR B. SCHEFFER

At top is the pelt of a wolf trapped in November, 1919, by rancher Amos Cameron on Cameron Creek in Gray Wolf River country in what is now Olympic Park. The wolf below was trapped six weeks later on the Humes ranch in the Elwha River Valley, also now part of the park.

the National Park Service, but not for lack of stated intent. In 1981, a Park Service Advisory Board task force chaired by renowned wolf biologist Durward Allen recommended that planning and public information programs be started for “early experimental reintroductions” of wolves in the two national parks most promising for the purpose, Yellowstone and Olympic. Ten years later, Olympic Park echoed this — and its own 1974 recommendation — in a resource management plan declaring: “It is timely for Olympic to initiate studies of the feasibility of wolf reintroduction...[and to] participate in inter-agency programs to increase public awareness of wolf ecology and recovery.”

In the meantime, Canadian wolves were beginning to reintroduce themselves in northern Washington. Since the 1980s, numerous wolf sightings have been reported in the Cascade Mountains and along the state’s northern tier from the Okanogan River east into the Selkirk Mountains at the Idaho border. In the Cascades the sightings extend nearly as far south

as Mt. St. Helens. Some have included pups. The data “indicate the presence of a widely distributed, resident, reproducing gray wolf population in Washington,” said biologists Almack, Fitkin and Cunningham in their 1993 report. Biologists have not documented a functioning wolf pack in the Cascades, however. Most observations have involved only single animals, suggesting that natural recovery has not yet occurred.

But the 15-mile-wide Strait of Juan de Fuca, which separates the Olympic Peninsula from the nearest population of wolves on Canada’s Vancouver Island, and Puget Sound and the heavily populated areas along the Interstate 5 corridor that isolates the peninsula from the Cascades to the east appear to make natural wolf recolonization of the peninsula very unlikely, according to the biologists.

Favorable public sentiment toward wolves has been growing in western Washington. A number of Northwest organizations have undertaken educational and lobbying efforts on behalf of wolves. Wolf Haven International, an educational and research

facility in Tenino, Washington, has educated the public on the biology of wolves and their role in natural systems, and the Washington Wolf Project and Olympic Park Associates have pressed for reintroduction.

But on the Olympic Peninsula, a place historian Murray Morgan called “the last frontier,” old attitudes die hard. At a meeting hosted by a property rights group in Port Angeles last winter, Wolf Haven biologist Jack Laufer smiled when posed his most frequently encountered question: Why return wolves to the Olympics? “Each species is like a spoke in a wheel,” he told the crowd. “As predators, wolves were an important part of this ecosystem for more than 8,000 years. We destroyed that system when we got rid of the wolf. Now, it’s our obligation to restore it.”

Earlier, Laufer fielded questions from members of the Clallam Citizens Coalition worried about wolves chasing cougars out of the park (“not likely”), wolves killing livestock (“very few”), wolves killing people (“no”).

Marilyn Lewis, granddaughter of peninsula pioneer John Heulsdonk, the legendary “Iron Man of the Hoh” who was known for among other things poisoning wolves out of the Hoh Valley, complained of being overrun with predators. “I grew up with the pioneers who got rid of these predators,” she said. “We don’t need them back!”

Another audience member was blunter. “You can talk about laws,” he told Laufer, “but I’m an outlaw. If



TOM AND PAT LEBSON

The rich temperate rainforest shading this small stream in the Hoh River Valley is typical of the habitat making Olympic Park suitable for reintroduction of the wolf.

there's wolves on my place, I'll take my Winchester and hunt them down and shoot them."

"Wolf habitat is in the human mind," Ed Bangs told me a few weeks later. Bangs coordinates wolf recovery in the northern Rockies for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and he has attended more than 100 public meetings on wolf reintroduction. "Wolves can survive almost anywhere there's prey," he explained, "if people let them."

We were driving west on the Olympic Peninsula through heavily logged lands toward the Hoh Valley rainforest. Stopping for lunch in the small logging town of Forks, we saw a black-and-white poster of timber workers taped to the cafe door. Across it, in red, stretched the legend, "Loggers: an Endangered Species."

Bangs compares the Olympic Peninsula to Alaska's Kenai Peninsula where about 150 wolves occupy a core territory closely defined by the boundaries of a national wildlife refuge. "From what I've seen, there's no doubt in my mind that wolves can live here," he told me. "Reintroduction would be easy to do, and pretty cheap." A healthy population of wolves on Vancouver Island could serve as donors. The island has an environment and prey base similar to the peninsula's, although it has fewer elk. Wolves there prey primarily on black-tailed deer. A wolf control program in the late 1980s reduced the island population by 250 wolves. "It's my guess that the Canadian government would be more than happy to donate a few wolves to the Olympics," Bangs said.

A mounted elk head with a huge spreading rack of antlers overlooked our lunch table. "Everything we admire most about elk is the result of predation, mainly by wolves," Bangs mused. "To say you want to have elk but not wolves is like loving the 'Mona Lisa' but hating Leonardo da Vinci."

MORE THAN 100 people crowded into historic Rosemary Inn on Lake Crescent on April 18 to attend the Olympic Wolf Conference. Congressman Dicks told the standing-room audience that his experience with wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone had shown him that it not only led to a better balance in the ecosystem but quickly became a catalyst for increased visitation in the park — an observation not lost on representatives of the Olympic Peninsula's economically hard-pressed rural communities. Defenders' Schlickeisen told the audience he was pleased at the level of interest in wolf reintroduction. He sees the wolf as a symbol of wild nature, he said, acting through its charisma as an ambassador to a deeper appreciation and understanding of humankind's role in the natural world.

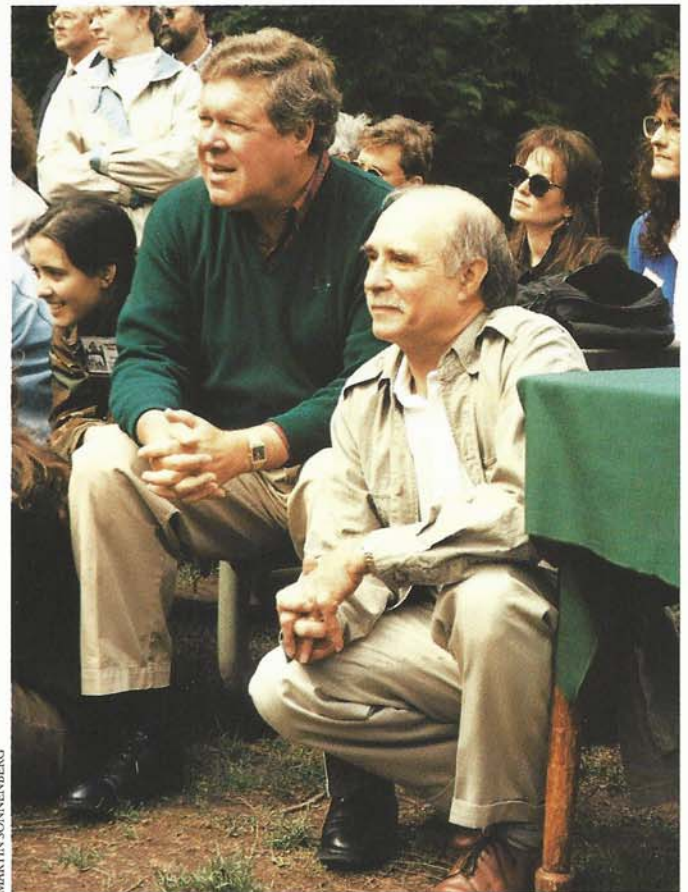
Ed Bangs confessed that he prefers to show slides at public wolf meetings in the West. "Chances of being hit by gunfire in a darkened room are far less," he said. Setting the tone for a day of straight talk, he told the crowd: "Wolves sometimes eat people's livestock." But under an "experimental, nonessential" provision of the Endangered Species Act used at Yellowstone, ranchers are granted the right to destroy wolves found killing their stock. And Defenders has pledged to compensate ranchers for any livestock lost to wolves.

Bangs explained that if wolves are allowed to prey on live-

stock, they will teach that behavior to others and put the whole recovery program at risk. In the Yellowstone ecosystem a wolf that preys on livestock is quickly relocated by government agents after the first offense, killed after the second. "We shouldn't tolerate it," Bangs assured agriculturists, "and we won't."

Bangs walked the audience through the reintroduction process for the northern Rockies. In central Idaho, adolescent wolves trapped in Canada were given "top-notch medical care" and released directly into a large wilderness area. At first the young wolves headed north toward home, covering an average of 60 to 70 miles. Eventually, Bangs explained, "like teenagers everywhere they found each other" and settled in.

This kind of "hard release" has the advantage of being the



Representative Norm Dicks, left, and Defenders president Rodger Schlickeisen at the April Olympic wolf conference.

least expensive option, and it would work on the Olympic Peninsula, Bangs told the audience. But it is not without costs. It invites a higher rate of incidental wolf mortality as wolves venture into more populated areas, he explained, and it is more difficult to predict where reintroduced wolves will end up. Nonetheless, he dubbed the Idaho reintroduction a success. "From the 1973 get-go to delisting the wolf from the endangered list in the region in 2002 it will cost each taxpayer five cents," he said. "That's not a bad investment."

Mike Phillips, Yellowstone wolf recovery coordinator who earlier played a major role in southeastern red wolf reintroduc-

tion, stressed collaboration of the Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and volunteer organizations as the key to successful reintroduction. Since the federal agencies wanted the wolves initially to establish territories in and around the park, managers opted in this case for a "soft release." Alberta and British Columbia wolves were trapped in family groups in areas known to be disease-free and ecologically similar to Yellowstone. They were then held for ten weeks in one-acre fenced enclosures in the park where they were fed twice weekly. "We minimized human contact with the wolves," Phillips said, "and every time we showed up to feed them the wolves became agitated. They eventually became tolerant of confinement, but they never grew tolerant of us."

THE WOLVES responded well to the delayed Yellowstone release, according to Phillips. "As predicted, they didn't run for the border," he said. "In fact, four of seven groups bred in captivity, surprising everyone." Phillips suggested that a similar soft-release program would work well in Olympic Park. Encouraging reintroduced wolves to establish territories in and near the park would also cut down on incidental mortalities, he predicted. Two years into the reintroduction at Yellowstone, mortality is about as expected, but reproduction is higher. "Wolves are hard-wired to breed," Phillips told the audience. "I guarantee you can recover wolves in Olympic National Park."

Brian Gilbert, a biologist with Plum Creek Timber Company, described experience managing private timber lands with wolf packs in residence. These are intensively managed lands, second-growth forests with high road densities, not unlike the managed forest lands surrounding Olympic Park. "We've worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state agencies to come up with cooperative solutions to potential conflicts, and the wolves are doing well," he said. Plum Creek has assisted with surveys and monitoring and permitted wolves to den and raise pups on its property, for which the company received a \$5,000 award from Defenders. And the company's close contact with local logging communities has helped foster an acceptance of wolves, largely because people don't see them as a threat, Gilbert said.

John Duffield, a University of Montana economist, cast wolf recovery in an economic light. To calculate the costs and benefits of wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone, he conducted a survey asking participants how much they would be willing to contribute to a fund supporting reintroduction. He then factored in the projected costs of reintroduction (opportunities lost to recreational hunters, livestock lost to predation, costs of wolf management). His analysis showed benefits outweigh-

ing costs by \$6 million to \$8 million. Rising Yellowstone visitation inspired by the wolves is expected to bring increased annual expenditures of up to \$23 million, he said.

Defenders northern Rockies representative Hank Fischer laid out details of Defenders' compensation fund for ranchers. Faced with the realization that ranchers were forced to bear the cost of livestock taken by wolves, Defenders established a \$100,000 fund in 1990 to compensate owners for the full value of stock lost to wolf predation. Since then, the interest alone has covered livestock losses (\$30,000 to date). The compensa-

tion fund will be available to livestock owners on the Olympic Peninsula if wolves are reintroduced there, Fischer said.

During a break outside the lodge, with the blue-green water of Lake Crescent shimmering through the trees, I asked Ron Humphrey, supervisor of the Olympic National Forest, what he thinks of the proposal. He said he finds the idea appealing but is concerned about funding priorities. "We've got species in trouble on the forest right now," he told me. "We're losing salmon; we've got problems with spotted owl and marbled murrelet populations. All involve very costly management programs. If we have to take away limited money for management of species that are on

the edge to study wolf reintroduction, does that make sense?"

I got essentially the same reply from Kurt Smitch, assistant regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Patti Happe of Olympic Park and Dave Brittell of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. However, Rodger Schlick-eisen said he believes because of what's been learned with reintroductions elsewhere that the total cost of preparing the environmental impact statement and reintroducing the wolves could be kept to less than \$500,000. And even that need not come at the expense of other wildlife projects, he added.

One question on everyone's mind, given the changes that have taken place on the peninsula since the 1920s, was whether the area can still support a viable wolf population. Patti Happe, Olympic Park wildlife biologist, was the first to address this question. She pointed out that today the wolf is the only missing species in the Olympic ecosystem. And prey are plentiful, she added. Of the park's 5,000 Roosevelt elk, a population that has remained stable since the 1950s, some 4,000 remain in the park year-round. Most of them are in the large westside valleys of the Hoh, Queets and Quinalt rivers, but some are also along the Elwha, which flows north. Estimated deer numbers are slightly less on winter range in the westside valleys, but deer are more populous on the steeper east side. Happe said her preliminary assessment was that reintroduction has the potential to be biologically successful.

Defenders conservation biologist Dennis Hosack followed



One of Olympic Park's black-tailed deer, which will be important prey if wolves become resident again.

ART WOLFE



up with some preliminary population estimates based on current wildlife figures. Using data collected from the Yellowstone reintroduction and factoring in Olympic's available winter range, which is close in acreage to that of Yellowstone, he calculated conservatively that Olympic Park by itself could accommodate between 25 and 60 wolves and that these animals would take between four and 15 percent of the park's deer and elk a year.

Dave Brittell mentioned potential problems that wolves preying on ungulates might raise with sport hunters. Although elk and deer numbers are stable in the old-growth forest of the park, elk populations outside the park are in steep decline. Total Olympic Peninsula elk numbers have dropped from 13,000 to 9,000 in the last decade. Hunters' take of elk on the west side of the peninsula has dropped from 517 animals in 1991 to 142 last year. Most biologists agree that the declines are closely related to forest succession. As conifers shade out leafy shrubs in young clearcuts, ungulate browse is reduced across large landscapes. The situation is often compounded by overhunting. This year, increased restrictions were placed on Olympic Peninsula hunters, and some may see wolves as one more factor that might limit their take in the future.

But Patti Happe, citing the stability of the park's elk populations, told me: "Cows in the park are generally older and breed less frequently. Some wolf predation would be compensated for by a larger population of younger cows that might be better at reproducing. And some wolf prey would be winterkill anyway."

Congressman Dicks is confident that local concerns can be addressed by a "ground up" process similar to the Yellowstone plan. "My instinct tells me reintroduction makes a lot of good

A herd of Roosevelt elk crosses the Hoh River in Olympic Park in spring. The Olympic Peninsula's 9,000 elk would play a big role in sustaining a restored wolf population.

sense," he said. "We've learned it could be done, that problems with cattle and sheep are manageable, and that threats to humans are remote."

At the close of the conference, Dicks shared a personal perspective with the audience. "You rarely in public life get a chance to correct a historic mistake. The government played a major role in eliminating the wolf. The government erred, and we have a real responsibility to repair that wrong," he declared.

Driving home after the conference, I passed a small billboard tucked among trees. Above the notice for the monthly John Birch Society meeting was the slogan: "EAT BEEF & LAMB. HUNDREDS OF WOLVES CAN'T BE WRONG."

I chuckled to myself over this contemporary voicing of an old myth. Then I thought of something Yellowstone's Mike Phillips had said. He stressed the need to be straight with local residents, to listen to their concerns and to follow through on what you promise. "There's a lot of fuss about Americans' lack of faith in their government," he said. "But if we do well by people in these reintroduction efforts, we may help convince them that the Endangered Species Act is an effective piece of legislation and that there are reasons to rebuild their faith in government." □

Tim McNulty is a poet and nature writer who lives in the foothills of the Olympic Mountains. His Olympic National Park: A Natural History Guide (Houghton Mifflin) was published last year.