

## Isle Royale likely to get 20-30 wolves over a 3-year span

March 20 2018, by Todd Spangler, Detroit Free Press

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The National Park Service on Friday formally moved forward with its proposal to put 20 to 30 wolves on Isle Royale in Lake Superior over three years to bolster the nearly extinct population on the island and cull the growing herd of moose.

The Park Service made the announcement that it had completed a final Environmental Impact Statement announcing the plan on Friday, with a Record of Decision to follow after a monthlong waiting period.

That Record of Decision will start the process of physically reintroducing wolves onto the island located 55 miles away from the Upper Peninsula across Lake Superior possibly as early as this fall, depending on the availability of funding and the procuring of suitable wolves, said Phyllis Green, the superintendent of Isle Royale National Park.

The 20-year cost of reintroducing wolves and monitoring them should be about \$2 million, according to a cost estimate included in the plan.

"Wolves are a key component of the Isle Royale heritage and part of what makes this [national park](#) one of Michigan's unique treasures," said U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, who has closely monitored the situation on the island and visited himself on occasion. "By reintroducing wolves onto the island, the National Park Service is also taking steps to restore and preserve the entire Isle Royale ecosystem."

Over the years, the Detroit Free Press has reported extensively on the question of whether to reintroduce wolves onto Isle Royale, a 45-mile-long island and national [park](#) known for its vast, largely untouched wilderness. Hunting is prohibited and the island—and its wolves and moose—have existed largely outside of human interference.

But in recent years, a longtime study of wolves and moose interaction on the island has found that due to inbreeding and disease, the pack of wolves had dwindled to just two, with the moose population exploding. That, in turn, could lead to the island being effectively stripped of vegetation by the moose herd, which would hurt other species.

In December, the annual wolf survey done by Michigan Technological University could only confirm a single wolf remaining on the island.

More than a year ago, in December 2016, the National Park Service released a draft proposal for putting 20 to 30 wolves on the remote island, which is only accessible by boat and is located far closer to the Canadian side of the lake than the Upper Peninsula.

Park Service personnel noted that while reintroducing wolves—which would be monitored by radio collars—resulted in "substantial impacts to (the island's) wilderness character." But it also addressed changing conditions, believed to be due to climate change, which have led to fewer ice bridges to the island for wolves to pass onto the island. Park Service officials felt their plan best balanced the two concerns.

"This is about more than wolves," Phyllis Green, superintendent of Isle Royale National Park, said at the time. "It's about the entire park ecosystem and where it is heading in the future with changing conditions."

The plan attracted nearly 5,000 comments, with some arguing that it sets

a dangerous precedent that may violate the federal Wilderness Act's requirement that lands remain "untrammelled" by human intervention. One well-known group, Wilderness Watch, called on the Park Service to not intervene, saying that "is the only alternative that respects the wolves autonomy and lets them decide whether or not they inhabit Isle Royale."

"Perhaps the wolves intuitively know of the genetic downsides to island isolation," the group wrote.

That stance contrasts to those by other groups in favor of reintroduction. Some, like the National Parks Conservation Association, argue that instead of a shorter window in which wolves would be reintroduced to the island—the proposed alternative allows for wolves to be put on the island from three to five years, depending on how they establish themselves—that it should be stretched over a much-longer 20-year window, with potentially even more wolves being placed there as needed.

"In the absence of [wolves](#)," the group said, "actions would be necessary to manage the moose population and/or undertake revegetation of balsam fir, which are both much more intrusive actions."

The final proposal is available online. There are also a limited number of hard copies available at park headquarters as well as public libraries in Houghton and Marquette as well as those in Superior, Wis., and Duluth, Minn.

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Citation: Isle Royale likely to get 20-30 wolves over a 3-year span (2018, March 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-isle-royale-wolves-year.html>

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