

# Why the feds should protect Midwest wolves from slaughter

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The bald eagle is America's symbol, but 70 years ago it was nearly extinct. Once numbering as many as half a million, the population in the lower 48 states had been reduced to fewer than 1,000 by pesticides,

hunting and destruction of habitat. Under the Endangered Species Act, bald eagles made a comeback. There are now some 70,000 across North America, including every state but Hawaii.

That's the definition of success in recovery of an endangered species. But it's not one that the Interior Department wants to follow for another treasured American creature: the [gray wolf](#).

The [federal government](#) once promoted eradication of wolves, an effort that came close to happening. But after gaining protected status in 1973, they, too, rebounded. There are now about 6,000 in nine states.

From the point of view of the Trump administration—and the Obama administration before it—that's good enough. These iconic predators once numbered in the millions and inhabited virtually the entire area of the lower 48. Today they exist in just a tenth of their historic range. But the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to remove them from the list of creatures deemed endangered or threatened.

The change, which has already happened in much of the West, would mean loss of protection in Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, which now have nearly 4,000 wolves. These states then could allow hunting, as all three did when wolves were temporarily delisted in 2012. Some 1,500 were killed. The same federal policy would apply in Washington, Oregon and California.

Gray wolves effectively would be limited to where they are now present, rather than be allowed to spread beyond that range. Remember the bald eagles? Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, told National Geographic, "We didn't declare them to be recovered until they were found in every state." Even afterward, hunting of the birds was not allowed.

Wolves could easily expand their territory in the absence of human predation, but some people prefer to keep their numbers down and their range tightly restricted. Farmers and ranchers regard them as a threat to livestock. There are also hunters who love the idea of killing wolves as trophies.

Most other Midwesterners, we'd bet, would prefer to avoid this unnecessary carnage. Taking away their federal protection in the Midwest is bound to mean a lot of slaughtered wolves. In Montana, 315 were killed in the hunting and trapping season that ended March 15. That's more than a third of the state's previous wolf population.

The Midwest once had lots of wolves, and eventually lost nearly all of them. Bringing them back has been a major achievement. But we're not alone in thinking this part of the country would benefit from having more of these beasts—which Midwesterners have been known to travel to Yellowstone or Glacier National Park in hopes of glimpsing. Closer to home, some tourists trek to the wolflands of Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin hoping for a photograph—or just a few howls.

Allowing the wolves to expand their range and population would strengthen our tenuous connection to our wild past. Delisting them, however, would mean premature death—by extermination—for a lot of [wolves](#). It would also be a big loss for people.

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