

SPECIAL REPORT BY MIKE CADE

LAND IN CRISIS

WOLVES AT THE DOOR IN CATRON COUNTY, NEW MEXICO.

The inhabitants of Catron County have always been tough and resilient. They first began drifting into this vast and rugged land in the 1880s and, by the turn of the century, had carved out a vibrant economy based on mining, logging and ranching.

For 90 years the formula worked well. Any young man, with hard work and a banker's handshake, could raise a family, build a business and pass it on to his children.

With the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, however, this rural economy began to decline. It seems all kinds of critters—the Southwestern willow flycatcher, the Cherokee crawler, the Chiricahua leopard frog, the loach minnow, to name a few—might suddenly be endangered after nearly a century of coexistence with lumberjacks and cowboys.

An adversarial relationship began to fester between the Forest Service and ranchers, who suffered grazing cuts and had to jump through all kinds of regulatory hoops to stay in business.

Then the logging industry suffered a fatal blow in 1992 with the listing of the Mexican spotted owl.

As loggers began leaving the county in search of work, the forest canopy began to close. Less sunlight reaching the forest floor meant less feed for livestock, wildlife and spotted owls. At lower elevations juniper and other woody species also had been choking out grass, a consequence of Smokey the Bear's fire-suppression policy.

Even with sharp grazing cuts across the county, many ranchers hung on. But the advent of the Mexican gray wolf recovery program in 1998 was the final straw.

"We're going to lose six ranchers this year and probably eight more next year," says Catron County Commissioner Ed Wehrheim.

COWS OR CONDOS

Joel Alderete of New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau recalls a Game and Fish Commission meeting in Reserve a couple of summers back in which the wolf recovery program was discussed.

"Don't you guys realize what's going to happen?" he asked. "The wolf is going to put these ranchers out of business and they're



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Sewell and Lois Goodwin, L Bar H Ranch on the San Francisco River north of Glenwood. The house was built by the McKean family, who homesteaded here about 1885. Recently the Forest Service made some noise about cutting his cattle numbers. "That'll be fine," says Goodwin. "I'll just subdivide and you can have everybody's out-of-control four-wheelers, dogs, horses, goats, pigs and chickens out on the forest."



going to subdivide their land.”

After the meeting, a gentleman from the Center for Biological Diversity pulled Alderete aside and asked: “What do you mean they’re going to subdivide? That’s all government land up there.”

Alderete had to explain that every federal grazing permit is attached to private land, which ranges anywhere from 40 acres to many thousands of acres.

“You should have seen the worried look in his eyes,” says Alderete. “He just couldn’t believe that anyone would do that.”

Sewell Goodwin can believe it. Through the 1970s and mid-’80s, he was ranching the AD Bar and the XXX in the Blue Range of eastern Arizona, 160 square miles permitted for 500 cows. Then the Forest Service cut his permits to 170 cows. This prompted one of his sons to find work elsewhere: “It was no

longer economically feasible to operate.”

In his youth Goodwin had been offered a college education but chose a \$60-a-month cowboy job instead. Since then he’s owned eight ranches in seven Forest Service districts and figures he’s well versed in the agency’s ways. “They’re destroying these family ranches,” says Goodwin, who still believes that good range management isn’t possible without grazing.

Goodwin finally sold the AD Bar and the XXX and through a trade involving some of the deeded land was able to move to Catron County, where he’s making his stand on the L Bar H along the San Francisco River north of Glenwood. The ranch consists of nine homesteads scattered throughout 30 sections of the Gila National Forest.

Recently the Forest Service made some noise about cutting his cattle numbers.

Reintroduced gray wolves (above) in the north are expected to cross with Mexican wolves or wolf hybrids not too far in the future. (See following stories.)

“That’ll be fine,” says Goodwin. “I’ll just subdivide and you can have everybody’s out-of-control four-wheelers, dogs, horses, goats, pigs and chickens out on the forest.”

Goodwin’s cows are still there, but recently a pack of wolves was seen near the northwest corner of his allotment. They’re busy eating a neighbor’s cows on up the country, but he knows it’s just a matter of time until they start on his.

“It’s really pretty simple,” says Goodwin. “The environmentalists have a choice. It’s cows or condos.” ■

Mike Cade lives and works in the Southwest.

(MORE CATRON COUNTY STORIES FOLLOW.)

GOV'MENT "WOLVES" OR FERAL DOGS?

According to popular mythology, the Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Program began with the successful capture and breeding of a few remaining wild wolves in Mexico. But the real history of the program is one of skullduggery that began with hybrid genetics more than 20 years earlier.

In 1959 a Mexican cowboy caught a male wolf hybrid in Ramanote Canyon in the Tumacacori Mountains northwest of Nogales, Ariz. The animal ended up at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum outside of Tucson.

Three years later a couple of tourists on motorcycles rolled into the Desert Museum with a young female wolf that they claimed to have acquired in Mexico. Worried that the wolf wouldn't survive the rest of the trip, they donated her to the museum as well.

After siring a single litter of pups, the hybrid male escaped in 1964 and was killed before he could be recaptured. His skull was preserved at the museum. The female was

then bred back to her sons from that litter and subsequent litters were sold to other zoos and museums as brother-sister pairs. This hybridized and highly inbred line of wolves became known as the Ghost Ranch lineage.

In 1979 the participants at a Mexican wolf workshop, organized by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), concluded that the Ghost Ranch lineage wasn't fit for inclusion in the recovery program. Although the skull of the founding male of the line had inconveniently disappeared from the Desert Museum before it could be analyzed, the workshop participants concluded that many of the Ghost Ranch animals showed definite dog characteristics.

Jack B. Woody of the FWS wrote about the workshop's recommendations in a 1986 status report on the recovery program: "Wanting to protect the genetic purity of the wolves used as founders for the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program, it was concluded that, for the time being, the only wolves that can be



accepted by the program are those that come from the wild range of the subspecies in Mexico."

Roy McBride, world-renowned large-predator expert from Alpine, Texas, recalls attending numerous wolf recovery meetings in which the question was asked: Can we use the Ghost Ranch or any other captive lineage in the recovery program?

"It was unanimous," says McBride. "They'd looked at all the ones in captivity and decided they weren't pure wolves. So they sent me to Mexico to catch some real ones."

McBride caught eight wolves for the FWS, but only one female and three males survived their care in captivity to actually breed. Although based on a small number of founders, the McBride or "certified" line of Mexican wolves was at least genetically pure.

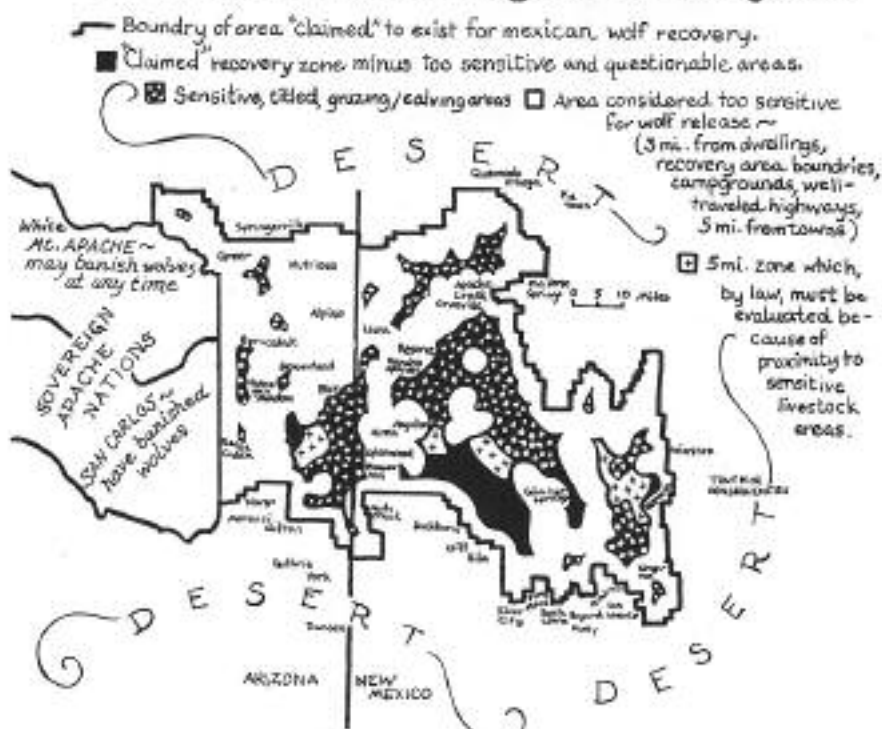
In 1997 McBride learned to his chagrin through another status report that the FWS had added Ghost Ranch animals to the certified line they had established for captive-breeding purposes. Animals from the Aragon lineage, another captive population of uncertain ancestry, also had been added to the studbook.

"David Parsons promised everyone on the wolf recovery team that he would never do that," says McBride. In a letter to Parsons, then director of the program, McBride wrote: "You are threatening the validity of genetics of the entire wolf reintroduction program, both north and south."

McBride, in the earlier days of the program, also had examined some of the Ghost Ranch animals. "Some of their ears folded over; some had curls in their tails. While some showed wolf characteristics, they didn't resemble any wolves that I had ever caught in Mexico or anywhere else."

As for the agency's explanation that the Ghost Ranch animals don't look like wolves because of captivity and diet, McBride

The Truth about the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area



The areas designated for Mexican wolf recovery are interspersed with ranches and small communities. These are prime recreation areas for New Mexico natives and visitors. It is habitat for wildlife. For more than a hundred years, it has been grazing land for livestock. Now everyone and everything is threatened.

responded: “The real reason that many Ghost Ranch animals look like dogs is because that is what they are.”

The high degree of inbreeding in the three lineages begged for the infusion of fresh genetics. But without pure genetics the planned reintroduction would have been illegal under the Endangered Species Act.

The FWS, therefore, commissioned and funded, in partnership with the Heritage Fund of Arizona, a study by Phil Hedrick of

FWS mixed the three lineages and proceeded with the 1998 release of a “nonessential, experimental population” of wolves into the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico.

Two lawsuits, one led by New Mexico Cattle Growers in 1998 and another led by the Arizona/New Mexico Coalition of Counties in 2003, challenged the legality of the reintroduction program. In both suits the court deferred to the FWS’s “expertise.”

Was this the first documented case of ancestral genetics coming home to roost?

According to blood tests, the pups were indeed hybrid but the alpha male wasn’t the father. The real culprit was most likely a domestic dog or a wolf/dog hybrid, several of which are known to have been dumped in the area. It’s not known how the alpha female managed to leave the alpha male long enough to have a tryst with a domestic dog, nor whether the alpha male was similarly engaged elsewhere.

About a year later the FWS found another litter of hybrid pups belonging to a female wolf on the White Mountain Apache Reservation in Arizona. Although field personnel had tried to hook her up with another male, it didn’t work out and she also bred with a domestic dog.

John Oakleaf, field projects coordinator for the FWS, says the agency takes hybridization seriously. In his time with the program, Oakleaf has caught about 31 uncollared wolves, born in the wild, about as many coyotes, and maybe 10 dogs, he says. “But there’s no evidence of anything other than pure Mexican wolf genetics.”

Laura Schneberger of the Gila Livestock Growers Association, however, isn’t impressed with the agency’s record and believes hybridization will continue to be a problem. She says at least 18 wolves have been reported in five different areas, to which the FWS has yet to respond. About a year ago a pack of wolves killed a puppy near Quemado, about 50 miles outside the recovery area. Although it was a confirmed wolf kill, the pack still hasn’t been caught, collared or tested to see what they are.

According to the terms of the Environmental Impact Statement under which the recovery program operates, all wolves are to be collared and monitored. But whether due to lack of expertise, manpower, funding or willpower, Schneberger says the agency isn’t fulfilling its obligation: “They refuse to investigate these different wolf reports.”

Furthermore, it isn’t known how many hybrid litters have escaped detection, nor the number of their pups, as in the Pipestem litter, that are indistinguishable from pure wolves. Even if the question of ancestral genetics were settled, the area lends itself to hybridization, she says.

The Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area isn’t true wilderness, but is full of inholdings, home to hundreds of ranching families, subdivisions, small towns and communities and many, many dogs in close proximity to pen-

PHOTOS COURTESY LAURA SCHNEBERGER



Two wolf-like animals shot north of Luna, N.M., in December 2006. A landowner saw three of them killing a yearling elk and since the FWS wouldn’t investigate, the landowner took a chance and shot them. Due to the proximity to known Mexican wolves, it’s believed they may be Mexican wolf hybrids. FWS is DNA testing these animals. OPPOSITE: A close-up of a Mule Creek animal.

Arizona State University to determine the genetic status of its “wolves.” The study examined blood samples and concluded that “they likely represent the descendants of pure Mexican wolves.” This left many to wonder by what sort of alchemy animals that were dog hybrids (according to visual inspection) could be thus transformed.

“You may put dog blood in the wolves, but you will never take it out,” wrote McBride in his letter to Parsons. “And you will forever cloud the issue of what it is you have released into the wild.”

As for the concern of genetic variability, “Why not augment the Mexican wolf genes with those from Canada? Isn’t that exactly what is going to happen in the wild when the reintroductions from Idaho and Wyoming meet the reintroductions from the Southwest?”

But with their genetic study in hand, the



Neither suit addressed the purity of the wolves’ ancestry. “Skulls, hides and other genetic material had mysteriously disappeared,” says Howard Hutchinson, executive director for the coalition. But the issue of hybridization wasn’t going to go away, as the plaintiffs tried to demonstrate in their second suit.

About four years after the 1998 release the FWS discovered, quite by accident, a litter of hybrid pups while trying to capture and relocate the Pipestem pack, which had two confirmed strikes against it for livestock depredation. While six of the pups had typical Mexican wolf markings, one had a much lighter coat, almost white with speckles in it.

raised, human-habituated wolves.

For a growing number of people in the wolf recovery area, it's more than an abstract question about genetic purity. Is that animal that's out in the yard killing my chickens a wolf hybrid that I can legally shoot, or do I risk a \$100,000 fine and/or a year in jail?

That is the very question that could land the hybrid issue once again in the courts. So far it's been taken for granted that the FWS's wolves are genetically pure. In a takings case the burden of proof would, or at least should, be held to a higher standard, as McBride suggested in his letter to Parsons.

"When the first Mexican wolf is killed by some rancher or trapper, and it enters the

courts as a legal matter, you will never be able to convict anyone of killing a true wolf."

Meanwhile the Center for Biological Diversity has sued the FWS to implement new rules recommended by a "scientific panel" in 2001. If implemented, the rules would allow the agency to release captive wolves directly into the Gila, allow wolves to establish territories outside the recovery area, and redefine "problem wolves" so as to exempt those that kill livestock after having scavenged on carcasses. It's unclear whether wolves that kill emus, chickens, cats and horses also acquired their taste for such cuisine by first scavenging on carcasses.

Parsons, in a separate statement, also

argues that these rule changes are necessary because overzealous control of depredating wolves threatens the viability of the recovery program. According to the FWS's numbers, only 59 wolves and seven packs have been successfully reintroduced, while the program's 1996 EIS called for 102 wolves and 13 packs by the end of 2006.

Parsons, now retired from the FWS, is a steering committee member of the Southern Rockies Wolf Restoration Project, a coalition of environmental organizations such as Forest Guardians, Defenders of Wildlife and the Wilderness Society, long known for their opposition to multiple use of federally administered lands. ■

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

The popular perception of the wolf is that of a family-oriented animal that plays with its cuddly pups, avoids humans and benefits wildlife by culling the sick and weak. But for a growing number of people at "ground zero" in the wolf-recovery area in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico, the reality gives new meaning to the ancient expression "wolves at the door."

For the Millers, owners of the Link at Diamond Creek and Mimbres Outfitters, it car-

ries a terrible double meaning.

It was to be another day in the saddle following the hounds. Mark, Mary and another hunter had just collared and loaded their hounds when they sent their eight-year-old daughter Stacy to call in the horses. Kirby, a nine-year-old hound she had grown up with, went with her.

"We heard this god-awful screaming," says Mary. "Stacy was yelling, 'wolf, wolf,' and we heard sounds of a terrible fight. I didn't know

at that point whether the wolf had Stacy or Kirby."

It was Kirby. The wolf had him by the throat and was shaking him violently. If not for the tracking collar and the quick action of the adults, Kirby would have been killed not 20 yards from Stacy. As it was he suffered a crushed windpipe and multiple chest injuries.

USDA's Wildlife Services listed it as a "probable" wolf attack. Two months later it was Six, the 13-year-old Scharbauer-bred horse from Texas that Stacy had been riding since she was big enough to sit in the saddle with her father. The Millers arrived home to find Six's carcass in the corral, where the wolves had chased him from the pasture and hemmed him up. Tracks showed where one wolf had peered through a back window of their house and another had defecated only feet from the front door.

A week prior, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, when specifically asked, had assured the Millers that wolves don't attack horses and that theirs were safe. Wildlife Services confirmed that Six had been killed by wolves, but somehow the rumor got around that the horse might have died of colic.

Politics aside, all Stacy knows is that she lost a member of her family to a horrible death. "She can't sleep and is terrified that her horses or dogs are going to get eaten alive in the front yard," says Mark. "Until you experience a pack of wolves living around your house, constantly terrorizing you, holding you hostage, you have no idea what it's like."

When Jess Carey, Catron County wolf interaction investigator, started hearing complaints of insomnia, nightmares and bedwetting by constituents who had suffered similar encounters, commissioners authorized a psychological study. Preliminary results, taken



Mark Miller and his eight-year-old daughter Stacy. "She can't sleep and is terrified that her horses or dogs are going to get eaten alive in the front yard," says Mark. "Until you experience a pack of wolves living around your house, constantly terrorizing you, holding you hostage, you have no idea what it's like."



“We heard this god-awful screaming,” says Mary Miller. “Stacy was yelling, ‘wolf, wolf,’ and we heard sounds of a terrible fight. I didn’t know at that point whether the wolf had Stacy or Kirby.” Wolves injured the dog and later killed a prize horse within feet of the house. These are wolf tracks and the remains of the beloved equine named Six.

from interviews with 35 people, found mild to moderately severe psychological stress and trauma resulting from encounters with wolves.

For the Millers, it’s not just chronic fear for safety but sadness over the loss of a cherished way of life. Mark and Mary bought the Link for its remote location and abundant wildlife. They had plans to open a wilderness youth camp to provide kids the opportunity to learn about and experience wildlife in its natural environment.

But using FWS’s own conservative numbers about wolf predation on elk, they know that within three to five years the elk herd will be drastically reduced. “What a tragedy to lose our game for the sake of hearing a wolf howl,” says Mark. “It’s a huge price to pay for a lot of people—ranchers, outfitters, hunters, or any outdoor enthusiast. It’s all going to be a thing of the past. And then they have the gall to tell us we shouldn’t live up here. Well why shouldn’t we? This land was homesteaded before the forest was even formed.”

The Link at Diamond Creek lies isolated, high in the Gila. But as ranchers give up and ship their cattle, and elk numbers decline, the government’s wolves will still have to eat. As they move lower in search of food, the denizens of the urban fringes might also learn something of the terrible reality behind an ancient expression—wolves at the door. ■

HUMAN SAFETY

Jess Carey likes to say he came to Catron County from Arkansas by way of California. Born the son of “Arkies” who migrated to Bakersfield, Calif., to pick crops in the San Joaquin Valley, Carey graduated from high school, served in the Marines and worked his way into a good paying job with the city of Ventura. But when the California legislature informed him that he’d no longer be able to run his coon dogs at night, Carey knew it was time to gather his traps.

Several months and odd jobs later, while gazing at the majestic, pine-covered hills that surround the tiny logging village of Reserve,

N.M., Carey said to his wife Lynn: “Honey, if I can find a job, we’re staying here.”

Since that day 30 years ago, Carey has served four years as undersheriff, two as sheriff and four as a criminal investigator. His forensic experience, along with a lifetime of trapping and running hounds, uniquely qualify him for his current job as Catron County wolf interaction investigator.

The county created the job when it realized that the federal government’s incentive to document wolf predation didn’t exactly coincide with that of ranchers. When Carey started working with USDA’s Wildlife Services, the

reports on verified kills doubled almost overnight.

But if livestock predation is a big concern, that of human safety is bigger. An increasing number of complaints involve human encounters with “habituated wolves.” In one chilling incident, a wolf charged onto private property and ran by eight-year-old Stacy Miller to attack the family dog. In another, 14-year-old J.C. Nelson was stalking elk in the forest when he found himself surrounded by wolves. He backed up against a tree and kept his rifle pointed at the wolf that stood facing him while the others circled around behind.

“I didn’t want to shoot him because I was afraid they’d blame my father and take away his grazing permit or send him to jail,” says



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Jim Blair (left), owner for 40 years of the O Bar O Ranch, and Jess Carey (right), Catron County wolf interaction investigator.

Nelson. While the FWS gave Nelson credit for keeping a cool head, they otherwise dismissed the incident. Carey believes it was an example of wolves testing prey. The wolves walked away this time. The next person might not be so fortunate.

"It's like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar," says Carey. "These wolves, because of their protected status, aren't getting spanked. So they're getting bolder and bolder."

Current rules allow someone who feels threatened by a wolf to shoot if attacked. By then it could be too late.

"If it was a dinosaur you'd go out and shoot it. That's for sure," says Catron County manager Bill Aymar. "What are we going to do? Wait until they kill a kid?"

That was the question on everybody's mind when county commissioners met in February before a standing-room-only crowd to pass an ordinance giving Carey authority to handle problem wolves.

Under the carefully written ordinance, heavy on protocol, the county could issue a dispatch order authorizing Carey to permanently remove any habituated wolf in close proximity to humans if the feds fail to do so within 24 hours.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Bio-

logical Diversity told the *Albuquerque Journal* that "they are asserting county rights where they have no legal basis" and called on federal officials to "make sure that vigilante justice does not prevail."

But growing potential for vigilante justice is in part why the ordinance was put into place, says Aymar. "These aren't pretty little wolves. They're on private property killing people's animals. The pro-wolf people very handily discount the human-welfare concerns."

As this issue of *RANGE* is put to bed, the FWS is evaluating the new ordinance and has yet to respond.

"I know one thing," says Carey. "This commission's got the resolve. They're not going to fold up. And we'd rather do it this way than to have somebody go off the deep end and start shooting people."

If worse comes to worse, Carey knows he might have to trap or even kill one of the government's wolves, and that could mean a trip to the jailhouse.

"I figure it's worth the price in order to protect our children," says Carey, who lives in a rustic, two-room cabin. "Besides, I hear they've got color TV in those federal pens." ■

COMPENSATION, ECOTOURISM & OTHER MYTHS...

Defenders of Wildlife, on its Web site, blames ranchers for the fact that the government's pen-raised "wolves" are eating their cows. If these "welfare ranchers" had been diligent in removing carcasses of dead cows from their rugged rangelands, these wolves never would have learned to eat beef in the first place.

"That's how I learned to like beef," quips Joe Nelson, who ranches near Glenwood. "I'd cut a piece of rotten meat out of a carcass and waller that around until I finally acquired a taste for it."

In spite of the ranchers' sloth, Defenders, in its magnanimity, boasts that it pays 100 percent of the market value of each animal proven to have been killed by wolves. Of course, by their own admission, only one kill out of seven is confirmed. They also advise that compensation isn't guaranteed.

Preston Bates of the N Bar Ranch can vouch for that. "I've got stacks of confirmed kill sheets that I've sent to Defenders," he says, "and I've never gotten one red cent from them."

Bates tells about the Wyoming sheep ranch that Defenders compensated for losses until 1999, when it stopped paying on confirmed kills. One year later the rancher, bankrupt, sold his allotment to Defenders.

"I'm sure they're hoping that's what will happen down here," says Bates. "They're going to starve us out."

As cattlemen suffer the economic impacts of endangered species' regulations and now wolves, so does the county treasury. As hard as ranching has been hit, grazing still generates 48 percent of the county's revenues. As more ranches fold up,

new sources of revenue will have to be found. Environmentalists suggest that rural areas, hard hit by their costly schemes, can make up for lost revenue through ecotourism. Bill Aymar, Catron County manager, disagrees.

"The average tourist comes down here from Santa Fe, drives around in the forest for a couple of hours says, 'Oh, I think I heard a wolf, and leaves. He might buy a couple of candy bars and a coke, but he contributes little to the economy."

"The tourism thing is a fallacy," he says. "This isn't Yellowstone."

Hunting, on the other hand, is big business in Catron County, long known for its trophy elk.

Tom Klumker of San Francisco River Outfitters, who operates mostly in the Gila Wilderness, says wolves are beginning to affect the movement of the elk, making them harder to hunt and causing a decline in their conception rate.

"The hunter's ox hasn't really been gored yet," says Klumker, "but it's fixing to be. We're seeing more and more wolves and we believe they're going to start doing us a lot of damage."

Jack Diamond of Beaverhead Outfitters agrees and mentions all the outfitters in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming who have gone out of business since reintroduction of the northern gray wolf.

"It's really just started in the last six months," says Diamond. "I believe that in the next year or so Game and Fish is going

to have to start managing these elk herds with the wolf in mind."

That would be the same state game commission appointed by Gov. Bill Richardson, who upon taking office fired the former director and seven commissioners, all adamantly opposed to wolf reintroduction.

A couple of years ago at a town meeting in Reserve, everyone but Richardson wanted to talk about wolves. Finally, toward the end of the meeting, he suggested forming a task force that could look at possible solutions—grazing buyouts, compensation...well, you get the picture. ■

AMERICAN DREAM DENIED

Like many ranch couples who work for wages, Jim and Sherri Haught dreamed someday of having their own spread. When the nearby Deadman allotment came up for sale, it seemed like the opportunity they'd been waiting for.

"It was going to be our retirement," says Sherri. "It's a beautiful place where our kids could bring people as part of their youth and family ministries."

But in fall 2004 the Haughts started seeing wolf tracks, scat with cow hair in it, and tight-bagged cows missing their calves along the north fork of the Negrito. They soon learned that the San Francisco pack, which had been wreaking havoc on several neighbors, was camped on their ranch. To make matters worse, the Ring pack, which had been removed a year earlier because of two confirmed livestock kills, had been rereleased.

Jim recalls coming up on John Oakleaf of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, who was tracking a collared wolf. "I asked him, 'What are you going to do with that wolf when you catch him?' He said, 'His collar's a little goofed up. I'm going to put a new collar on him and turn him loose.'"

Jim believes management of problem wolves should be left to those who are impacted by them. "I've worked a lot in rough country and when a bear or lion starts killing livestock we've always been able to catch it and survive," says Jim. "But here, they've put a new predator into the mix and told us we can't do anything about it."

The Deadman allotment historically has produced 85-percent calf crops. Jim and Sherri could survive on 75 percent. But with 30-percent and 50-percent calf crops the last two years, their dream is shattered and their ranch is for sale.

"You see all these Disney films like 'The Lion King,' that talk about the 'Circle of Life,'" says Sherri. "Is there something missing here? What about livestock? What about us? Are we not a part of the Circle of Life?"

PHOTOS © JACKIE CADE



ABOVE: Preston Bates has got "stacks of confirmed kill sheets" that he's sent to Defenders of Wildlife, which brags about 100 percent compensating for proven wolf kills, "and I've never got one red cent from them." BELOW: Jim and Sherri Haught's dream of owning their own spread has been destroyed by wolves. "I've worked a lot in rough country and when a bear or lion starts killing livestock we've always been able to catch it and survive," says Jim. "But here, they've put a new predator into the mix and told us we can't do anything about it."



Preston Bates considers himself to be a conservationist. He even tried to coin the phrase “green rancher.” Growing up around dairies and racetracks in Virginia, Bates dreamed of being a cowboy. Finally, at age 20, he came to New Mexico and started from scratch. He learned to cowboy and broke BLM horses to sell back East.

The owners of the N Bar believed in him and gave him the opportunity to lease and later to buy the sprawling, high-country ranch, which boasts as fine a stand of grama grasses as can be found anywhere.

“I had the idea of starting a working guest ranch for horse owners back East to come out and learn how to cowboy,” says Bates. “I went way into debt on this deal, but

I knew it could work.”

And so it did for several years. The cows paid the mortgage, while the guest business grew and prospered. Bates even married one of his guests, Margaret, who came with a friend from Dallas. At its peak the N Bar had five full-time employees and pumped at least \$80,000 a year into the downtown Reserve businesses.

“Live and let live,” says Bates. “That’s what I thought when I first heard about this wolf recovery program.”

That was until the Luna pack moved onto the N Bar, where it spends about 99 percent of its time. The Saddle pack leaves about half the time to feed on the neighbors’ stock.

“I tried to get people to take notice of

what’s happening and work with the FWS and Defenders of Wildlife,” says Bates. “But I got no reciprocation.”

Bates has watched his calf crop go from 79 percent to 49 percent. We met him coming over a snow-covered mountain pass on his way back from Phoenix, where he’d been trying to sell the last of his 60 top-of-the-line string of guest horses to pay the mortgage.

With only 11 horses left, he’s out of the guest business. What’s left of his cows are going next. He hopes to pasture yearlings and hang on for another year. Short of that the only thing left is to sell his private land for vacation homes.

“Your ranch is your 401-K,” says Bates. “And I’ve been Enronned.” ■

FIGHTING BACK

It’s a paradox that while the children of rural families are fleeing economic malaise to find work in the cities, baby boomers are fleeing the social malaise of the cities to look for a piece of what America once was.

In this sense Catron County, N.M., is a microcosm of what’s happening all over the

Mountain West as verdant valleys, once home to spacious farms, give way to vacation homes surrounded by once productive national forests, now choked with overgrowth, often diseased and dying on the stump. In no small part, this is the product of a federal government that is bloated and arrogant on the one

hand, negligent and incompetent on the other.

Dick Manning and Buddy Allred of Catron County and Art Lee of Apache County in Arizona recognized the trend years ago. Deciding to do something about it, they formed the Coalition of Arizona/New Mexico Counties.

Often reviled by opponents as the “county sovereignty” movement that seeks to usurp federal authority, its true mission is simple—hold the federal government accountable for obeying its own laws

Howard Hutchinson, executive director, has been with the coalition almost from the beginning. “All of the ordinances and plans put forward by the member counties mirror the federal, statutory requirements,” he says. “The counties have never initiated anything outside of existing federal law.”

Since its humble beginning in 1990, the coalition has won nine of 12 suits filed against federal agencies—some of them even in the notorious Ninth Circuit—and its spirit has spawned a movement that has spread to other counties across America.

But Catron County faces its biggest challenge now as it tries to save its culture and economy from the agents of a government that seems bent on policies of rural cleansing and the outsourcing of America’s wealth.

“Basically, these are bullies who are taking advantage of people who don’t really have the resources to fight,” says Hutchinson. “But they do have the spirit.”

Commissioner Wehrheim agrees. “The feds have had their way in a lot of places. But they know when they come to Catron County that they’re going to get a fight.” ■



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Catron County Commissioner Ed Wehrheim on private land along the banks of the Tularosa River, home to the loach minnow, near Reserve, N.M. The loach minnow was listed as threatened in 1986. A study by J.N. Rinne and D. Miller (1996-2000) concluded that the extirpation of the loach minnow in Arizona’s Upper Verde River was due partly to removal of livestock, which caused stream bank vegetation to increase markedly and the channel to become deeper and narrower. Nevertheless, the Forest Service fenced off all federal land along the Tularosa, rendering six good ranches almost useless, because the Tularosa was their only dependable supply of water.