



Photos by Fulvio Eccardi

A Howl Fading into Time

Edgar Anaya Rodríguez*

Are there wolves in Mexico? Mexicans hardly have the time or the curiosity to even ask themselves the question. And if they did, they would not find an easy answer: yes, there are, and no, there are not. According to their original distribution, there should be wolves in Mexico; but the reality on the eve of the twenty-first century is that

there are none, because hunting has finished them off.

Como boca de lobo ("like the wolf's mouth") is an expression in Mexico describing a place that instills fear. Human beings have always said that wolves are bad, and condemned them to death without further ado. All we have to do is look at stories, fables, tales, cartoons and films down through the centuries. Saint Francis of Assisi says so; so does the hunter in Peter and the Wolf, set to music by Prokofiev; the characters in Aesop's fables, including

his creation, the wolf-man; Little Red Riding Hood, the Three Little Pigs and any sheep to be found in a short story. But the current dire straits of the Mexican wolf are no tall tale.

WOLF, LUPUS, LOBO

From ancient times, both oral tradition and literature have made wolves symbols of evil and ferocity, as well as of courage and resistance. Anglo-Saxon kings and

* Contributor to several tourism and cultural publications; author of the Reader's Digest book *Maravillas Naturales de México* (Natural Marvels of Mexico) (Mexico City: 1997).

nobles added the word “wolf” to their names, and the Apaches used it to honor their bravest warriors. Narrations in which she-wolves lovingly bring up human children also abound, like in the legend of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, and in Rudyard Kipling’s *Book of the Jungle*.

A COLLAR TO IDENTIFY THEM

The Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus bailey*) is one of the 24 traditionally recognized sub-species of wolves in North America. Several hypotheses hold that these wolves evolved after the last Ice Age: the American wolves spread out and became isolat-

age of about 33 kilograms, and grow to between 60 and 80 cm high and 130 to 180 cm long. Their coloring is classified as dirty yellow, with black and grey shading. A short mane around their shoulders and a black collar-like ring around their throats distinguish them from others. In the wild, they seem to live between 7 and 8 years and, in contrast with the large packs characteristic of the other sub-species, they form small family groups.

A HOWL OF HOPE

There was a time when wolves were very common in Europe, most of Asia and North America. They were probably

Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango and further south to the Valley of Mexico. There are even records of sightings in the states of Puebla and Oaxaca.

Wolves must not have encountered grave difficulties in pre-Hispanic times. During the colonial period, however, with the introduction of cattle, their space and tranquility was noticeably affected. Their condition became critical in the mid-twentieth century. By the time we noticed, wolves had practically disappeared.

Taking into account that it had never been a particularly numerous species, its age-old bad reputation and the intense hunting it was subjected to by cattle ranchers who attributed “serious losses” in their herds to attacks by wolves, we can understand why their number dropped so drastically.

The last straw was called “1080” (sodium fluoroacetate), a very powerful poison, more effective than strychnine, and traps used in an intense extermination campaign requested by cattle ranchers in Mexico’s North and carried out by the federal government in the early 1950s. The result was indiscriminate slaughter, not only of wolves, but of carnivorous mammals in general. The majority of these mammal populations have never recovered—this is the case of the black bear which is in a situation similar to that of the wolf— or have even been completely wiped out, as in the case of the brown bear which disappeared in Mexico at the beginning of the 1960s. The effectiveness of this poison and its terrible consequences were due partly to the fact that the flesh of an animal which had been poisoned was also lethal, and therefore killed anything that ate it.



Hunting and government extermination policies made them almost extinct.

ed in their attempts to flee the ice. Their isolation lasted long enough for sub-species to evolve, but not enough for a completely new canidae species to develop.

Little is known about the characteristics of the Mexican wolf. It is smaller than the other sub-species of Canada and the United States. Adult males weigh an aver-

more geographically widespread than any other land mammal. In the fifteenth century, wolves could be seen in the cities of Paris and Tenochtitlan.

The original geographical distribution of the Mexican wolf ranged from the southern United States to central Mexico: its howl could be heard in the states of

Fifty years after this campaign, no one is certain if Mexican wolves still exist in the wild, or if they have been completely wiped out. Between 1978 and 1980, biologist Roy T. McBride did field research and was bold enough to estimate the polemical figure of 50 surviving wolves in northern Mexico.

The plight of wolves in the United States was the most dire on southern border states. The wolf had more enemies with more advantages: the cattlemen there arrived before they settled in northern Mexico and, in contrast to the rough terrain in Chihuahua and Durango that allowed wolves to hide, the United States had roads and resources, as well as expert exterminators. After an intense eradication campaign, the Mexican wolf sub-species was declared extinct in the United States. U.S. technicians had also trained the Mexican ones for the extermination campaign in northern Mexico.

A few years later, both Mexico and the United States developed plans to save the sub-species.

Today, the only known surviving Mexican wolves live in captivity—about 150 in both countries, but most in the United States. In Mexico, they can be found in zoos, like the Aragón and Chapultepec zoos in Mexico City, and in semi-captivity, in game preserves like La Michilía, in Durango, and San Cayetano, in the State of Mexico. The efforts that Mexico and the United States used to put into exterminating the Mexican wolf are today invested in researching and saving it: national and binational meetings among experts on the topic; exchange of animals in captivity (very few are identified as 100 percent pure wolf); the search for wolves in the wild, mainly in the Chihuahua and

Durango mountains; and campaigns by conservationist groups. However, the search has been fruitless until now.

The main problem wolves in captivity face today is their blood ties. Because there are so few of them, they are all related to each other to one degree or another, which is why new blood is needed. The hope of capturing or at least confirming that there are wolves living in the mountain ranges of northern Mexico endures.

While hunters see wolves as prize game and cattlemen see them as monstrous enemies of their property, naturalists see them as a fascinating species. And that is just as it should be: the wolf is the largest member of the canidae family in Mexico

Scientists who study animal behavior never cease to wonder at wolves' complex behavioral patterns: among others, the way they watch over the development of their young; the organization of their packs; the elaborate group hunting strategies; the healing techniques they use, including the consumption of certain herbs. Vast reaches of what was the Mexican wolf's original habitat have now stopped being suitable for their survival and that of other species: polluted rivers and lagoons, human settlements, logged forests, scarcer and scarcer sources of food and hunters.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult for any wild animal to survive. Only human beings are capable of destroying



Only a few Mexican wolves survive, all living in captivity.

and one of the most intelligent mammals alive. Like all carnivores, their role is fundamental in the delicate ecological balance of nature, among other reasons, to control the number of herbivores, which they feed on, and to contribute to weeding out weaker and sick animals, thus purifying other species.

themselves and decimating other species in the process. The Roman comic playwright Plautus understood this before the time of Christ and summed it up in a phrase that comes down to us complete with the stigma of evil always attributed to wolves. "Man is the wolf of Man." **MM**