

# THE TUG-OF-WAR OF



# CONSERVATION

## The importance of building social tolerance for Mexican wolves

By Loren Chase, Ph.D.

Few people can get through childhood without playing tug-of-war. We all had our tactics to win: putting the stronger people in back, locking your arms, pulling with your legs, and taking small steps. Such a simple game taught teamwork and showed examples of physics and mechanical advantage. Unfortunately, some mistakenly view Mexican wolf management in Arizona as a game of tug-of-war. This is understandable. In the past, few conservation issues have been more contentious, litigious or complex as Mexican wolf management.





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On one end of the rope, some individuals and organizations are tugging in their direction to have large numbers of Mexican wolves thriving across the entire Southwest. Numbers that are unrealistic in our modern age. Habitat conditions and vast amounts of open space are not what they were historically. These groups are concerned that a viable, self-sustaining population of Mexican wolves will not be established or that the project may be discontinued. That compels them to pull even harder through actions such as filing lawsuits to force changes that match their version of how wolf management should look. However, with human and urban expansion, habitat degradation and diminishing prey base, it is unrealistic to expect wolves to recover to their historic numbers.

At the opposite end of the rope, others are pulling to have the government stop wolf conservation and kill all wolves on sight. People strongly opposed to wolf reintroduction may include those who believe their ability to make a living will be jeopardized, such as the logging industry's inability to access forest products if critical habitat were to be designated for wolves. Agricultural producers fear the loss of livestock through wolf depredation because of the industry's already-thin profit margins. Many within the hunting community are concerned there will be loss of big game, thus reducing their ability to hunt deer or elk.

And in the middle of the rope is the great majority of Arizonans who weakly support or oppose wolf reintroduction and remain largely unaware of the issues that come with wolf management. Most are suburbanites with little connection to nature, or they are recent transplants from states that lack the awe-inspiring ecosystems Arizona offers. Their daily life is impacted very little by the presence or absence of a Mexican wolf, so they do not have a strong opinion in either direction.

Monitoring all of this counterproductive infighting is the Arizona Game and Fish Department. The department is committed to a wolf reintroduction program that will put wolves on the land, but at a level that allows ranching to occur and big game populations to continue at healthy levels. The department supports the concept of "multiple-use" of Arizona's public lands, which includes conserving wildlife and their habitats, livestock production, public recreational activities, hunter opportunity, and recovery of imperiled wildlife species. However, perhaps the most daunting challenge of the department's Mexican wolf management is gaining social acceptance.

The department is trying to help various

stakeholders at opposing ends of the issue better understand and tolerate the nuances of managing wolves. For example, those who live where wolves occur are most affected by their presence. Therefore, acceptance of the wolf reintroduction project by this group is essential to the success of Mexican wolf conservation. Wolves are likely to reduce local hunting opportunities in some areas, so the acceptance of the wolf management program by this group is also important. Finally, buy-in from wolf advocates is important too because without their support, efforts to gain additional funding for wolves, invest in compensation programs, or other landowner incentives would be diminished.

History has shown that when Arizonans set aside these misleading tug-of-wars and pull together in the same direction, focusing on commonalities, we achieve great conservation successes. One notable success is the ongoing recovery efforts for the California condor. Hunters in Arizona have voluntarily reduced lead available to condors by using non-lead ammunition or by removing gutpiles from the field. The department helps by using Heritage Fund dollars to provide non-lead ammunition at no charge to hunters drawn for a hunt in the condor's core range. Other conservation groups contribute to a raffle for hunters who turn in a gutpile. Each group contributes a little, and everyone benefits, especially the condor. Additionally, Arizona has many other examples of cooperative successes including black-footed ferrets, Chiricahua leopard frogs, Sonoran pronghorn and Apache trout.

The reality is that Mexican wolves are — due to laws created by the citizens of this country — returning in some number to portions of their former, historically-occupied lands. It is imperative that individuals and organizations consider the factual science surrounding wolf management issues, use reason when discussing these volatile issues, and comprehend opposing viewpoints. Each stakeholder must evaluate his or her position and decide if they are going to pull against each other at the extremes of the artificial tug-of-war or work together to seek common ground. However, we invite all to set aside the zero-sum mentality of yesteryear where one team must lose in order for another to win. Because when it comes to Mexican wolf conservation, if we all win a little, nobody loses a lot. 🌻

■ Dr. Loren Chase is the department's human dimensions program manager and leads several statewide and national research studies. He hopes to see a wolf when he is hunting with his grandkids many years from now.