

Where Have All The Red Wolves Gone?

Reintroduction and Recovery

Recovery efforts for red wolves have a special urgency. Many researchers think the red wolf of eastern North Carolina represents the only wild population in the world. Unlike gray wolves, red wolves therefore face a real and imminent threat of extinction.

Because their numbers had been severely reduced by 1970, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established a captive breeding program for the red wolf in 1973. Over a period of eight years, biologists captured over 400 wolf-like canids from coastal Louisiana and Texas. Genetic testing showed that only 17 were red wolves, and of that number only 14 were able to breed. **Seven pairs of animals stood between extinction and recovery.** At Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium in Tacoma, Washington, the future of the red wolf was in the hands of the captive breeding specialists, who were careful to keep these animals from becoming too dependent on humans. No one knew, however, whether the wild instincts of the red wolf could be maintained over several generations in captivity.

In 1987, four pairs of red wolves were released in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern North Carolina. Early releases resulted in a high mortality rate, but despite setbacks, the wolves produced the first litter of pups in the wild in 1988. By 1993, red wolves were successfully residing on many other public and private lands in northeastern North Carolina. Restoration in North Carolina has been successful in many aspects, but the future is not secure.

In 1991, Red Wolf Recovery efforts began in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. Despite some of the

successes in North Carolina, the wolves failed to establish home ranges within the National Park boundaries, and pup mortality was high due to disease, parasites, and malnutrition. In October of 1998, plans were announced to terminate the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Red Wolf Program. The remaining wolves were captured and relocated. Today a few red wolves live in the wild on island propagation sites on national wildlife refuges in other southeastern states. The very first red wolf release in the wild took place on Bulls Island, part of Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, off the coast of South Carolina. Many release techniques were tested there before the wolves were released in Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. Red wolves are important for island ecosystems since they prey on rabbits which eat protective dune vegetation and raccoons and nutria which eat endangered sea turtle eggs.

"For generations there was no far traveling. The unseen walls of lost habitat became the chain link of breeding pens. The great skills went unused. Sharp sight, keen hearing, shape-changing stealth. Great endurance, silent speed over forest litter; tolerance of the deepest cold....

*Generations without a hunt, without the joyous chase and the muzzle-bloody dance around the wide-eyed deer. Generations without a proper den. The young knew nothing of the world. Had no wildness in their hearts, no weather in their fur. Did not know the proper seasons - the short staccato southern winter, the long soft spring, the muggy summer, and the invigorating autumn....
Where was all that? How to*

pass that on to the fast-growing young confined in cages?

...After three generations, all of the old ones were dead and there was not a wild red wolf in the world. Only shadows of wolves. Pale flames of red wolf spirit licked the cages. The soul of the wild wolf nursed her young from afar. The wolf clan keened. Hunters wandered. Ravens held aloof. Even black bears turned their great heads to listen to the final silence. Then the red wolf returned to the old places, freed."

Christopher Camuto,
Another Country