

BA'CHO

To the White Mountain Apaches, Mexican wolves are known as *ba'cho*. They're culturally significant to the tribe, but not all tribal members support the reintroduction of the endangered species. It's a polarizing issue that pits elders and traditionalists against outfitters and big-game hunters. BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE D. TAUBERT



For the White Mountain Apache Tribe, history lives in the spoken word. Significant events from the past, cultural practices and spiritual teachings are often transmitted and preserved simply by the telling. Among the most treasured of the tribe's oral traditions is the "wolf song."

According to Ramon Riley, the tribe's cultural-resource director, tribal members used the song to summon the wolf's power before going into battle. The song harks back to a time before European immigrants arrived in the Apache homeland — a time when both the wolf and the tribe thrived across a large swath of the Southwest.

"The wolf song is not written down anywhere. I keep it recorded in my mind," Riley says. He's a youthful-looking 73 years old, which he attributes to his regular use of a sweat lodge. He grew up on the tribe's land in Eastern Arizona and learned the wolf song from tribal elders when he was young. Now he passes it on to others during sweat ceremonies.

"The wolf song does not translate into English," he adds. "You have to live with the land and know the Apache language to understand it."

It's August 2014, and I'm visiting Riley in the tribal town of Whiteriver to get his perspective on Mexican wolves. Called *ba'cho* in the White Mountain Apache language, the species carries deep cultural significance for the tribe but in recent times has been the subject of heated debate, both on tribal land and in communities throughout Arizona and New Mexico. We sit in Riley's office in the Nohwike' Ba'gowá (House of Our Footprints) museum, located on the grounds of Fort Apache, the base from which the U.S. Army waged war against the tribe in the 1800s. Riley's desk is piled high with stacks of papers he's sifting through to request the return of tribal ancestors' human remains from museum collections in other parts of the country.

Mexican wolves hold a treasured place in the White Mountain Apache Tribe's lore, but the reintroduction of the species remains controversial even among tribal members.



Arizona Game and Fish Department wolf specialist Jeff Dolphin carries a Mexican wolf to a workstation after sedating it from a helicopter. The wolf will have its health checked and get a new collar before being re-released into the wild.

For Riley, what has happened to Mexican wolves and his own people are one and the same.

“The invaders came and brought their own laws. They killed all the predators, like the wolf and the grizzly, and they put us on the reservation,” he says. “They taught us to live in a way that forgets our dependence on nature. The value of creation became money.”

With a historical home range that extended from West Texas across New Mexico and most of Arizona, and down to central Mexico, the once-prolific Mexican wolves were eliminated from the United States by the 1970s. The wolves’ stellar hunting ability, which made them revered by the Apaches, made them despised by European ranchers and homesteaders who viewed the predators as a threat to their livelihood. However, after the federal Endangered Species Act passed in 1973, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was charged with the recovery of Mexican wolves, the rarest subspecies of the northern gray wolf. In 1977, the last seven Mexican wolves remaining in the wild were retrieved from Mexico and a captive-breeding program began in the United States. In 1998, the wolves returned to the wild when 11 captive-bred animals were released with much fanfare into Eastern Arizona’s Blue Range Primitive Area.

Over the past 17 years, the Mexican-wolf recovery program has remained one of the most polarizing issues in the history

of Southwestern public-lands management. It has pitted environmentalists against ranchers, wilderness-loving hikers against trophy-craving hunters, city dwellers against rural residents — and, on tribal lands in wolf country, traditionalists against those who put economic concerns first. In the first year of the reintroduction program, four of the 11 released wolves were shot illegally (a federal offense under the Endangered Species Act). And the program has limped along ever since, with illegal shootings continuing, anti-wolf groups lobbying hard against any expansion of the program and environmental organizations suing to have the Endangered Species Act upheld.

Riley is reluctant to give me details about the wolf song, but he’s quick to point out why he believes Mexican wolves should be welcomed onto tribal lands. “The wolf and all the animals were here first,” he says. “In the Apache world, we learned how to live in nature from the animals; they showed us the trails to the water holes. We are connected to the wolf, and all the animals, through what they have taught us.”

But not everyone sees it this way. Down the road, at the tribe’s Hon-Dah Casino and Conference Center near Pinetop-Lakeside, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is hosting a hearing to gather public comments on the agency’s plan to significantly expand the Mexican wolves’ recovery area and modify the program to comply with a legally mandated agree-

ment for sustaining a healthy population in the wild. After visiting Riley, I make my way to the hearing and sit in a ballroom filled with government officials, representatives from environmental groups, wolf supporters who have traveled from across the West, and cowboys wearing knee-high boots and 10-gallon hats. Participants walk up to a microphone, one by one, and shoot their comments into the audience like arrows. A rancher from Catron County, New Mexico: “We’ve got kids sitting in cages waiting for the bus. If you’ve got to worry about your kids getting eaten by something, that’s something you don’t need to have around.” An 8-year-old girl from Phoenix: “I love all wildlife, especially wolves. I’m counting on you to protect them for me when I have my own children and for all future generations.”

While no White Mountain Apache Tribe members speak at the hearing, the tribe’s sensitive-species biologist, along with tribal game-and-fish officers, sits in the audience and listens. Somehow, the heated rhetoric filling the ballroom — both for and against the wolves — seems far removed from the legendary predators Riley described. *Where is that wolf power? I wonder. Where is the magical creature that lives in Apache stories and songs?* I want to see a wolf in the wild, or at least spend time with people who regularly observe wolves in the wild, to find out if *ba’cho* is still out there, somewhere.

Jeff Dolphin’s official title is interagency field-team supervisor for the Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project. But he’s more like the program’s chief “wolf whisperer.” Based out of Alpine, in the heart of wolf country, the 34-year-old Dolphin, a biologist with the Arizona Game and Fish Department, has had more hands-on contact with Mexican wolves than just about anyone in the program and can describe the activities of individual wolves the way neighbors catch each other up on gossip.

I’m shadowing Dolphin for three days in September 2014 as he carries out his normal routine: monitoring the movements of radio-collared wolves; setting traps to catch wild-born, uncollared wolves and collar them; looking for signs of wolves; and responding to angry calls from ranchers reporting wolf-caused problems with their cattle.

“It never lets up,” he says as I climb into his pickup on the afternoon of the first day of my visit. He’s been on the go since before sunrise. Game and Fish wildlife technician Julia Smith caught the alpha male from the Hawks Nest pack in a trap, and Dolphin drove to the remote site at dawn to help collar and release it. Then he got a call from rancher Wink Crigler, reporting one of her calves had been killed by a wolf. Dolphin spent hours assisting the investigation of the carcass to confirm it was a wolf-caused death so Crigler could be reimbursed for the loss of her livestock.

Unlike the successful recovery program for endangered gray wolves in the northern Rockies, carried out largely in the 20 million-acre Yellowstone National Park, the Mexican-wolf project is mostly on national-forest land that is also used for cattle-grazing. The 4.4 million-acre recovery area, established in 1998, encompasses all of the Apache National Forest in Arizona and the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. In 2000,

the White Mountain Apache Tribe joined the project as a lead partner (along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish and the U.S. Forest Service) and opened its adjoining 1.7 million acres to Mexican wolves, providing crucial additional habitat.

Although Dolphin and his team report that 90 percent of the Mexican wolves’ diet in the recovery area consists of elk, there were 28 confirmed cattle kills in 2013, up from 19 in 2012. A fund administered by the independent Mexican Wolf/Livestock Coexistence Council pays ranchers market value for cattle that are killed (a total of \$24,343 in 2013), as well as a stipend for the presence of wolves in their grazing allotments. For many ranchers, though, even one wolf roaming near their cattle is one too many.

Crigler serves on the board of the Coexistence Council. She tells me, during a visit Dolphin and I make to her X Diamond Ranch, that “the payment is minuscule to adequately compensate for the cost of what happens.” She’s a fourth-generation rancher in the Greer area; her great-grandfather raised cattle to feed the soldiers stationed at Fort Apache. She points out that modern ranching has focused on changing cattle genetics to make the animals fatter, more docile and without horns.

“We’ve bred the defensive instinct out of them to produce a quality product,” she says. “It’s like feeding candy to a baby with these wolves. This one endangered species just doesn’t fit into our current culture.”

Crigler says she’s “at the end of [her] rope” because she and her sister have each lost two cows over the past two weeks.

The flip side of the cattle problem is the illegal killing of Mexican wolves. Between 1998 and 2013, 55 wolves were killed illegally — a heavy toll on an endangered population that numbered only 83 animals in the wild at the end of 2013. Just two of those illegal killings have been prosecuted. Ranchers and others experiencing problems with wolves are supposed to call Dolphin and let his crew manage the situation, usually by tracking a derelict wolf and moving it to a captive-breeding facility. But too often, people living in wolf country who don’t want the predators threatening their property use a different tactic: “Shoot, shovel and shut up.”

Dolphin has been working in various capacities for the wolf program since 2007. He logs about 25,000 miles a year driving washboard roads on the Arizona side of the recovery area, usually with his window down so he can more easily spot wolf tracks. After he finishes up with Crigler and grabs a bowl of chili at Alpine’s Bear Wallow Café, we cruise forest back roads, looking for the Bluestem pack.

Mexican-wolf packs have only one breeding pair. “The Bluestem alpha female has been a very successful breeder,” Dolphin says. “She kicked her mother out of the pack, who was 11 years old and had been the breeding female. The mother dispersed into New Mexico and was shot.”

The original breeding female was a founding member of the nine-member, captive-born pack that was released into the recovery area in 2002. Since then, the Bluestem pack has thrived despite one breeding male being illegally killed and another dying of natural causes. The pack has produced several generations of wild-born wolves, with some members dispersing and founding new packs, which is critical to the species’

survival. In 2014, the Bluestem pack numbered 12 wolves, including five new pups. Its territory in the middle of the Apache National Forest ranges over 200 square miles of aspen-covered mountains, rocky ravines and grassy cienegas.

Since eight of Bluestem’s 12 wolves have radio collars, Dolphin often is able to track their movements, but today, they remain elusive. We drive past a meadow he says is a “rendezvous site” where the pack has been gathering since the pups became too big for their den. In the blue light of dusk, we stare hard into the distant meadow. “There has been a juvenile male staying behind with the pups to babysit while the others go out and hunt,” Dolphin says.

Dolphin, along with two other biologists who have been

stripped bare by the 2011 Wallow Fire, the last whisper of day-light is fading. We wave at camouflage-clad elk hunters who fill the twisting back roads as they return to their camps. The explosive growth of aspens after the fire has given elk in the White Mountains a boost thanks to the abundant food source, which Dolphin says also helps the wolves that eat the elk.

While some big-game hunters welcome wolves into the area, others do not want the top-of-the-food-chain carnivores to intrude on their territory. This conflict is especially intense on White Mountain Apache Tribe land. Trophy elk-hunting brings in a much-needed \$1.4 million annually to the tribe, where 47 percent of tribal members live in poverty.

“Based on the impacts we are seeing now with the elk



A Mexican wolf rests in the White Mountains’ tall grass. The wolves’ predation of elk has complicated the White Mountain Apache Tribe’s hunting industry.

studying wolves in the recovery area, says the Bluestem pack has become increasingly stealthy over the years. “They don’t like people,” Dolphin adds, noting that wild-born wolves like those in Bluestem are far more successful at survival and less likely to prey on cattle than captive-bred wolves released into the wild. However, captive-bred wolves provide the small wild population with crucial genetic diversity. Rather than releasing adult captive-bred wolves into the recovery area, Dolphin prefers a more surgical approach called “cross-fostering” where several captive newborn pups are placed with a wild female that has just given birth to her own pups. That technique was successfully implemented for the first time in May 2014.

As Dolphin and I drive past Big Lake and through forests

population, [the tribe’s Game and Fish Department doesn’t] want more wolves on the reservation,” says the tribe’s big-game biologist, Jesse Palmer, who helps manage the lucrative tribal hunting business. Clients pay \$20,000 for a weeklong, fully outfitted and guided trophy-elk hunt. Palmer says that on average,

90 percent of the tribe’s business is return customers who want a larger trophy than the year before.

“On the eastern part of the reservation,” he says, “elk are being displaced from their summer and winter ranges, and we are pretty sure the main culprit is the wolf. The elk calves are easy pickings, and the wolves will even haze the mature, trophy-class bulls.” Palmer says that not only are there fewer elk on tribal land because of the wolf, but the big trophy animals

are seeking refuge on the land of the nearby San Carlos Apache Tribe, which has a competing hunting business and does not allow Mexican wolves on its land. And Palmer adds that his department has taken steps to address other factors that could be causing the elk displacement, leaving Mexican wolves as the likely cause.

The White Mountain tribe is the only Native American nation in the Mexican wolves’ large historical range that accommodates the predator and maintains its own recovery agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service. There are several packs that live full time on the tribe’s land, and lone wolves are constantly moving through in search of new territory. In addition to the wolves, the tribe is working to recover other endangered species that are part of its cultural heritage: Apache trout, Chiricahua leopard frogs, Mexican spotted owls and Southwestern willow flycatchers.

“We manage wolves as part of the environment,” says biologist Cynthia Dale, who has worked as the tribe’s sensitive-species coordinator for 20 years. She agrees that wolves are changing the behavior of elk on tribal land, but she views this as a positive. “Now, the elk run when they hear wolves howl. It’s better for the elk and the forest habitat because the elk are always on the move,” she says. And Dale thinks that also presents a better challenge for sportsmen.

Despite the challenges of illegal wolf killings, cattle predation and pushback from hunters, Dolphin is bullish on the current state of the recovery program. “It feels like there will be an uptick in the wolf population [in 2014],” he says. “We’ve got more pups, more packs and more breeding pairs.” The latest population report, released in February 2015, proves him right: Compared with the program’s record-low population of just 42 Mexican wolves in the wild in 2009, there were a record-high 109 in 2014 among 19 different packs.

And the wolves now have much more room to roam. After receiving some 40,000 public comments on its proposed changes, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced in January 2015 major revisions to its 1998 recovery plan. The new rule greatly increases the area Mexican wolves can occupy, from 7,212 square miles to 153,853 square miles, and also greatly expands the territory where captive-born wolves can be released. In addition to the Apache and Gila national forests, the larger recovery area now includes all of Arizona’s Sitgreaves National Forest along with the Payson, Pleasant Valley and Tonto Basin ranger districts of the Tonto National Forest. It also includes the Magdalena Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest in New Mexico. And the new rule triples the recovery program’s existing population goal of 100 wolves, increasing it to between 300 and 325 animals roaming the wild of Arizona and New Mexico.

While environmental groups welcome the larger recovery area for the wolves, representatives say it’s still too small to sustain a species that is highly territorial and can travel 60 miles in a day. The Center for Biological Diversity, which brought the lawsuit that pressed the federal government to revise the wolf plan, maintains that in order for the species to recover, it needs to be allowed to disperse north into the Grand Canyon and Northern New Mexico, and to grow to a population of at least 750 animals in the wild. Environmental-

ists also oppose the new rule’s more liberal regulations, which will enable ranchers to legally shoot a Mexican wolf in the act of attacking livestock.

As for the White Mountain Apache Tribe, longtime Tribal Chairman Ronnie Lupe says the tribe will continue to receive the wolf with open arms. “Why not? It’s their natural habitat,” he says. Lupe, 85, recalls when he was a young boy growing up in Cibecue and hearing Mexican wolves howling. “We all lived with the wolves back then,” he says. Lupe decided that the tribe would join the Mexican-wolf reintroduction program in 2000 because he wanted to hear wolves howl again on tribal land. “I look at the world through Apache eyes,” he adds. “All life is sacred.”

Wolves are also sacred to Mary Newby. She lives in a trailer off a remote road in the southern part of the Apache National Forest. She calls Dolphin on the second day of my September visit to report that the entire Bluestem pack ambled through her front yard that morning.

“I was outside listening to elk bugling when I first noticed three wolves about 100 yards away,” Newby tells me when I contact her later. “And they kept coming until I saw all 11. I could even see black fur on the pups’ tails. They looked at me and then kept walking across the meadow.”

Newby, 58, moved to Greenlee County from Phoenix 14 years ago, after she learned she had terminal liver disease. “I just wanted to live in wolf country, but I was very lucky to wind up moving into a rendezvous site,” she says. The meadow where she lives used to be a hangout for the Hawks Nest pack, but now it’s been taken over by Bluestem. “When you see wolves in the morning, it is amazing,” she adds. “I shouldn’t be alive right now. I attribute my health to clean living and wolves.”

At dusk on my third day of shadowing Dolphin, we’re cruising the roads near Newby’s residence, still trying to catch a glimpse of the Bluestem pack. Dolphin has the receiver on his truck seat tuned to the frequency of the wolves’ radio collars. As we drive in silence, I think back to my visit with Riley.

I had pressed him for details about the wolf song, and he had said the words described a tribal member’s desire to run and hunt like the wolf: “It goes, ‘Like the black wolf that I am ...’” Then he had stopped, mid-sentence, and burst into song. English could do this cultural treasure no justice. From behind his paper-filled desk, Riley had closed his eyes and released the ancient Apache chant toward the office ceiling, hanging on every word.

Just as Dolphin and I are about to head back to Alpine, the transceiver beeps. A few seconds later, there is an explosion of beeps like popcorn cooking in a microwave. Dolphin parks the truck to assess the pack’s location and the reason for all the beeping. Below the road is a 700-foot-deep, rocky ravine that drops into darkness. “They’re all down there hunting,” he says. This is as close as we’re going to get to the Bluestem pack, which is close enough. Down there, beyond the reach of humans or politics, Mexican wolves are going about their business in their native habitat, as they have for millennia. Down there is *ba’cho*. **OH**