



California Wolf Center

Conservation, Education, Research

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New Study Sheds Light on the Possible Distribution of Gray Wolf

SAN FRANCISCO— As gray wolves begin to return to California, a [study](#) released today by the Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center sheds new light on the widespread historical distribution of wolves in the state. The report comes as the California Department of Fish and Wildlife is considering whether to protect the animals under the state’s Endangered Species Act; it demonstrates the historic presence of gray wolves across California.

“The new research is relevant to the state’s decision,” said Lauren Richie, Northern California associate director for the California Wolf Center, “since it sheds light on the distribution of California’s wolf population across diverse habitats before wolves were hunted to extinction here.”

The study, conducted by the university’s staff archeologist Michael Newland and faunal specialist Michael Stoyka, found linguistic and cultural evidence indicating that indigenous peoples across California had words for, and rituals involving, wolves. No fewer than 15 of California’s indigenous languages have distinct words for “wolf,” “coyote” and “dog,” and in the oral traditions of five languages, wolves appear as deities or a part of ceremony or ancestral history.

The wolf is a creator deity, for instance, in Southern Paiute traditions; sorcerers are capable of turning into wolves in Tolowa traditions; and three Northern California tribes — the Karuk, Hoopa and Yurok — used wolf fur in their dance regalia. Evidence also exists that some California tribes ate wolves as food. The widespread distribution of evidence implies the wolf itself once had an expansive range, from north to south and from east to west throughout the state.

“In modern times we talk about wolves being ecologically important,” said Amaroq Weiss, a West Coast wolf organizer at the Center for Biological Diversity, “but this research shows us that wolves have been a part of California’s cultural heritage for thousands of years.”

Previous research had compiled historical accounts of sightings of wolves in California by European explorers and settlers, and these accounts were from locations scattered widely across the state. But because it was not always clear that observers were familiar with, and could distinguish between, wolves, coyotes and dogs, the reliability of such accounts had been called into question. The new study's linguistic analysis honed in on whether indigenous people distinguished between these three canids, and the study's examination of the role ascribed to wolves in cultural stories and traditions revealed unique treatment of the wolf — quite distinct from roles or characteristics assigned to coyotes or dogs.

“This study sets a baseline for understanding that many indigenous people across California came into contact with wolves and also helps to identify additional research areas that would broaden our understanding of the historical distribution, role and cultural significance of wolves in California,” said Newland.

Wolves were driven to extinction in California by the mid-1920s, but in late 2011 a wolf from Oregon, known as OR-7 or “Journey,” entered California and remained in the state for 15 months, wandering throughout seven northern counties before returning to Oregon in March. The dispersal of this wolf into California sparked efforts to gain full state protections for the species, in anticipation that Oregon's growing wolf population will result in more wolves finding their way into California. A state listing petition filed in 2012 by the Center for Biological Diversity and allies resulted in the gray wolf being declared a candidate for listing; the state is expected to complete its status review and issue a recommendation on listing late this year.

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