Man and Wolf

A now-missing predator was regarded highly by California's original human inhabitants

By Alexandra Geddes-Osborne and Malcolm Margolin

Visit anywhere in California – the dense redwood forests, the Sierra lakes and peaks, the desert, the Great Central Valley or the coast – and you will not encounter a single wild wolf. Yet that was not always true.

The very first European land explorers, the Portolá expedition of 1769, sent to scout for potential mission sites, reported seeing wolves near the coast. Subsequent visitors also recorded encounters. Charles Frémont, traveling through the San Joaquin Valley in 1844, wrote: "We saw wolves frequently during the day, prowling about after the young antelope, which cannot run very fast."

But extirpation of the wolf went hand-in-hand with Euro-American settlement. It was self-evident to the newcomers that wolves embodied unmitigated evil – diminishing game, preying on livestock and endangering human life. Wolves were hunted and trapped; government bounties were placed on their lives. Poisons, too, were laid out, and often scores of other carnivores and scavengers were killed in the process. When in later years only a few scattered wolves were left, bounty hunters would track a single animal for months, whether for the fee, the sport or their own pride. By the turn of the century, wolves were nearly gone; the last solitary wild wolf was reported killed in 1924 in a remote part of Lassen County.

36 A

Gray Wolves in California Map

ALEX TAIT/EQUATOR GRAPHICS. SOURCE: ROBERT H. SCHMIDT

At about the same time – the early 20th century – the first ethnographers and linguists began to probe the precontact world of the California Indians, questioning native people about traditional customs, language and beliefs. And though the wolf itself had largely disappeared, these researchers found traces of it still embedded in myth and ceremony. From these hints and fragments, remnants and remembrances, we can glimpse an outline of an ancient and complex relationship that once existed between native Californians and wolves.

The mythic being Wolf played a major role in the creation stories of native people in many parts of the state. Wolf was one of the spirit beings who, in the "before time," inhabited the world in which we now walk. These spirit beings, so hard for the modern mind to grasp, were immortal, shifting, archetypal characters with attributes sometimes human, sometimes animal, sometimes more.

To the Chemehuevi, who historically occupied desert lands in southeastern California, Wolf is present from the very beginning of time, afloat in a basket boat on the Everlasting Water. With him are Ocean Woman, Mountain Lion and Coyote. A long and wondrously complex creation myth – the "ancient telling," one narrator called it – recounts how these spirit beings went about making the world and establishing its rules and institutions.

In one incident retold by author Carobeth Laird from tales she learned from her Chemehuevi husband, Wolf and Coyote are in a cave in the Panamint Mountains west of Death Valley when they are attacked by their enemies, the Bears. Numerous, the Bears approach "like rain under a dark storm cloud.... The sparks that glinted from their flint arrowheads were the lightning." Wolf was Coyote's elder brother – wiser, more stately and in charge. In the epic battle that ensues, he dons his war clothes, which glow with all the colors of the rainbow. The brilliance dazzles the enemies; they gasp in amazement. Wolf then strings the whole length of his bow with arrows and discharges them all at once on the enemy horde, killing many.

But through trickery, deceit and the envy of Coyote, Wolf is defeated. He is killed by the bears, dismembered and then – such is the nature of myth – brought back to life. He can no longer stay, however, and he heads north, moving out of the land of the Chemehuevi toward the "storied land where the ancient telling starts and ends," leaving his brother, Coyote, howling in loneliness behind him. To the Chemehuevi, the rainbow – "Wolf's discarded war clothes" – serves as a reminder of Wolf and his great battle of mythic times.

STEPHEN SHARNOFF

Curator James L. Patton at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology of the University of California, Berkeley, with the skull of a wolf trapped in 1922 in San Bernardino County and the skeleton and pelt of another collected in 1924 in Tulare County.

Language gives further evidence of how widely wolves ranged in California. More than 80 distinct languages were spoken in California when Europeans first arrived. (Some 30 are still alive, although generally spoken only by a handful of elders.) Early linguists found that most California Indian languages had clearly differentiated words for wolf, coyote, fox and dog – the four canids found in California. In 1918, for example, anthropologist Llewellyn Loud did a report on the Wiyot of Humboldt Bay in which he recorded the words *rakwiliril* (wolf), *witskererar* (coyote), *waitits* (dog) and *halikwilil* (fox). The Wiyot language and its hold on wolves exist, however, only in such reports. Della Prince, the last fluent speaker of Wiyot, passed away in the 1960s.

In the 1920s, Samuel Barrett recorded the word *sméwa* for wolf from the Pomo of central California. Today the linguist Robert Oswalt reports that the word still exists among modern Pomo speakers he interviewed decades later, but *sméwa* has evolved to mean "a hairy, ferocious, dangerous creature." With the animal extinct, the word has come to refer to a creature already passed into myth – this is what happens, one supposes, when a word outlasts the physical thing to which it once referred.

Early ethnographic notes likewise bear references to wolves, often fragmentary and isolated, that nonetheless hint at an overall complexity and context that by the early decades of the 20th century already were fading from memory. Among the Luiseño of southern California the North Star, Polaris, was quite possibly Wolf. Polaris was the most important of all the stars and was said to be a great chief, and other stars moved about him in an orderly and ritualistic way. People, when they danced in ceremonies, moved in the same direction, taking their cues and deriving some of their powers from the great movement of the stars overhead.

Among the Kumeyaay, also of southern California, a sand painting was a central feature of a boy's initiation ceremony. In this painting, major powers of the world were depicted in a particular order and balance, to the initiate revealing esoteric yet essential knowledge about how the world works. Prominent among the 18 sand-painting images was a figure known as *Etcekurlk,* Wolf.

The Chimariko people of northwestern California were said to be close to the wolf and were known for their excellent imitation of howling. Many tribes would not eat wolves because they believed that wolves had once been people or were too similar to people. Among the Wintu of the Sacramento Valley it was believed that some powerful people could turn into wolves and that some very sinister wolves could turn into people.

Although wolves are largely beyond living memory, contemporary California Indians still feel a connection. It is perhaps expressed most strongly in the northwestern part of the state, among the Yurok of the lower Klamath River, the Karuk of the upper Klamath and the Hupa of the Trinity River. While different in many respects, these three tribes share

WOLVERINE

Wolverines live in remote regions where people seldom intrude, feeding on carrion, marmots and squirrels and traveling as much as 50 miles a day in search of food. Furtrappers once took them from the Sierra, the Cascades, the Klamaths and the Siskiyous. Trapping was banned in 1970, but as logging, summer-home development and recreation brought people into the back country, the wolverines seemed to vanish. Every year there seems to be at least one tantalizing report of a wolverine sighting in the California mountains. But no one has obtained a clear photograph, or found an incontrovertible track or road-killed carcass from these areas in more than 50 years. The reports might be fanciful or might describe contacts with animals that wandered down from Oregon but didn't stay to breed.

The recently concluded Sierra Nevada Framework promises funds for helicopter surveys to look for tracks in snow around likely den sites from February to March. If no wolverines are found, there will be discussion as to whether the Golden State is too heavily urbanized to sustain the secretive creature at all. If sufficient wildness is deemed to remain, reintroductions from Oregon or Idaho populations might be undertaken. Defenders has petitioned for wolverine listing under the Endangered Species Act.

some of the same beliefs and ceremonies. These include a series of religious dances performed to "fix" the world – to put the world in balance, to renew and maintain it. Among the dances is the White Deerskin Dance, in which dancers display one of the great rarities and treasures of their culture, the skins of albino deer. Each of the ordinary dancers wears a "blinder" made of wolf-tail fur cut into small strips and attached to an ornamented buckskin band. It is worn with the fur extending both above and below the band, the lower fringes hanging down over the face to hide the eyes. Wolf-skin blinders are also worn during the Kick Dance, a ceremony in which the powers of a doctor or healer are confirmed.

A story told by a Karuk woman, Georgia Orcutt, in the 1940s suggests the importance of this regalia. Samchaka, a very poor young man, is a real nobody in Karuk culture – he has no beads, no dance regalia, no wealth, nothing. He is mocked when he desires to take part in the White Deerskin Dance. So to prove himself he undertakes a wealth quest. Over a period of years he devotes himself to collecting all sorts of divine treasure: red woodpecker scalps, elaborate dresses, large pieces of obsidian. Finally he finds a dead wolf, and from the fur he makes the wolf-skin band that a dancer must wear. When he goes back to the ceremonial grounds, everyone is amazed and impressed by his store of treasure – his accumulation of divine wealth and what it implies. His religious devotion is rewarded; a place is made for him in the dance, and for his descendants as well. The regalia he has collected will be worn at ceremonies, carefully stored in carved wooden boxes between ceremonies, and handed down generation after generation. Indeed, dance regalia in use to this day is often hundreds of years old.

A.W. ERICSON/SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF MAN

The White Deerskin Dance is still an essential part of northwestern California Indian culture, and wolf-skin blinders are still in use. Jack Norton, a longtime participant in the Hupa ceremonies, explains his feelings about the wolf skin. "The role of the wolf must have import and meaning," he says. "All the dancers except for the four 'hook men' wear the wolf-skin head blinder that comes down and covers the eyes. I would guess, partly depending upon how I feel when dancing, that it protects me from powerful fields that are set in motion by this ancient ritual. It is an essential part of the ceremony, and ultimately the wolf participates in the balancing of the world for all things and the continuity of life."

Wolves and humans share many characteristics. Both are generalists, not confined to any single prey, climate or topography. Both are societal mammals, living in groups or packs in which we find ranking, and in which we cooperate and compete. For at least 12,000 years, wolves and native people lived together in California. Wolves and native people shared a similar fate at the hands of the newcomers, as they did elsewhere in this country from the time of first contact. Ten years after the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony, a law was enacted whose chilling language linked Indian and wolf: "[It is] the order of the General Court, subsequently, that whoever shall shoot off a gun on any unnecessary occasion, or at any game except an Indian or a wolf, shall forfeit five shillings for every shot."

Like the wolf, the Indians suffered ruthless persecution. When Spaniards began to settle California in 1769, more than 300,000 native Americans inhabited the state. They belonged to some 500 independent political groups, and their manner of living varied widely according to geography and custom. By the beginning of the gold rush in 1849, the population had been halved. Ten years later, the number of California Indians had plummeted to 50,000. By the turn of the century, no more than 20,000 descendants of California's native population were left.

To the linguists and anthropologists who worked in California during the early decades of the 20th century, it seemed clear that California Indian languages and culture were on the verge of extinction, and they were desperate to salvage what they could. Speaking of anthropologist John Peabody Harrington's obsession to record, his wife once said: "The vessel of the old culture had broken, and its precious contents were spilling out and evaporating before our very eyes. Harrington, like a man dying of thirst, lapped at every random trickle."

In the last couple of decades, however, the unimaginable has occurred – a full-fledged revival of California Indian cultures. Dances and ceremonies, some long neglected, have been reinstituted.

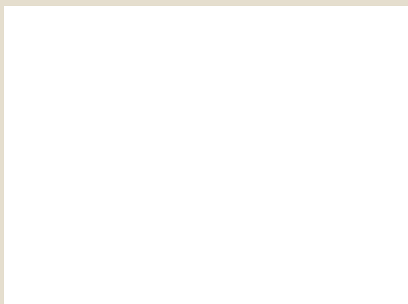
38AMap:California Native Groups

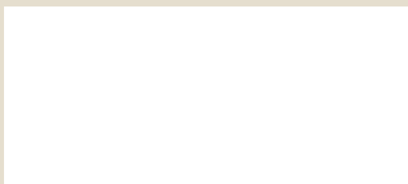
ALEX TAIT/EQUATOR GRAPHICS. SOURCE: MALCOLM MARGOLIN, © 1993 HEYDAY BOOKS

COURTESY OF PHOEBE APPERSON HEARST MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY

This blinder of wolf tail fur attached to a band of ornamented buckskin from albino deer was used in the sacred White Deerskin Dance of Yurok Indians of northern California. Top, Hupa Indians perform such a dance early in the 20th century.

OLD-GROWTH SPECIES
NORTHERN SPOTTED OWL
PACIFIC FISHER
MARBLED MURRELET



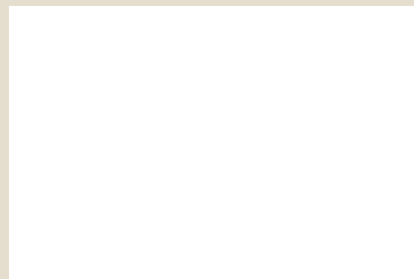


President Clinton's 1994 Northwest Forest Plan sought to settle conflict between the threatened northern spotted owl and the logging industries on 24 million acres of national forest and Bureau of Land Management lands in Washington, Oregon and northern California. Old-growth forests in the Northwest support a suite of unique species, including the marbled murrelet, a robin-sized seabird that nests in large old trees as much as 50 miles inland, and the Pacific fisher, a small carnivore associated with mature trees and large downfall logs. With 90 percent of the old-growth forest already gone, the plan closed 70 percent of the remainder to logging. It was not a recovery plan for endangered species and set no management goals or strategies.

A large number of California's northern spotted owls live on private lands subject to state timber harvest standards aimed at protecting owls but not to continued monitoring after a harvest. A 1999 study estimated that the owl was still declining at a rate of four percent per year, possibly faster in California where old growth may be so fragmented that the owls are subjected to greater exposure during winter storms. Recent surveys also suggest that murrelets are declining in California and few survive on lands subject to the Northwest Forest Plan. The next step for both owls and murrelets may be habitat conservation plans with private timber companies.

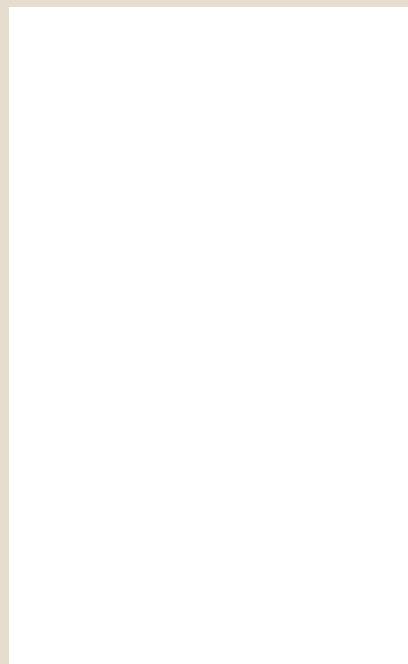
A petition seeks endangered status for the fisher, which once ranged from the southern Sierra north to Washington but now is largely confined to three populations, one in the Oregon Cascades, one in California's north coast ranges and a now-isolated population in the southern Sierra. Reintroductions in the northern Sierra might restore gene flow between them.

CALIFORNIA SPOTTED OWL



Two to three thousand California spotted owls, subspecific cousins of the more celebrated northern spotted owl, survive in old-growth mixed conifer forests in the Sierra Nevada and southern California mountains. But 80 percent of their habitat has yielded to urbanization and logging, and in some forests the owl is thought to be declining at a rate of ten percent per year.

BURROWING OWL



What do you do if a species is doing relatively well in parts of the state but taking a beating in your own backyard? Burrowing owls have lost so much habitat to agriculture and urban development in California that 60 percent of the breeding groups known 20 years ago have disappeared. Healthy populations persist in the Central Valley and the Imperial Valley, where earthen irrigation ditches favor the rodent burrows the owls nest in and nearby fields provide foraging for insects and rodents. In the last eight years, the state's third largest population, at the southern end of San Francisco Bay, has declined 50 percent. Only 100 to 120 breeding pairs remain there. A habitat conservation plan was supposed to make burrowing owl habitat a priority for the City of San José. But without listing under the Endangered Species Act, there was no incentive for either the city or private developers to support such a plan, and the effort collapsed.

Silicon Valley's rapidly escalating land values may put these owls out of business.

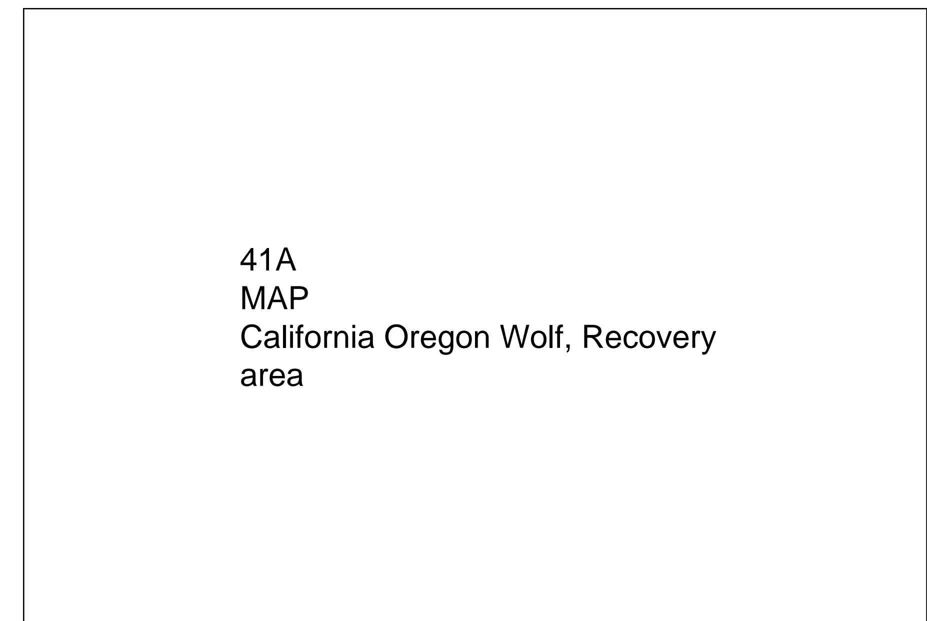
Youngsters are enrolling in language classes taught by their elders. Every year, statewide gatherings of basketweavers and storytellers attract not only older practitioners of these arts but scores of younger people eager to learn. Today, people are conversing in languages that were silent for decades, and what they are saying warms the heart. The native population, too, is expanding. It is now around 300,000 again, the largest in any state except Oklahoma. And aided in some cases by a recent influx of casino profits, a people long nearly invisible are now rooted strongly in the economic, political, social and artistic life of modern California.

With Indians back from the brink of extinction, what about the wolf? In native California, the wolf is like a relative who disappeared from the family before we were born — known only by fragmentary tales and a few artistic representations. Such a relative is sometimes bigger than life because of long absence, sometimes almost invisible, the subject of conjecture and curiosity. Now, suddenly — to the surprise of legislators, the chagrin of ranchers and the delight of environmentalists — the all-but-forgotten relative seems ready to return.

Biologists have identified Del Norte, Siskiyou, Lassen, Humboldt, Trinity, Modoc and other northern counties as offering a combination of good wolf habitat and low human population that could easily sustain 400 or more wolves. Lately, wolves were trapped in Canada and successfully reintroduced in former habitats in Montana and Idaho. There is no biological reason that this cannot be repeated in California.

The idea of doing so is opposed by some, especially the livestock industry, which fears losses to predation and is politically powerful throughout the West. Scientists suggest, however, that because wolves would displace coyotes but would tend to have a lower density themselves, their reintegration into the environment would in fact lower the overall predator population. Moreover, Defenders of Wildlife offers to compensate livestock owners for losses to wolves.

Attacks on humans by healthy wolves are rare. There has never been a documented death in North America from such an attack. Nonetheless, opposition is strong and emotional, and any deliberate reintroduction of wolves in California would probably involve a prolonged battle.



ALEX TAIT/EQUATOR GRAPHICS

The dashed line on this map shows a wolf recovery area proposed by Defenders of Wildlife for northern California and southern Oregon. Defenders plans to petition for establishment by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of what is called a distinct population segment covering this area. If the service responds favorably, it then will develop a wolf recovery plan for the segment. If wolves move in from neighboring states, they will be protected by the Endangered Species Act until achievement of the recovery goal. The area has mostly federal lands and little livestock grazing.

But the wolf is also strong, a cunning and resourceful species that might not need any government assistance getting back to a land it once knew well. It is quite possible — many biologists think inevitable — that the wolf will simply trot across the border on its own four feet. The wolf packs in Idaho are flourishing and their populations expanding, and unless they are stopped by human intervention their range will certainly spread. When young wolves reach dispersal age they have been known to travel long distances in search of new territory. With less than 300 miles between Idaho's reoccupied wolf range and the border of California, it is only a matter of time before wolves find us.

If they do return, it will be to a state vastly different from the one they left so many generations ago. Development, human population pressures, public opinion, the livestock and agricultural industries and the California political climate will all affect the reception they receive and the environment in which they will live. Still, they will return to a place where they have been before, where they are remembered and where rumor of their coming has already spread.

In native California, the memory of wolves is still embedded in myth, in language and even today in ceremony and practice. Miraculously, the long-lost relative is about to return. Perhaps wolves will not need to be reintroduced, but rather Californians can take the opportunity to be reintroduced to an all but forgotten relation. Let's hope that we in California will have the wisdom to greet the wolf as a returning family member. □

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